

1990: L.A., *The Gold Field*

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1990: Already ten years into trickle-down economics, a rise in cynicism, growing racial and class tension, and the widening gap between the very rich and the rest of us. Los Angeles before the riots of 1992. A time of defunding vital social programs, the abandonment of the ideals on which our country was supposedly founded. The erasure of history. The savings and loan bailout with our tax dollars. The "economic boom" of the Reagan empire thanks to the tripling of the national deficit. The explosion of the information industry, and at the same time the implosion of meaning. Meaning can only be formulated when we can compare, when we bring information to our daily level, to our "private" sphere. Otherwise information just goes by. Which is precisely what the ideological apparatuses want and need: "You give us thirty minutes and we give you the world." A meaningless one. With internets and highways included. A virtual state of containment. How could the famous "taxpayer" remain idle and voiceless when for every dollar we spent for welfare the government spent six dollars for the savings and loan orgy? That was our money that ended up paying for mega takeovers, super mergers, environmentally destructive "developments," and bigger and better (now empty) office spaces. Because it does not mean anything. The American family doesn't know how to get upset, how to understand a bill of \$500 billion. But it can get extremely interested in a ten-thousand-dollar grant from the NEA. Five-hundred billion is unthinkable. That amount is not personal. On the other hand, ten thousand dollars is the down payment for a small home, or a trailer. Now that's meaning.

The list of hard data from that fabulous decade was depressing. Especially in the face of public inaction, and the absence of an organized reaction to so many devastating statistics such as the fact that in 1980 the ratio of the United States Government budget for housing-to-military expenditure was 1:5. By 1989 it was 1:31. Since 1980 Federal support for housing assistance has been slashed by more than eighty percent. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, mobile homes were the fastest growing type of dwelling in the 1980s, as the cost of traditional houses soared beyond the reach of many. Nearly sixteen million Americans - about one in sixteen - now live in mobile homes. But in a way we built a lot of "safe housing" during that time. According to the September 13, 1992, *New York Times*, the nation's incarcerated population increased by nearly 130 percent over the decade. We have the highest rate of imprisonment of any industrialized nation. During those same years we witnessed the top one percent of American households grow richer. By 1989 that one percent was worth more than the bottom ninety percent. In those *Dynasty* years the number of children living in poverty increased by twenty-one percent. By 1992, seven percent of all infants, and nearly seventeen percent of African-American infants were born underweight - the highest rate since 1978. The state with the highest child poverty rate is Mississippi - home of the American Family Association, one of the most vocal organs of the right-wing religious industry.

According to Jennifer Howse, who led the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation in 1992, the proportion of pregnant women without prenatal care was twenty-five percent, the highest in twenty years. We now rank twentieth among industrialized nations in preventing infant mortality,

and when it comes to immunizing infants against polio, we now rank behind sixteen other nations, including Mexico. But who cares. We kicked butt in Grenada. We got more stealth bombers, plans for a real star wars system of toys, and a glamorous, anorexic first lady who exhorted all of us to "just say no." To say no to the formulation of meaning, to concentrate instead on a photograph of two men kissing, or of a crucifix. Symbolism sells. History doesn't. We must remember that most of the social security net the revisionists wanted to dismantle then (and now) helped cut the poverty rate almost in half, and poverty amongst the elderly by an even greater degree. And we must remember that the war on poverty in the 1960s and 1970s brought many needy Americans medical care, food stamps, prenatal and infant care, legal services, college tuition, and guaranteed student loans which enabled many of us to forge a better life. (I can attest to that.) Those programs, according to the *New York Times* editorial on May 6, 1992, brought the poverty rate down from nineteen percent in 1964 to eleven percent in 1973.

One of the dangers of the new technologies of information is that they do not guarantee an informed or active public. Sound bites replace arguments. The statistics on the economic decline of the so-called typical normal American family mean very little to them. One of the effects of the division of labor is the misrepresentation of facts, issues, and events as completely isolated, independent of each other. It does not occur to many that bailing out the white collar crimes of the 1980s means less money for hospitals, repairing roads, and school lunches (Remember ketchup as a vegetable?).

And it's precisely here where the radical Right and their allies in the religious industry have been so brilliant in their strategy of deflecting meaning by using charged symbolic images of homosexual acts (among others). Why bother with the destruction of the environment or lack of adequate health care when we have a black-and-white photo of two men kissing? Now that's real meaning. Unfortunately, we in the cultural Left are more than eager to play the role assigned to us. We are invited to participate in a debate that has never really been a debate, but a travesty, a red herring to keep us occupied. We should not reply with the First Amendment and so-called freedom of expression, we should redirect the circus toward our agenda and expose what they really want to avoid mentioning. We should fight hate and the dissemination of ignorance and fear with the effective use of history and fact. Ideology cannot stand it when we make connections.

L.A. 1990. Yes, it was very depressing, and very hard to sustain any sense of hope in such a bleak social landscape. How is one supposed to keep any hope alive, the romantic impetus of wishing for a better place for as many people as possible, the desire for justice, the desire for meaning, and history?

L.A. 1990. Ross and I spent every Saturday afternoon visiting galleries, museums thrift shops, and going on long, very long drives all around L.A., enjoying the "magic hour" when the light makes everything gold and magical in that city. It was the best and worst of times. Ross was dying right in front of my eyes. Leaving me. It was the first time in my life when I knew for sure where the money for rent was coming from. It was a time of desperation, yet of growth too.

1990, L.A. The Gold Field. How can I deal with the *Gold Field*? I don't quite know. But the *Gold Field* was there. Ross and I entered the Museum of Contemporary Art, and without knowing the work of Roni Horn we were blown away by the heroic, gentle and horizontal presence of this gift. There it was, in a white room, all by itself, it didn't need company, it didn't need anything. Sitting on the floor, ever so lightly. A new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute

beauty. Waiting for the right viewer willing and needing to be moved to a place of the imagination. This piece is nothing more than a thin layer of gold. It is everything a good poem by Wallace Stevens is: precise, with no baggage, nothing extra. A poem that feels secure and dares to unravel itself, to become naked, to be enjoyed in a tactile manner, but beyond that, in an intellectual way too. Ross and I were lifted. That gesture was all we needed to rest, to think about the possibility of change. This showed the innate ability of an artist proposing to make this place a better place. How truly revolutionary.

This work was needed. This was an undiscovered ocean for us. It was impossible, yet it was real, we saw this landscape. Like no other landscape. We felt it. We traveled together to countless sunsets. But where did this object come from? Who produced this piece that risked itself by being so fragile, just laying on the floor, no base, no Plexiglas box on top of it? How come we didn't know about her work before, how come we missed so much? Roni's work has never been the darling of the establishment. Of course not. Some people dismiss Roni's work as pure formalism, as if such purity were possible after years of knowing that the act of looking at an object, any object, is transfigured by gender, race, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation. We cannot blame them for the emptiness in which they live, for they cannot see the almost perfect emotions and solutions her objects and writings give us. A place to dream, to regain energy, to dare. Ross and I always talked about this work, how much it affected us. After that any sunset became "The Gold Field." Roni had named something that had always been there. Now we saw it through her eyes, her imagination.

In the midst of our private disaster of Ross's imminent death, and the darkness of that particular historical moment, we were given the chance to ponder on the opportunity to regain our breath, and breathe a romantic air only true lovers breathe.

Recently Roni revisited the *Gold Field*. This time it is two sheets. Two, a number of companionship, of doubled pleasure, a pair, a couple, one on top of the other. Mirroring and emanating light. When Roni showed me this new work she said "there is sweat in between." I knew that.