

Kristopher Raos  
The Driver and the Race

There is a challenge at the heart of Kristopher Raos' works in *Painter/Piloto*. To properly describe and unpack them in writing, we would need to take the long way around: across decades and oceans to the cut-throat and moneyed world of professional automobile racing in the 70s and 80s; past the scattered landscapes and local aspirations of Los Angeles' ubiquitous auto and body shops; and through the convoluted afterlives of modernist abstraction in advertisement and contemporary art. But if you move too slowly you miss the sense of speed—these paintings hit you all at once in a rush, bang! An incautious step in front of Shell be coming around and you'll lose your footing. Move too slowly, and you turn them into an academic exercise.

Unfortunately (or, fortunately, for you the reader) we don't have time for the long, meandering path, and the short, revelatory way is beyond my current skills with poetry— so this is a third option. Here are three quick laps around the track. Each takes a slightly different line of approach around the straights and blind-corners of the exhibition. Think of them as the qualifying rounds. I'm trying to set a hot lap.

**1/3 — Where is the race?**

In Los Angeles, but which Los Angeles? A slow start with a tangent, but I recently saw this year's wonderful version of *Made in LA* at the Hammer Museum, and it is full of beautiful and specific, lived answers to that question. There is a particular artistic strategy on view, a slow, and almost hyperrealist vernacular that combines minutely observed textures and details with a seemingly casual and intentionally non-linear perspective to create an intensely affective feeling of lived realness and authenticity. We might understand the desire for these sorts of slow landscapes as part of a material turn away from the smoothness of social media, a rejection of our culture's valorization of instant gratification over meaningful connection.

Raos's landscapes are usefully brought into contrast alongside this approach. His paintings are no less painstakingly hand-crafted and no less reliant on the city's rasquache built environment, but they aim for a different effect, valuing the visual immediacy of graphic design, a seamless fusion of surface and structure, and the embodied "it-ness" of minimalist sculpture. They challenge the impulse, including my own, to understand the world as cleanly divided between superficial and authentic, and to imagine that these ultimately moral judgements neatly correspond to visual styles. Moving quickly, they make us pause—

**2/3 – Who is the driver?**

It's not just Kristopher Raos— it's also the corporate designers and executives of the Shell oil company, and Song from Song's Auto and Body shop on Silverlake Blvd and Bellevue. It includes Oswald Bruce Cooper, the designer of the ubiquitous Cooper Black font, as well as Ellsworth Kelly, and the workers cooperative that owns and produces BOING! Soda. The sources are varied, the authorship dispersed and distributed. With so many hands involved, how can we speak of a single author and their creative intent? Why would we?

Well, because artistic creativity is often assumed to be the result of individual genius and charges of derivativeness are often used as a way of drawing lines between good and bad art. Art historian Maria Loh writes about 17th century Italian art, but her work focuses on questions of repetition as a way of undermining the myth of individual artistic genius and the supposed supremacy of the original. Loh writes that each version, copy, or performance of an artwork "instantiates its own moment of authentic experience in which originality is continuously renegotiated between the multiple intentions of the author, the reader, and the work." An artwork is, for Loh, something to be used and reused, and is "original" every time because of the shifting contexts and audiences by which it is presented and received. An artwork is a means to an end, a way of getting somewhere. Loh concludes that "rather than disavowing the repetitive quality [of the artwork]" we should "explore it in the utmost specificity."

Obviously, Raos made these paintings by himself, and they are unique works of art. But he made them in a way that leans into their multiple sources of authorship, self-reflexively challenging the singularity of his own practice, and encouraging us to consider, "with utmost specificity" the multiple intentions embedded within. Every painting has multiple drivers. They don't always agree on the destination.

**3/3 — How do we win?**

This is a question of success, and a tricky one. What is win? In these works, winning is an idea that exists where the eternity of capitalism and the immortality of art come together with the resourcefulness of necessity; its component parts are equally greed and need. Part of the beauty of Raos's paintings is in how, through their technically precise fusion of surface and structure, they show how close together these two desires have become or have been made; the necessity to survive inseparable from the ambition to thrive.

The exhibition's central race-world/ art-world metaphor is useful here. The arts like to playfully differentiate themselves from sports, but they share an interest in success and an ambition to turn the ephemeral moments of life into the stuff of legends. The competitive driver (with the help of their mechanics and sponsors, among others) strives to be the greatest of all time, as the painter creates works (assisted by museum conservators and collectors, among others) that aim to stand the test of time. Imperfectly overlaid across both is the capitalist hallucination of endless growth, an infinite accumulation of value across time.

Yet in some ways, the central image or pathway to success in this exhibition, I would argue, belongs to neither painter nor driver, but instead the local mechanic. Raos notes how Los Angeles's mechanics often decorate their businesses with copies of car brand logos or attach their independent operations to major gas chains. Through acts of appropriation and strategic alignment, they can co-opt and project an aura of reliability, trustworthiness, and permanence. In each case a bit of stolen corporate valor is repurposed as a means of securing the future. The re-use and re-interpretation of both modernist styles and vernacular signage in these paintings is in some ways an analogous process, and in this way gives us a greater insight into the specificity of Raos's practice.

Seen from this perspective, the works are about strategies of living, the ways and means that people, cut off from capital, repurpose the culture around them in the effort to create an advantage and forge a life-path that, contrary to the low estimation of our society, emphatically does include both original artistry and visions for the future. Art is not just imagined but enacted as a fraught but viable life-path. It's one way to win a stacked race. The world of professional racing, you must remember, is infamously run by money and full of cheaters. No matter—they aren't the only ones who know how to get ahead.