

## Los Angeles Times

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By Christopher Knight

# Review The ‘Grind’ of city life at Various Small Fires



Mateo Tannatt, "Lehmbruck Cafe," 2016, mixed media. (Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times)

A disheveled cement wall in the courtyard of the Hollywood gallery Various Small Fires conceals a sculptural tableau. Mateo Tannatt has etched the word "Café" into the wall, and behind it a segment of construction scaffolding holds a dozen empty drinking glasses.

A life-size figure in white plaster crawls along the floor, like a drunken cross between a German Expressionist symbol of existential loneliness by Wilhelm Lehmbruck and a sentimental Pop memorial to American banality by George Segal. As an introduction to the group show "Grind," it strikes a resonant, appropriately off-key chord.

"Grind" is among the more discerning of the group exhibitions that proliferate in galleries during the summer. It brings together paintings, sculptures and mixed media works by 11 L.A., New York and Berlin artists to create what might be called a group portrait of current city life.

Guest curator Joshua Nathanson, a painter of wistful Pop graffiti, is after what an exhibition statement describes as a discordant milieu of "cozy chaos" and "comfortable dysfunction." He achieves it.

B. Thom Stevenson shows a hand-knotted throw rug sporting a fashionably black-and-white rendition of a Picasso weeping woman, her tears inseparable from the experience of being walked on. Photographs of trash — a broken LED light bulb, a crushed aluminum can of grapefruit sparkling water (seltzer with pretensions) — is transformed by Asha Schechter into big, slick, vinyl decals suitable for throwaway wall décor at a tech start-up.

Natalie Labriola's grungy gym lockers and foam floor mats impregnated with seeds seem to let the rarefied air out of over-produced sculptures by Matthew Barney. Nathan Zeidman's grimy paintings of dirty store windows — a flower shop, a thrift store offering statues of the Virgin Mary — let you press your nose up against a smudged screen shielding emblems of loveliness and hope.



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A blunt confrontation between blaring cartoon characters in a big, garish mural by Ellen Berkenblit oscillates between raucous play and the deadly law of the jungle. Fun and ferocity fuse.

Predecessors from the 1980s and '90s like Mike Kelley and Cady Noland are two obvious formal influences on these and other works in the show. But, unlike theirs, this art yields scant sense of rumination on failed promise — no hint of either grand aspirations or smashed dreams.

“Grind” instead casts a taciturn eye. It riffs on Grindr, the smartphone app for casual urban hookups — good, bad or indifferent. The city it sees is where art is made, and it is what it is. Deal with it.

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Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood. Through Aug. 27; closed Sundays and Mondays. (310) 426-8040, [www.vsf.la](http://www.vsf.la)