



Mark Hagen has a slightly geeky fixation with the pedigree of his raw materials. This transpires when he waxes lyrical about the naturally occurring volcanic glass, obsidian. "Obsidian was once indispensable to human culture," he explains. "For tens of thousands of years into prehistory it was fractured, like flint, to produce tools and weapons for humans all over the world. The cultures of ancient Meso-America saw obsidian as the Earth's dried blood." He furrows his brow and groans: "But now all it's used for is New Age trinkets and stuff."

Hagen, 38, received his MFA in Fine Arts in 2002 from CalArts, still California's most fertile ground for artistic talent. "The people I paid particular attention to while I was there," says Hagen, clearly warming to the subject, "were Thomas Lawson, Martin Kersels, Darcy Huebler, Christine Wertheim, Michael Asher and Sam Durant. But perhaps my most heated dialogues at school were with Tom [Lawson] and Michael [Asher]."

Once school was up, however, it was with multimedia artist Sam Durant that Hagen chose to pursue the dialogue, serving as his studio assistant from early 2003 to the summer of 2004. "One crucial aspect of Sam's work that rubbed off on me during my time in his studio," explains Hagen, with evident relish, "was his distaste for 'fetish finish' – the attempt to remove the hand from

fabrication and ape a machine-like aesthetic." For many years, the "fetish finish" school of minimalism was indeed a defining characteristic of LA art, from the smooth, glossy surfaces of John McCracken's fibreglass planks to the buffed sheen of Larry Bell's sculptures-cum-installations. "But once you go down that road, that's all you pay attention to, which can be terribly distracting for an artist," says Hagen.

Durant's aversion to "fetish finish" was never more clearly stated than in his series of 1995 collages, in which he defaced Julius Shulman's slick photographs of Southern California's modernist Case Study Houses by pasting on images of stoners chilling out by the pool. In the same year, Durant also developed a series of foam-core models of the very same houses before subjecting them to all manner of indignity, including graffiti, bullets and arson. "Sam's early works were very important to me," Hagen says, "because of their pathos."

The pathos that Hagen sees in Durant's depiction of the downfall of the utopian modernist dream has a deep history of its own in art. New York-based land artist Robert Smithson, a guiding influence on Durant and Hagen and a self-confessed archaeology geek himself, made a point of dampening the technological positivism that was rampant at the time in the work of his

West Coast contemporaries. Evidently, leading LA artists of the 60s such as Robert Irwin and James Turrell were indifferent to the dystopia caused by advances in technology – hardly surprising given how the very fabric of the city they called home was itself shaped around the technologies of the automobile and the film industry. Where Irwin and Turrell would produce high-tech flares and iridescent fairylights, Smithson would bleakly document the banks of New Jersey's Passaic River, scarred by industrialisation. In 1971, Smithson openly broke ranks with the technological trend when he snubbed an invitation to take part in the game-changing *Art and Technology* exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

"The *Art and Technology* show played really large for my tutors in LA, particularly Michael Asher," says Hagen. "But for corporate America to lay its grubby paws on contemporary art in such a heavy-handed way – providing financial and technical support to artists to coerce them into incorporating new technologies into their work – was questionable to say the least," he says, widening his eyes in disbelief.

Hagen's own first important exhibition in the city was held in 2007 at the Mandrake Bar in Culver City. The centrepiece was a quietly invasive acoustic-tile ceiling dotted with the kind of migraine-inducing fluorescent lights more commonly found in corporate headquarters.

Leakage stains, and other assorted indexes of technology's breakdown found in the more dilapidated examples of this ubiquitous corporate aesthetic, were rendered in Technicolor-bright ink. "I think of these stains as authorless, process-derived abstractions," says Hagen. "I wanted to freeze a moment of inner psychological conflict," he continues, "a moment between our attempt at controlling the inevitable – though sometimes imperceptible – leakage that occurs in things." Instead of a broken down technology being documented in a deadpan style or subjected to further ruin *à la* Smithson or Durant, Hagen identifies its moments of failure in order to then intensify them.

A series of large obsidian boulders that Hagen refers to as "subtractive sculptures" were a striking part of the artist's exhibition at China Art Projects in April of last year. "I impose a geometry on them which is antithetical to their nature, because obsidian is known as a homogeneous yet amorphous solid with a rigid crystalline-like structure whose molecules are disordered like water," he says. The rigid geometries of the sculptures were carved then chipped away at by hand, fracturing the stone into conical fissures. These are technically referred to as "con-choi-dal fractures," explains Hagen, over-enunciating the adjective like a child in a speech lesson.

Hagen carefully sources his obsidian supply. "Some I've gotten from out in Utah, and some from here in Malibu," he shrugs.

"The only reason it's in Malibu is because there was a mineral shop that used to sell it for people to make trinkets. But the shop closed down when the owner stopped paying his mortgage and bivouacked himself in his house in preparation for the fall-out that was predicted at the turn into the new Millennium."

Hagen also has an ongoing series of paintings on burlap, exhibited at China Art Projects last year, and being fabricated for his forthcoming show at the gallery this May. He explains how he wanted to work on "paintings that were an antidote to the controlled oils on canvas" he had produced up until then. Hagen's epiphany came to him while visiting a hardware store near his home in East LA. Outside the store he saw a burlap bag, forlornly flapping in the wind on the sidewalk. "It was pathetic and it had this beautiful dilapidated quality caused by being left out in the sun," he remembers. Upon further inspection, Hagen began to think about how, historically, burlap was a vital precursor to canvas, with its coarse texture and large weave pattern. "I mean, you can still see its material origins – that it's made up of plant fibres," he gleefully explains.

The techniques used to achieve these paintings are complex. Individual sheets of burlap are cut, creased, folded and stacked before being left to bleach in the sun. Each sheet leaves a record of itself in the form of a dark shadow on the layer beneath. The burlap is then laid face down on plastic sheeting, which is also creased and folded into irregular patterns. Acrylic paint is then poured through the back of the sheets into imperfect geometric shapes.

The shapes dividing the surfaces of the paintings – a patchwork of squares, circles, rhombuses, and stretched hexagons – convey layers of illusionary space which are refuted through the insistent materiality of the burlap and the arbitrary nature of their composition.

Running alongside the paintings are a series of architectural screens, also to be included in the forthcoming show. Made from the layering of concrete blocks and columns, the screens divide space while also becoming visually entangled with their surroundings. "I wanted to make a sculpture that was non-hierarchical in its build and that existed in a sort of in-between state, being both wall and sculpture, opaque and transparent, allowing and impairing vision."

"What has remained a constant in my work since school is the presence of things that cause a disorientation of your perception – what I call a cognitive dissonance." And with that characteristically cryptic parting shot, this rare glimpse into the complex mind of one of LA's most byzantine contemporary artists comes to a close.

ALEX COLES

