



Little Spitfires

The New Arts Foundation

The Hollywood Roosevelt, Room 111

February 22-23, 2024

On Urban Dictionary, a 'spitfire' is defined as "someone that's wild & free, & that can say what he/she wants to say without a care in the world...Also, someone whose angry words sting like fire."¹ Cimmy Mae (the author of the entry who also (and only) penned entries for cimarron, free, free-spirited, and hot-blooded) is wise to point out that a spitfire – simply by self-expression, and especially by pointed critique – can have a searing effect on those who tend toward conformity and rule-following.

Cimmy Mae wrote all their entries over an eleven-day span in 2008, and never wrote again. Through just a bit of deduction, one could imagine that Cimmy Mae was going through a breakup of sorts, and had cast themselves in the spitfire/cimarron/free/free-spirited role and their foil in the hot-blooded one. There are other possibilities, too. Maybe Cimmy Mae was trying to get ahead of something; maybe they were anticipating, defining terms to be used later – perhaps to dictate the foundation of an argument, or just to reference in a time of need.

I guess this is how information works. Whether it's created reactively or proactively, information is narrative's scaffolding, and can be made up anytime, anywhere. The avenues for information creation – information that informs narrative, that dictates "reality" – have never been more unlimited as they are right now. To quote the late, great, tech-overlord Steve Jobs: "Life – ... Everything around you... was made up by people that were no smarter than you... [so] you can change it, you can influence it..."

¹ Cimmy Mae, "Spitfire," Urban Dictionary, May 4, 2008, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Spitfire>.



One reality that's advanced drastically within the past five years in Los Angeles is the professionalization of Art, which was almost certainly kicked into high gear with the arrival of Frieze LA in 2019. Though that year's fair made a passing attempt at capturing some of LA's more roguish, sprawling, anti-discipline art energy with installations on Paramount's "New York Streets" backlot, Frieze LA quickly pivoted away from that in subsequent fairs, moved off the lot, and has become somewhat indistinguishable from any other mega-fair in any other city.²

Riding sidecar with Frieze LA is Felix, a fair which takes place in the rooms and bungalows of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Felix has styled itself (through marketing and PR) as a "hip," "iconic," and distinctly LA enterprise that, per its co-founder, "gets people mingling in a very casual way" while also talking about "serious topics, whether it's world politics or identity politics."³ While Felix might capture a bit more of the LA flavor through its corporate partnerships, the art being shown isn't actually much different from the art at Frieze, it's just considered less valuable, less "blue chip" (though in some cases, it's quite blue chip). In fact, if Felix's presentations were moved from the Roosevelt to Frieze's tent at the Santa Monica Airport, it would be hard to separate which art belonged to which fair. In some cases, exhibitors show at both.

² It would be hard to argue that this influx of money and exhibition hasn't influenced the work artists make, the way they handle their social interactions, and the spaces they choose to show in. With opportunity in sight, artists (and, frankly, anyone) will tend toward preservation and progression, qualities bolstered by acting diplomatically, taking measured steps, and ensuring artwork is positioned just right. While these may be rational steps to take, they sound more like steps taken to climb the corporate ladder, rather than steps taken to create a compelling work of art. Add in two wars, inflation, an election year, and a culture passionate about delimiting the contours of expression – the motivation (or, at least, the opportunity) for artists under the career-trap to take chances is slim. In an environment like this – and with attitudes like that – art will do less. So how do we make it do more? How do we change our environment?

³ Casey Lesser, "Inside Felix Art Fair's Bustling Fifth Edition," Artsy, February 16, 2023, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-inside-felix-art-fairs-bustling-fifth-edition>.

THE Hollywood Roosevelt

I draw attention here not to antagonize any fairs, exhibitors, or artists in particular, but rather to look at art institutions from a more critical distance, specifically their use of and association with space. In the same way that punk aesthetics (or any other aesthetics) were co-opted and stripped of their meaning by corporate interests for the sake of profit, so too have the DIY show, the hotel show, the backyard show, the off-space show in recent years. The result is something like aesthetic and ideological gentrification: in an off-space setting where the seeds of ideas once went to grow – where “serious topics” may have actually been addressed in a casual and low-stakes way (and be understood as such) – we now have gallery attendants, corporate sponsors, and perfectly leveled wallworks.⁴

It would make sense for more galleries and institutions – especially ones seeking the capital benefits of anti-capital aesthetics – to embrace the off-space like Felix has, to balance their own capital association with a more benign gesture... and they have. This is somewhat of an emergent trend in LA, where the city has begun to see backyard or rooftop shows within the bounds of (or in association with) an institutional space or gallery. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is worth noting, because, no matter the degree to which an institution insists their off-space programming is “different” from their white wall programming, it's still their programming. It's still imbued with an institution's capital and ideological considerations. Rarely, if ever, does the work offend or critique extant paradigms. The institutional off-space do-si-do then takes on a sort of Trojan horse function: it attracts artists to their program, only to flatten any idea or practice that threatens the bottom line.

⁴ Context at Felix tends to be disregarded. The spaces are often stripped of all furniture, bedding, towels, and televisions, making them function more like rooms in a hotel than hotel rooms.



Little Spitfires aims to create a dialogue about these emergent trends. Each work is staged in its own miniature lightbox and, together, the artworks are arranged in an otherwise unchanged room at the Roosevelt Hotel, just a day before exhibitors move into the space for Felix 2024. The works – small, scaled-down, and isolated – explore themes, processes, and often immaterial modes of inquiry that fall through the cracks of (or are actively ignored by) galleries and institutions. Many of the works blend function and formality, or speak to a concept whose meaning is magnified by the change in scale.

Taken as a whole, the exhibit asks us to actively consider site and space, and their roles in generating meaning. What happens to art as formal and informal spaces (and third spaces) merge? Are there types of work that engage critically with this phenomenon? And what is the effect on us – as artists and as people – when the professional begins to consume the personal and the experimental? How do we create new spaces and, in turn, new datasets and new information? Do we make them even less formal, or do we counter by somehow appropriating elements of that formality, while subverting others? Further, in occupying the Roosevelt one day before Felix, Little Spitfires aims to tug at the threads of ritual and ownership – of being the first event of Frieze Week, of being 2024's first art show at the Roosevelt – and does so by getting out ahead of noise, priming viewers with a new lens through which to view the week ahead.

Little Spitfires opens on Thursday, February 22, 2024 at The Hollywood Roosevelt in Room 111. The exhibition is curated by Greg Jenkins and includes work by Scott Benzal, Amy Chiao, Kristofor Giordano, Luke Haeger, Dallas Havoc, Chris Johst, Philipp Lerman, NAOMI, Nikki Ochoa, and Kathi Schulz.

More information can be found at new-arts.us/little-spitfires.

Text by Greg Jenkins

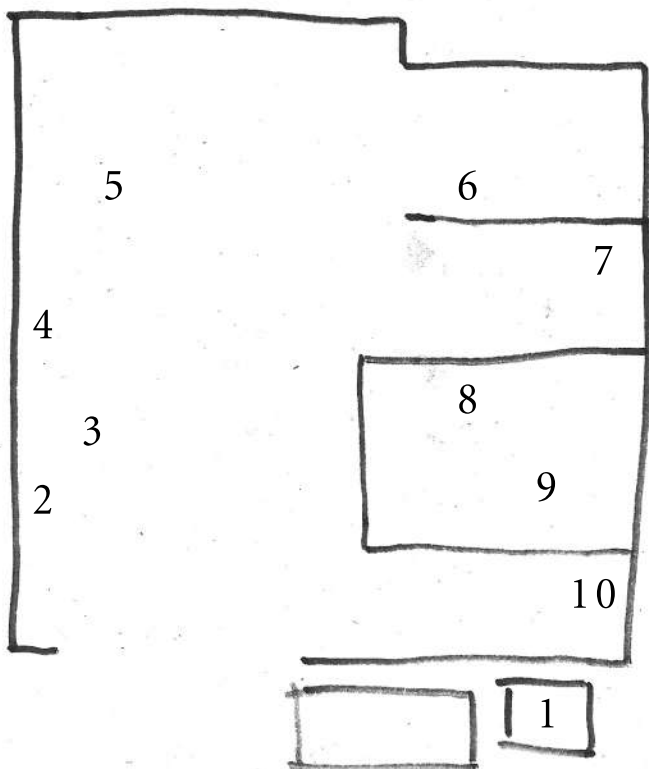
THE
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Roosevelt*

Little Spitfires

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1.
Kristofor Giordano
twas Heaven here with you, 2024

2.
Kathi Schulz
ctrl, alt, c "rosebud," 2024

3.
Scott Benzel
Aviary, 2024

4.
Philipp Lerman
Through the Sea Glass Cliff, 2022-2024

5.
Amy Chiao
Checkmarks, 2024

6.
NAOMI
FOUND OCCLUPANIDS, 2024

7.
Luke Haeger
Dawn, 2023-2024

8.
Dallas Havoc
Here is the House; Condemnation, 2024

9.
Nikki Ochoa
Hussam Al-Attar, 2024

10.
Chris Johst
untitled (well), 2024