

# Brody Albert – Exit Strategy

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A text by Jonathan Velardi

*Exit Strategy*

Brody Albert

with Sara Ellen Fowler and Jason Gowans

June 3 to June 30, 2017

711 Mateo Street, Los Angeles, CA

Welcoming: arguably one of the last go-to adjectives to best describe a gallery. The blinding white walls, austere interior and more often than not, a faceless gallerist stationed behind a desk, visible by only the top of their head, all set the scene for the unspoken script that is art viewing. Signs are intangible – codes of conduct to be expected. Los Angeles-based artist Brody Albert sets out to manipulate this implicit behaviour with a trio of gestures in the suitably titled exhibition, 'Exit Strategy'.



Brody Albert, *Division Symbol*, 2017, Dyed MDF, Dimensions variable

Satire aside, such a title alludes to the artist being cognisant of the barriers of privilege at play over the gallery's threshold. A brief second of relief perhaps, believing that he's sympathetic to any site-specific angst we're about to bring upon ourselves, is soon thwarted by the plight of physical barriers installed in the main gallery. The first gesture we're confronted with, 'Division Symbol' (2017), is a network of stanchions - 16 in total - in a restricting arrangement across the two rooms; their presence undeniable at 42 inches tall, scaled up by 15% to reach above the hip. Familiar and banal, viewers will be forgiven for thinking the modular sculptures are ready-mades, found in both highly politicised and depoliticised spaces. We're aware of this particular object's existence somewhere in the world. It has a duty and purpose outside of gallery theatrics. So what is its purpose inside a gallery? Albert is interested in malleability - how quotidian objects can work

the same function, at the same time, in different contextual scenarios. The stanchion's embedded politic as an institutional "way-finding" device adopts different modes in a theater or museum to that at border control. The commonality is unnerving. Albert reconstructs the power dynamics of these loaded communal spaces by creating an aesthetic experience within the gallery's architecture - itself a space of shifting guises. Unlike Robert Barry's 'Closed Gallery' from 1969, our natural reaction is not to turn around and exit as this exhibition title may suggest. We possess a body memory to interact with these unassuming monoliths; seduced by suspense as we meander ourselves along the designated way to the other side: to possible amusement, aspiration or sentence. And so the performance begins. Not enough for the sculptures to engage with the gallery's architecture alone, the viewer activates the work, step by step through Albert's choreographed layout.

'Division Symbol' is not composed of ready-mades but of multiple handmade replicas in industrially dyed MDF composite - even the latches and retractable belts are made from this single material. The works are an extraordinary example of craftsmanship of something otherwise manufactured - otherwise invisible. Its conflict of function is also reflected in its fabrication. MDF is a cheap and vulnerable material now given gravitas and requiring stewardship, elevated to the status of contemporary artwork. Masked by the form's very own familiarity paired with Albert's laborious mode of making in effect erases his identity. So identical are his renderings that his hand gesture is totally effaced. The result is a flawless finish in a muted shade of blue. Binding the three gestures in the exhibition is color and medium. The presence of the artist is in fact introduced collaboratively through poet, Sara Ellen Fowler and photographer, Jason Gowans, who Albert invited to create work using the cast-off of densely blue-pigmented dust from his process of carving the industrially dyed MDF.



Studio view of dyed MDF dust.

Fowler presents 7 text drawings, 'Stopped Lines' (2017), made from the fine blue dust applied to watercolor paper. 'They talk about us in their sleep.:' 'Debt and gentle work.:' 'Two emails in an hour.:' are single lines of poetry ending in a period that surround the enclosed path on the walls, intended to be read while standing; simulating an overheard environment of abstract sentiment ordinarily lost in a public arena. Continuing along the designated route to the second gallery, viewers are transported 3000 miles away to Montreal, Canada. 'The Clearest Memory of a Call Center I Worked at in Montreal (November 2005)', 2017 is a wall-size mural rendered directly onto the gallery wall using the same blue cast-off dust. The image – abandoned and absent of figures – is from Gowans' archives. It's desolate depiction,

barely animated were it not for the excess dust accumulated on the gallery floor from application, reveals a volatility of something in operation one day and shuttered the next. As with the dust laid at the foot of the mural, the cycle is exposed and a stillness amplified. The suspense of Albert's route leads to an ominous terminus. The uniformity of color and medium in all three works concede to a darker subcontext at play.

Retracing the steps back to the start of the route offers an opportunity to review the stanchions in more detail now that their initial familiarity has worn off. The subject of uniformity produces an uncanny reaction towards an object that the viewer has witnessed metamorphose across three states. The engineered material surprisingly offers a strong correlation to classical sculpture such as marble or stone. Its matte patina creates an anti-reflective, shadow-less entity – almost petrified in time and space – that results in a tension between the real and virtual. Albert's reduction of color – and use of coloration outside of the native spectrum – increases this virtual impression and a flatness more akin to a 2-D rendering achieved by a dominance of form, as opposed to surface. Through shifts in scale, material and purpose, he challenges our emotional resonance to objects, to art and to one another, and compels a strategy surrounding the ideas of authenticity as we step out of the confines of the artwork and exit the gallery. The disruptive experience is unexpected and questions our memory and relationship with our physical environment where Albert's materiality has the profound effect of nonmateriality.

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