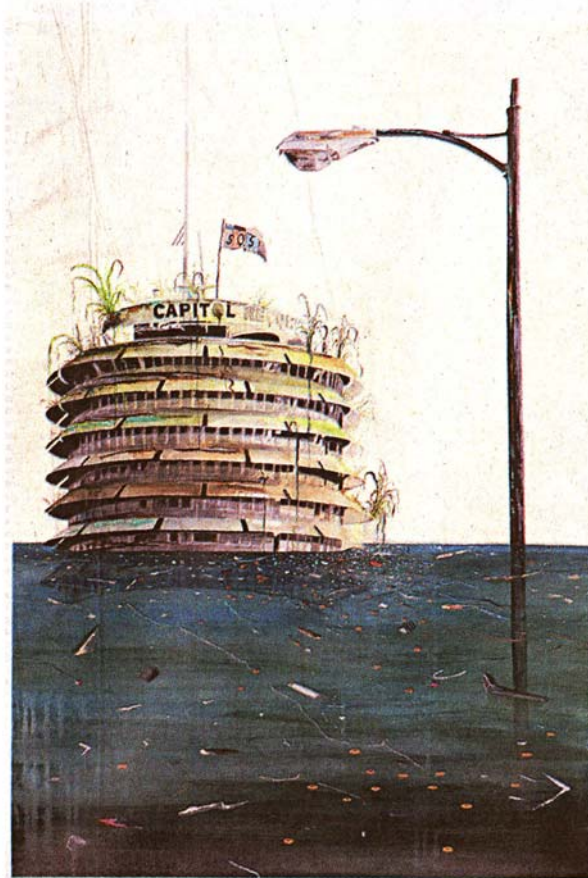


## AROUND THE GALLERIES



Margo Leavin Gallery

**DISASTER STRIKES:** Jason Middlebrook's "Capit L Records Building" shows the landmark building overwhelmed.

# Pointed warnings to the self-satisfied

By DAVID PAGEL  
Special to The Times

Comic-strip Conceptualism has been a part of art in Los Angeles at least as long as nerdy seriousness has been a part of Conceptual art's New York variant. At Margo Leavin Gallery, Jason Middlebrook's solo debut taps into this history by making fun of people who take themselves too seriously.

Such folks are in no short supply in the art world, which is filled with arrogant dealers, self-impressed collectors and vindictive academics. Middlebrook's works avoid these easy targets,

instead serving up humorous warnings about the pitfalls of all sorts of myopic self-satisfaction.

His casually beautiful drawings depict L.A. as if it had gone to hell in a handbasket. "Mickey Finally Has Some Company" shows Walt Disney Concert Hall overrun by giant mice, its main entrance buried in trash and its once-shiny walls cracked, stained and covered with graffiti. "Capit L Records Building" depicts floodwaters swallowing up all but the top six floors of the landmark building, an SOS flag flying from its rooftop. And "Have a Couple of Kids That Call

Me Pa" presents a post-earthquake view of Century City and downtown L.A., the rest of the continental U.S. having fallen into a dry gulch whose remaining inhabitants live in log cabins.

Frank Gehry is not the only art-world luminary whose work has fallen on hard times. In two other pieces, cracks appear in Ed Ruscha's recent street-map images, along with weeds, roadside detritus and rats. In "Public Art Continues to Suffer," Jonathan Borofsky's monumental statue of a hobo clown is washed away in the rain.

But pointed amusement, not disdain-fueled revenge, suffuses Middlebrook's pictures. As handsomely crafted as they are wickedly witty, his drawings also play off of Peter Alexander's airplane-window views of sprawling Los Angeles, Scott Greiger's sidesplitting sendups of egomania, Dave Muller's warm-hearted watercolors and H.C. Westermann's defiantly hilarious pictures of what rises from the ashes after the world as we know it crashes and burns.

To prevent viewers from forgetting that he's talking to — and about — us, Middlebrook has included 18 realistic sculptures of stalactites and stalagmites. Hanging from the ceiling and rising from the floor, they suggest that the present will soon be the past and none of us will be here to see it. At the same time, these painted polystyrene works recall Lynda Benglis' brightly colored polyurethane pieces from the 1960s.

Middlebrook's works falter when they read like cartoons or like slacker versions of Mark Tansey's paintings, which are themselves enlarged New Yorker cartoons in oil on canvas. Middlebrook is at his best when he refrains from illustrating and gives a viewer's imagination room to roam freely.

Now living in Brooklyn, Middlebrook earned an undergraduate degree at UC Santa Cruz and a graduate degree at the San Francisco Art Institute. That puts him in a good position to see the dangers of hubris — whether it occurs in L.A.'s art world, the entertainment industry or national politics.

**Margo Leavin Gallery**, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0803, through Feb. 5. Closed Sundays and Mondays.