



Jason Middlebrook **Jason Middlebrook** BY TOMMY FREEMAN
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles CA January 8 - February 5, 2005

A small graphite drawing of Charles Darwin quietly pre- sides over "Past, Present, Future," Jason Middlebrook's first solo exhibition at Margo Leavin (all works 2004). *Always*, the title of Darwin's portrait, serves as the thematic foundation for this body of work, which examines—or rather dryly pokes fun at—the seriousness with which we take our lives while we remind ourselves of the brevity of existence.

Los Angeles is an apt focus for Middlebrook's pointed, yet humorous paintings and sculptures that project the future of the city and its monuments (including iconic architecture and somewhat specific geographies) in various stages of degradation. The city generates and reflects the self-absorbed tendencies of a population totally obsessed with the cultivation of individual importance as the "altar" ego of a religion of celebrity. But Middlebrook does not set his sights on the easy and all-too-obvious tabloid-variety superstar, addressing instead various art world luminaries like Ed Ruscha and Jonathon Borofsky, and architects Frank Gehry (Walt Disney Concert Hall) and Welton Becket (Capitol Records Building).

Public Art Continues To Suffer finds Borofsky's public sculpture of a ballerina clown (located in Venice Beach) being swept away by floodwaters that also, it would seem, submerged the iconic landmark in another painting, *Capitol Records Building*: here the famous cylindrical building is all but swallowed by the rising water. *Mickey Finally Has Some Company* depicts Walt Disney Concert Hall in extreme disrepair and teaming with giant rats; its once shiny exterior, dulled by neglect and the passage of time, has become riddled with cracks and covered in graffiti. Ed Ruscha's now-familiar street map drawings demarcate real estate that has become, in Middlebrook's hands, drought-ridden wastelands.

Have a Couple Kids That Call Me Pa borrows its title from a line in a somewhat obscure Bob Dylan song in which the folksinger laments the passage of time and dreams of retiring to the simpler life in Utah where catching fish and raising children are all that matters. This work, probably more than any other in the show, establishes Tinsel Town as a sort of dream world on high, strewn with twinkling lights and sparkling buildings recalling Oz's Emerald City. Middlebrook situates L.A. as an unobtainable utopia separated from the rest of the world by a monolithic rocky cliff, at the bottom of which common people reside in simple cabins along the banks of a stream.

In the gallery's other room, Middlebrook affixes massive polystyrene stalagmites and stalactites to floor and ceiling, thereby projecting that the galleries of today are the dank caverns of tomorrow. *Past, Present, Future*, a small painting that shares the exhibition's title, depicts, nestled among these artificial spires, deer melting into the earth, symbolically demonstrating the cycle of life that will also consume both the subjects and beholders of the artist's other paintings. The deer's anonymity is thus as if seen through the eyes of some unknown future species. Although the underlying current of this show is the *River Styx*, Middlebrook maintains levity by juxtaposing mortal reality and sharp-witted humorous imagery.



OPPOSITE PAGE: JASON MIDDLEBROOK, *HAVE A COUPLE KIDS THAT CALL ME PA*, 2004, SINGAPORE, INK & WATER ON PAPER, 44 x 30 in. PUBLIC ART CONTINUES TO SUFFER, 2004, ALUMINUM, 66 x 30 in. COURTESY MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES. REBECCA SCHWARTZ, *THE STREAM ACROSS THE FARTS*, 1992, GRAPHIC ON PAPER, 7 x 8.5 in. PHOTO: PHOTODISC/STILL IN. PHOTO: GARY/ARTISTS/REEMAN/GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO.