Clarion Review

History

The Art Dockuments: Tales of the Art Dock: The Drive-by Gallery
Carlton Davis
Ed Glendenning, photographer
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Those whose downtown Los Angeles touchstone is Frank Gehry's aluminum-clad, tornado-like Disney Concert Hall may have trouble conjuring what the area was like thirty years before that building starred in every new automobile ad on television. *The Art Dockuments – Tales of the Art Dock: The Drive-by Gallery*, by Carlton Davis, is a fascinating tribute to a very different downtown scene and the scrappy artists who gentrified this rundown section of the city during the first half of the 1980s.

Divided into four acts—descriptively titled "The Manifesto," "The Community Gallery," "The Art Olympics," and "The Business of Art"—this chronological survey of events covers every exhibition held from 1981 through 1986 in the eccentric gallery located in the loading dock of a former pickle factory. The book's focus is as much on the lives and beliefs of the creators as it is on their art works. "Art in a loading dock was a statement about commodity, the standardization of creativity, and the sale of culture," explains Davis about his brainchild. His colorful illustrations of each show provide a visual diary and, together with a photograph of the featured art framed in the loading dock's square opening, effectively tie together the book's thirty-five historical narratives.

Appropriately, this so-called "Drive-by Gallery" compilation references car culture at every turn. In fact, the author begins his nested storytelling with a recollection of driving his bed, mattress, and clothes in a pickup truck fifteen miles west to the Pacific Ocean to avoid the building inspectors who were looking for artists illegally squatting in their downtown work spaces. "The reality of the creative life in downtown Los Angeles then," Davis remembers, was "like outlaws running from the posse."

Davis's inspiration for The Art Dock was Readymades creator Marcel Duchamp. Many

of the artists the book features, including Brett Goldstone and Kim Jones, are sculptors who used found objects in the tradition of Duchamp's seminal *Fountain*, fashioned from a porcelain urinal. Among the apt quotes sprinkled throughout Davis's volume is this one from Karl Marx: "A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."

On the subject of commodities, it bears mention that Carlton Davis was for a time unhappily employed as a project architect in Frank Gehry's office, working on a multimillion-dollar Malibu residence. For him and others, The Art Dock no doubt served as an antidote to the city's high culture, whose cognoscenti, significantly, were also not immune to its charms, as Davis tells it.

One questionable, and at times unfortunate, element of this volume is the author's choice to feature dialogue throughout, rather than to paraphrase some of his exchanges. While this lends a sense of immediacy to Davis's stories, his voice can be tiresome, and one wonders at his ability to remember conversations verbatim from so long ago. On the plus side, there is an update at the end of each section that informs readers about what the artists are doing today.

While *The Art Dockuments* is an accessible and entertaining choice for any reader craving a passionate account of art practiced as life—and faith—this handsomely packaged book will be most useful for aficionados of contemporary art, especially those interested in alternative ventures.

Julie Eakin