

# BREAKDOWN/BREAKTHROUGH: ART AND INFRASTRUCTURE

CURATED BY DR. MICHAËLA DE LACAZE MOHRMANN

JANUARY 31–MAY 16, 2026

UC IRVINE  
LANGSON ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

## CONCRETE THROUGH LINES

DR. MICHAËLA DE LACAZE MOHRMANN

The cliché still holds: The car has irrevocably shaped Los Angeles and, by extension, Southern California. To optimistic technophiles, the automobile and its freeways nurtured the region's very best attributes, from its unique architecture and energetic mindset to its mystique of freedom. The illustrious architectural critic Reyner Banham first popularized this view in 1971 by describing LA as an "autopia" whose freeways offered "a special way of being alive." In his eyes, even the Santa Monica–San Diego freeway interchange amounted to "a work of art."<sup>1</sup>

Banham's rosy take was immediately contested by some Angelenos, artists notably among them. Writing for *Artforum*, the painter and novelist Peter Plagens countered that Los Angeles epitomized an "ecology of evil," whose pollution, corruption, and class animosity had escalated with the car's proliferation. Freeways, in his view, corroded egalitarianism by "demarcating ethnic ghettos [and] letting upper-middle-class whites roll from the Valley or Hollywood Hills to the beaches without soiling their gaze on the poverty of South-Central Los Angeles."<sup>2</sup> He refrained, however, from further scrutinizing any related orchestration of invisibility in relation to communities of color. It would take the rest of the 1970s, and ever-louder critiques from Black and Chicano activists and artists, for the discourse on LA's car infrastructure to become more incisive and intersectional—that is, less overdetermined by privileged perspectives, whether utopian or dystopian, resulting from the windshield's mediation of the city.

Located across two sites on UCI's campus, the exhibition *Breakdown/Breakthrough: Art and Infrastructure* centers the experience of those inhabiting the inner-city neighborhoods, snubbed suburbs, and other in-between places that freeways impact but frequently skip over and blur. Infrastructure is the prominently public, human-built armature supporting society, but it is also a living record of intangible government policies and what Keller Easterling calls "extrastatecraft."<sup>3</sup> Its functions are self-evident, yet its slowly unfolding social harms remain opaque, even unquantifiable. As such, infrastructure is defined by dialectics of visibility and invisibility, of care and control. Confronted daily with this apparatus, SoCal's artists have become especially attuned to its dichotomies, creating art that counters or breaks through its insidious effects.

One such artist is Ruben Ochoa. While obtaining his MFA at UCI in the early 2000s, Ochoa began photographing government-planted ficus trees that had wrecked sidewalks in Los Angeles, especially in the Chicano enclave of East LA. In *Slipping into the Darkness* (2007, **fig. 1**), for example, concrete slabs buckle from root growth, creating a shadowy hole. Its pitch-blackness metonymically evokes the neighborhood's nightly plight, when ficus branches, left unpruned by city management, block streetlights, providing cover for crime and drug use. This inscrutable, amorphous darkness at the heart of the image momentarily stymies the eye like an afterimage, raising the possibility that its viewers may have blind spots in an optical as well as a social sense. As suggested by the wordplay of the work's title, East LA's residents risk tripping on broken sidewalks, but it is their metaphorical fall into sociopolitical oblivion—at least, in the eyes of those in city hall and even the art world—that has proven most deleterious.<sup>4</sup>

There is a perversity to this slippage. In the 1950s, California's Division of Highways exaggerated East LA's decrepitude, caused by decades of redlining and governmental neglect, to justify the building of seven polluting freeways and one interchange (the world's largest at the time) in the neighborhood.<sup>5</sup> Freeways, as Plagens notes, monopolize resources, devalue homes, and "encourage neglect of surface streets" nearby.<sup>6</sup> In short, they exacerbated the dilapidation of East LA, better priming it for future infrastructural incursions—a vicious cycle. At times, the city also placed the burden of street repair on local homeowners, straining their financial ability to remain in the neighborhood. Through his photographs, then, Ochoa both captures the long-term human costs of infrastructural projects—a subject already thematized by an earlier generation of Chicano artists, including Carlos Almaraz and Pat Gómez—and exposes their entrapment.<sup>7</sup>

Ochoa exhibited his early ficus works in *CLASS: C* (2001–5, **fig. 2**), an old Chevy van he converted into a studio and mobile art gallery while studying at UCI. Born of necessity, it enabled him to create and display his art as he split his time between the art scene of Los Angeles, his classes in Irvine, and his family home in Oceanside. *CLASS: C* also became an exhibition space for other emerging artists—many of them minorities with ties to Orange County—who were being ignored by LA galleries. If freeways had famously transformed LA into a decentralized,

postmodern city, *CLASS: C* underscored the limits of this de-hierarchization; the art world's consolidation in LA accelerated gentrification and favored artists who could afford to live there, creating center-periphery dynamics of another kind. Though referencing a type of driver's license for commercial vehicles, the work's title echoes colloquial phrases such as "first-class" or "B-list," scrambling their codification of social status. Similarly, *CLASS: C*'s mobility challenges privileged forms of access that are often reinforced through the built environment. Ochoa, for example, frequently parked *CLASS: C* outside galleries, pitting the works it displayed against those for sale inside the white cube.

Yet *CLASS: C* simultaneously complicates the emancipatory potential of mobility—that shibboleth of California's postwar infrastructural boom and, according to Banham, the very language of Los Angeles, "the uniquely mobile metropolis."<sup>8</sup> Significantly, Ochoa's mother, Lupe Ochoa, had originally used the van to sell tortillas. Her difficult peripatetic work, which compounded her unmooring as a Mexican immigrant, reveals how hypermobility can be as much a marker of precarity as of freedom. Through its first exhibition of ficus-related works, *CLASS: C* connected this family history of dislocation to the struggles of East LA. The result was a subtle homage to the state's Chicano community, symbolized, according to Ochoa, by the ficus, an alien species that has formed, against all odds, inextricable life bonds to Californian soil. If this work ultimately finds an institutional home, it will have achieved another symbolic form of belonging. Until then, it continues to perform the intergenerational healing and communal care that is often impossible within brick-and-mortar art venues. The works by UCI-affiliated artists who are presently exhibited in *CLASS: C* continue to raise the possibility of collective care and artistic breakthroughs in the face of societal and infrastructural breakdowns.

In her 2025 *Survivors* series, Beatrice von Rague Schleyer photographs cars marred by accidents. Systemic issues, from poverty to poor insurance coverage, have prevented their repair. In several works, such as *Survivor One (Westlake)* (**fig. 3**), Schleyer focuses on the damage surrounding a single headlight, staging a charged parallel between this anthropomorphic car part and the eyes observing it. Her photographs' velvety shadows and delicately warm tones bestow a softness and vulnerability to these machinic black eyes. Implausibly, one feels empathy for the cars. The oddity of this outcome redirects our misplaced concern toward the vehicles' owners—the true survivors—all of whom reside in the predominantly Latino, working-class neighborhood of Westlake, where Schleyer herself once lived. It is a poignant irony that Schleyer heightens compassion for LA's increasingly dehumanized immigrant communities through a consumerist, all-too-American propensity to perceive selfhood in fetishized products more readily than in the undocumented and underprivileged.

Social numbness and its dispelling are also at play in a work from Sean Duffy's *Road Signs* series (2012–13). Bearing the eponymous message "I've seen more photographs of people than people," the print lifts its look from street signs, yet its rounded corners and white letters on a dark ground are also reminiscent of

iPhone screen aesthetics. The implication is that the isolating experience of driving while rapidly absorbing messages psychologically conditions people for the even more alienating, more distracted attentional capture of the internet's information superhighway. According to Marshall McLuhan, the imbrication of two mediums, or "break boundary," is precisely where one can grasp "the paradox that nomadic mobile man . . . is socially static." It is where one can see how technology has turned humans into its "servomechanisms," trapping them "in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness."<sup>9</sup> Duffy awakens his viewers by leveraging the chance imperfections of the silkscreen—striations, flecks, cloudiness—against the pellucid digital screen. These indexical interruptions appeal to one's sense of touch—an effect reinforced by Duffy's decision to pin his prints directly to the wall—returning viewers to the bodily and material frictions unabsorbed and disavowed by the virtual realm.

Duffy's sensitivity to the slippage between informational and infrastructural networks can be attributed to his MFA studies at UCI, whose car-centric, suburban community was master-planned as a highly networked "information society," with the University as its key hub. Campus architecture, in fact, relates to people in a way not unlike the road signs and new tech driving UCI's research, as noted by art historian Susanna Phillips Newbury:

Built to be seen but not noticed, to shape social activity but not be witnessed, the [UCI] campus buildings were configured as a kind of literal and symbolic infrastructure, received almost subliminally as such in a state of distraction. . . . Master planning, like that of Irvine, reconceived the city with architecture as the formal interface of the invisibly networked organization of space. . . . To understand this is to refine an understanding of *infrastructure*.<sup>10</sup>

When William Pereira designed UCI's campus in the early 1960s, he had no illusions about the failures of transportational infrastructure in Southern California:

The "go syndrome" has completely dominated transportation objectives. . . . This is particularly evident in the growing monumental failure of our common carrier, the automobile, to perform efficiently, economically, and pleasantly as an infra-city mode. . . . We must invalidate the attitude of moving humans out of the way and removing all that nature can provide in the city in order to give priority to transportation alone.<sup>11</sup>

Pereira, who equally bemoaned "the misuse of the earth," found a solution to both crises, but not by creating pedestrian-centric communities that diminished the need for polluting cars and roads.<sup>12</sup> Rather, he emphasized the creation of green spaces that could mitigate the worst consequences of the car's continued preponderance. The core of UCI's campus, Aldrich Park, best represents this effort.

**continues inside**

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## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

In Focus Gallery, 18881 Von Karman Ave, Suite 100, Irvine

**Carlos Almaraz**  
*Evening Traffic*, 1985  
Oil on canvas  
30 ¼ x 48 ¼ in.  
The Buck Collection at UC  
Irvine Langson Orange County  
Museum of Art

**Pat Gómez**  
*Stay Tuned*, 1992  
Ink on archival paper  
27 x 32 ½ in.  
Edition, 41/63  
The Buck Collection at UC  
Irvine Langson Orange County  
Museum of Art

**Ruben Ochoa**  
*Overlapped in the 90063*, 2007  
C-print in wengé frame  
40 x 50 in.  
UC Irvine Langson Orange County  
Museum of Art. Museum purchase  
with additional support by Vielmetter  
Los Angeles

**Ruben Ochoa**  
*Slipping into the Darkness*, 2007  
C-print in wengé frame  
40 x 50 in.  
UC Irvine Langson Orange County  
Museum of Art. Museum purchase  
with additional support by Vielmetter  
Los Angeles

**Sean Duffy**  
*I've Seen More Photographs of  
People Than People,  
Road Signs*, 2013/2025  
Acrylic silkscreen on paper  
Exhibition copy  
30 x 45 in.  
Collection of the artist

**Ruben Ochoa**  
*CLASS: C*, 2001–5  
1985 Chevrolet van  
81 x 202 x 79 in.  
Collection of the artist

**Beatrice von Rague Schleyer**  
*Survivor One (Westlake)*,  
*Survivors*, 2025  
Silver gelatin print on aluminum  
20 x 24 in.  
Private collection

**Beatrice von Rague Schleyer**  
*Survivor Two (Westlake)*,  
*Survivors*, 2025  
Silver gelatin print on aluminum  
20 x 24 in.  
Private collection

**André Woodward**  
*On the Wall*, 2025  
Ficus tree, cement, steel, enamel  
Overall dimensions variable  
Private collection



FIG. 3. BEATRICE VON RAGUE SCHLEYER, *SURVIVOR ONE (WESTLAKE)*, 2025



FIG. 1. RUBEN OCHOA, *SLIPPING INTO THE DARKNESS*, 2007



FIG. 2. RUBEN OCHOA, *CLASS: C*, 2000–5

While earning his BA in studio art at UCI in the early 2000s, Mexican American artist André Woodward noticed how underestimated natural forces left Aldrich Park boggy despite the campus's engineering. These events shifted Woodward's perception of the highly manicured gardens of Orange County, which he frequently tended as a part-time landscaper. He began creating sculptures of ficus trees growing out of concrete cubes. Informed by the Japanese art form of bonsai, these living sculptures, which must be regularly soaked in water and carefully oriented toward natural light, exact a discipline of care from their keepers that results in a form of mutual control. Over time, their concrete bases will crack from these baths and from the resulting root growth, generating a sense of botanical time that riffs on Minimalism's theatricality while unraveling its anthropocentrism. By the same token, they nod to Pereira's concrete architecture in a futuristic brutalist style, as if to conjure what they most seek to deny: their aging into ruins. Yet these sculptures are not fully entropic. Woodward notes that his trees will never outgrow or destroy their containers; they'll instead settle into an equilibrium with their cubes, no matter how small. The most oppressive are no more than three cubic inches. The political implications are clear.

It is striking that Woodward's allegory for an authoritarian status quo sprouted from his study of Pereira's chief emblem of leisure at the center of a complex devoted to intellectual freedom. Yet Aldrich Park harbors troubling ideological underpinnings. Its carefully circumscribed and artificial deployment of nature is in keeping with Pereira's awareness of nature's destructive powers, "the hurricane, the flood, the avalanche." In the architect's anxious mind, nature's "running amuck" goes hand in hand with humankind's equally natural yet self-destructive drive to breed. Under the heading "Zero Population Growth," Pereira writes, "I recognize that human growth patterns are a disease that can devastate mankind if we cannot cope with the steady inexorable increase in population." He muses over the eventual need for population control and "the obvious decisions to be made on the proportions of the races" if natural resources continue to dwindle.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Pereira remained sanguine about the future. After all, he had the power to master plan it. And so he refrained from pursuing this ecofascist, anti-humanist line of thought any further, leaving future generations of multiracial students blissfully strolling on the Ring Road of his utopia.

1 Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books), 213, 214, 89.

2 Peter Plagens, "Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil," *Artforum* 11, no. 4 (December 1972): 72.

3 "Extrastatecraft" refers to the hidden, nongovernmental forms of power that are embedded in infrastructure, global standards, technology, and urban systems. Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014).

4 For more on the art world's complicity in infrastructural projects and urban redevelopment see Susanna Phillips Newbury, *The Speculative City: Art, Real Estate, and the Making of Global Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

5 See Eric Avila, "All Freeways Lead to East Los Angeles: Rethinking the L.A. Freeway and Its Meanings," in *Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990*, ed. Wim de Wit and Christopher James Alexander (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013).

6 Plagens, "Los Angeles: The Ecology of Evil," 71.

7 For an analysis of freeways in the work of Almaraz and other Chicano artists, see Eric Avila, "East Side Stories: Freeways and Their Portraits in Chicano Los Angeles," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 83–97. This entrapment is a form of neocolonialism. When city governance used East LA's dilapidation as a pretext to deploy eminent domain against its Latino population, it was merely replicating the federal government's own colonialist dynamic with Latin America. The United States' brutal interventionism in the region regularly found justification in exaggerated accounts of its poverty, crime, and disorder. The capital gains produced by this interventionism were also often infrastructural—the Panama Canal being arguably the greatest infrastructural prize ever won by the United States. For more on this, see Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Making of an Imperial Republic* (New York: Picado Metropolitan Books, 2006).

8 Banham, *Los Angeles*, 23.

9 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 38, 46.

10 Newbury, *The Speculative City*, 94, 102–3, her emphasis.

11 William Pereira, "Architecture, Nature, and the City," in *William Pereira*, ed. James Steele (Los Angeles: USC Architectural Guild Press), 47, 49.

12 Pereira, "Architecture, Nature, and the City," 31.

13 Pereira, "Architecture, Nature, and the City," 31, 37, 38, 60, 59.

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TEXTS © THE AUTHOR AND THE MUSEUM

ISBN: 979-8-9941560-0-1

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