

LARRY BROWNSTEIN

November 24, 2009 - January 3, 2010 at [G2 Gallery](#), Venice

by *Jeanne Willette*



"Seagull Flying 18," 2009, photograph.



"Seagull Flying 38," 2009, photograph.



"Seagull Flying 42," 2009, photograph.



"Seagull Flying 46," 2009, photograph.

Launching a series of exhibitions with the theme "Nature L.A." could sound like an exercise in futility or a contradiction in terms. The land of popular culture has nature? But the gallery launches this oxymoron with a photographer, Larry Brownstein, whose career trajectory is a dialectic from shooting blissful weddings to documenting the homeless. His motto--photograph what he wants--fits in well with his back story as a next generation Lee Friedlander, a Jack Kerouac with a camera, traveling the world and observing it through a lens. Now a veteran in his field, Brownstein has settled in the nature preserve of Culver City, from whence he has traveled to one of the last bits of the natural world available in Los Angeles, the rim of the Pacific. There he engages his latest subjects: Seagulls.

At first glance, the images of seagulls, toned in sepia, are only mildly interesting. That said, as is often the case with photographers of Brownstein's generation, the seemingly banal images are actually the result of a series of interesting decisions that are not immediately obvious. First, the seagulls exist at the fringe of that phenomenon we term "nature." Nature, L.A. style, exists in a dialogue between the beach and the landfill. For the seagull this is the very definition of paradise. The gulls careen happily among the restaurants that line the shore and trot jauntily along the boardwalks, cleaning up after the tourists, depositing guano at will. If they are still hungry, they can fly to the hills of garbage tucked away discretely so as to not disturb the humans who built the mounds.

But Brownstein shows none of the birds' bonanza, choosing to photograph them on the wing, flying high in the sky, freed from the sordid context of leftovers. Second, the images are cropped tightly, removing the romanticism of the clouds and sky, giving each frame the look of a scientific analysis of flight--something Leonardo da Vinci might have done. To add to the seriousness of the study, the photographer has eliminated all the "nature" we find in those high colors of the seashore: the turquoise blue of the sky and the blossoming white of the clouds. The images have been transformed by that sepia tint. It seems an odd choice, often (over-)used by the film industry to connote "the past." But Brownstein is no Mark Klett, trying to re-photograph another photographer's images. We know that no photographer in the past could have captured a flying seagull using the albumen process that caused the sepia tones of the historical past. Cameras were simply not fast enough. So why the sepia? What is the color meant to evoke?

A clue as to the artist's intentions is that the show's December 4th reception will be a fundraiser for The Last Straw, an organization that battles against the plastic pollution of the oceans. Brownstein's reason for focusing upon our mildly annoying companion of the beach is that the human culture of food has not been the bonanza it seems for sea birds. Indeed, our habit of encasing our food in plastic has caused a sea-borne ecological disaster. Discarded plastic floats out to sea and congeals and congeals into a petroleum-based Sargasso Sea. Today there is a huge "garbage patch," as big as Texas, floating in a Pacific Ocean Dead Zone. The confluence of junk, ninety percent of which is plastic, swirls clockwise in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, between Hawaii and California. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch attracts the seagulls, who think that they are seeing digestible food. The birds dive down, eat the floating plastic bits, then go to the shore and die.

's determination to "master" nature. Brownstein's seagulls in sepia serve as a metaphor for what has been irretrievably lost. We can only mourn the passing of the F-64 tradition of Weston and Cunningham and Adams, who could find and celebrate the natural world. As we know from the recent powerful documentary series by Ken Burns on our National Parks, nature has always been and always will be threatened by our addiction to profit. Brownstein's seagulls are not nostalgic reminders of long-lost nature. They are harbingers of our Civilization and its Discontents, and the messengers of the prophecy of Yeats.