

## Candy flake on the bottom of the pool, and other California dreams

By Glen Helfand

Tamra Seal's work expresses an unabashed appreciation for luminous plastic, in colors not found in nature. She has a deep investment in California dreaming, in swimming pools and candy flaked dune buggies, crystals and minimalism. That is, there is a palpable yearning for transcendence through sculpture. Seal makes it look easy to balance the magnetic pull of the materials—for her and the viewer—but truthfully, she manages to appreciate their pop surfaces while imbuing them with extra dimensions of form and meaning.

These attributes make a strong case for making Tamra Seal an honorary California native. Born outside of Boston, albeit on the coast, her sense of color, concept and cinematic influence (notice the alliteration of the letter 'C') are more attuned to the nature of this place than those born into it. In her case, the color scheme is more otherworldly, the luminescent plastic fantastic of Hollywood science fiction, and the steep Lucite heels of Frederick's footwear. It's as if she boned up for her state citizenship test, aiming for high marks and an electrified chartreuse green card.

Seal makes sculpture that glows without visible means of illumination, turns out plays of vibrating color, and objects that betray their actual heft. It's amazing what a coat or dip of fluorescent pink will do to a weighty cast iron bathtub. This is a feat she achieves in a key element in her current body of work for 2 x 2 Solos. It's titled *Alien Swimming Pool*, a moniker that suggests a campy science fiction film but also a bit of California politics of identity and real estate (in the sense that this is a sublime bathroom fixture makeover).

Seal came across the bathtub in a salvage yard. In regards to her process of gathering materials, she calls herself a 'finder', an interesting term given its relation to the idea of a seeker, something that people have traditionally headed West for. The Golden State's early allure was as a place of healing, of moderate temperature, dry air, affordability, dreams of betterment, and even transcendence; effects that this artist can illustrate with unlikely materials.

What early settlers actually found in California was a mixed bag—strange ironies, hucksters, earthquakes, brush fires, drought. Seal found herself this vintage tub, and dubs it a swimming pool for someone who isn't from around here. I imagine David Bowie, as a happier version of the character he played in Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, taking a relaxing soak in anti-freeze bath oil. (It's worth noting that Seal is an ardent cinephile, and a list of her favorite films contains keys to her aesthetic mixes of analog special effects and domestic horror: the verdant alienation of *The Boy with Green Hair*, the papier mache human visceral of *Fantastic Voyage*, or the sleek modernist spookiness of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.)

The swimming pool can be thought of as the hearth of the California backyard, a fixture where people gather for glamour, health, and perhaps even some baptismal healing. Seal points to a Jewish equivalent of this called the *mikvah*. This is a ritual of full immersion to purify a person, who has somehow become unclean. The set of circumstances sounds like a combination of art—the immersive, the idea that the application of a liquid can change the surface and condition of an object—or a person.

It is fitting then that this body of work includes a series of liquid soap dispensers with purifying elements in a spectrum of colors. Its title, *Tincture of Rainbow*, another example of the artist's playfully astute titling abilities, alludes to distillation and healing powers. It's as if she boiled down a segment of chromatic arc, giving something visible but simply vaporous a viscous form in off the rack dispensers. It so happens that "rainbowing" is a term that Seal uses to describe acts of aestheticization. The term is surprisingly elastic, evoking a populist craft (bedazzling), a queering (that rainbow flag), as well as a sense of viewing through an altered spectrum.

Who knew that there is actually a town called Rainbow, California? Somehow it's fittingly located in San Diego County, not far from the border, in a zone buffeted by arid Santa Anas.

Let's go back to the pool. In conversation, the artist describes her California state of mind in liquid terms: "It's a watery environment," she says. "I feel like I'm floating here. The plants look like they are from another planet. They're almost mystical but it is also harder to focus here. Things are illusory."

That has something to do with why Light and Space became the homegrown, Southern California art movement—all that cast acrylic used to channel illumination and our perceptions in trippy ways. It's common art historical knowledge that John McCracken's monoliths were surfboard inspired, so Seal's more direct use of the board—*Mirage* (2015)—is rather refreshing, though its engineering is a marvel of balance, standing there like that. Is it held erect by its translucent pink stripe of a spine? Robert Irwin famously stated that he wanted his work to convey the "ultimate experience of riding a wave," though he didn't do that with literal reference to the form. Seal's object is reverential and witty—she admits with a grin that in high school, on the east coast, she read surfing magazines to check out the guys. Such acknowledgements are perhaps the source of the phenomenological pleasure Seal's work generates.

Considering Seal's work, I'm reminded of collegial conversation I had with the LA-based sculptor Shirley Tse. She told me about a class she taught at CalArts back at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that riffed on the influence of those Light and Space dudes. With witty criticality, she called the class Light and Spacey.

Tse's syllabus, which she unearthed and forwarded along, contains some useful key words:

“Light: playful, fun, indifferent, entertaining, clean, colorful material.

Space(y): eccentric, disoriented, also futuristic, technological.”

All of these terms seem to connect to Seal's project. She notes on her website that she has been nearsighted since childhood, a reference that may account for the shimmering, bright colors that are optically distorted (and disorienting), and dynamically off-kilter. But there are also a number of areas in which Seal's work is a darker shade of light. She has a serious, studied interest in Tantric drawings, citing the Ajit Mookerjee's book of record on the topic, *Tantra Art: Its Philosophy & Physics*. She speaks of how her work engages a form of transmutation, taking a two dimensional image, say a film still, and creating a sculpture, which then might also become the subject of a photo. It's a dimensional hall of mirrors, and it's clear this is one artist who knows how to handle shiny surfaces, and all that they reflect.