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Art review: Larry Mullins at Blythe Projects

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Larry Mullins' first L.A. show, at Blythe Projects, has memorable energy and absorbing, street-smart beauty. The artist, now living locally, floats a fragment of verse within each of his pale pinkish, scumbled, sanded, spray-painted panels. The words come from his own song lyrics, and they read as both simple music and homespun poetry, brief evocations of character. One pays homage to “radiant child” Jean-Michel Basquiat, another tells of a woman “with a tough guy stance” meeting up with a man who was “sucking chaw in the back of his jaw/been riding 5 days his butt was rubbed raw.”

The texts might not be profound or revelatory, but they have a captivating duplicity as both words and images. Mullins mixes and matches letterforms, laying down the first half of a word, for instance, in an ornate gothic script and the second half with the blocky clarity of a sign painter. He breaks up the phrases, staggering and layering them so the letters recede and pop with syncopated, push-pull rhythm and textural variety, interspersed with flourishes of geometric patterning and ornamental arabesques. Both letters and imagery are confined to red, blue, black and white, with touches of green and silver.

With their distressed surfaces and paint drips, the panels recall the spontaneity of the street, but Mullins interweaves that raw immediacy with a more calibrated, composed harmony. He tempers graffiti's passion with calligraphy's refinement, allies the tight with the loose, proves that there's always room for one more around the table of text/image artists.-- Leah Ollman

Blythe Projects, 5797 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (323) 272-3642, through Dec 18. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.blytheprojects.net/ Images: Larry Mullins, "Cow Folk," Blythe Projects.