

## Alex Von Bergen

### *Next Time*

MOCA Tucson

24 October 2015 – 31 January 2016

In “Next Time,” his first museum exhibition, Alex Von Bergen presents recent work and new site-specific pieces in the Great Hall and on the outside walls of MOCA, as well as a survey of nearly ten years' worth of photographs, sculptures, and videos in the South Galleries. Specializing in subtle duplications of and alterations to the commonplace, drolly commenting on the myriad absurdities of the current era, Von Bergen concurrently illuminates the disorienting complexities of our ongoing bifurcation into both real life selves and disembodied, online ones. Equally essential to his undertaking is a finely tuned knack for noticing what is right in front of all us but is often deemed undeserving of attention. His forte is taking the mundaneness of modern life and with a playful conceptualism putting it through discriminating tweaks and transformations that impel the viewer to see the everyday in a novel, beguiling, and comical light.

Von Bergen wrestles, as all sentient practitioners must, with trying to answer or at least grapple with the question of whether the artist is now primarily a translator or a creator. Many artists now move things around, re-presenting or re-contextualizing them instead of manufacturing something “new” in the old-fashioned sense. The “Death of the Author” has definitively arrived and everyone is a producer and a consumer of culture, but despite the entrenchment of that phenomenon since at least when Roland Barthes’ influential essay of that title was published in 1967, unique works are still possible by virtue of a dexterous transfer from one context to another. What is at the forefront here is copying, a characteristic that raises hackles since it flies in the face of cherished romantic notions of originality. The trick is copying with élan, prejudicial intent, cloning with panache and a purpose. What was heralded by the Pictures Generation of the 1970s (Richard Prince, Sarah Charlesworth, Jack Goldsmith, Sherrie Levine, et al) and other forebears and came to be designated as “Appropriation Art” has now gone into overdrive as wholesale, omnivorous replication. In the wake of those shifts, Von Bergen adroitly dives into the incoherent and bewildering onslaught, shrewdly taking his copies beyond mere slavish reproduction and remodeling them to restore what is taken as “real” (the illusions, the chimeras, the marketing, the veneers) to a fully-formed actuality. That is no small attainment, and its most striking aspect is that what is conjured and materialized for the audience is not only a serious theoretical investigation as enumerated above, but also enjoyable, fun, gladdening, and even, at times, unexpectedly delectable.

Laughter is the doorway for entering the work, putting the audience at ease while making them think. To quote Vito Acconci, an expert at that kind of bait-and-switch, from a 2012 interview, “When you laugh it's proof that you had some second thoughts. You revised something. You thought things were this way, but maybe they're not necessarily this way. Laughing makes you do a double take.” We need more jolts of that kind to our ingrained mental tendencies, and Von Bergen provides a constant switcheroo between earnestness and disingenuousness, seriousness and not, and between what the public deems “art” and what artists and their cohorts say it is.

This is art decidedly not about the Internet as a subject, but informed by the collapse of barriers between online and offline which has created a perverse binary doppelganger to our vanities and delusional self-representations. Navigating the minefield of references and precedents the artist arrives at an up-to-date new. Not *sui generis*, but a nimble and perceptive mind making “it” “new” to us, now. This artist is an avatar of bricoleurs of old, tinkering, instead of availing themselves to nails, boards, and glue employing digital texts, images, and designs to spin a whimsical gold. In the right hands pilfering, searching, and culling that huge pile of Internet garbage leads to surprising and alert observations that catch one off guard and show all is not as it may seem. Not as innocent as hoped, or malignant as feared, but a semi-funny, grey-toned, insidiously ambiguous morass. The purgatory between is what Von Bergen brings to our attention.

Von Bergen attempts, and succeeds, at making meaning, or at the very least an informed commentary, out of this disarray. He battles the colossal avalanche of data and free-floating material with verve, parses it, and elucidates its bizarre mix of erudition and inanity without indulging in self-righteous hectoring. There's a gift for understatement, a precious commodity at odds with the shrill barrage. This is art that is standard size, emphatically, with a humility that doesn't exclude a broader, inclusive ambition to connect and be seen and heard. Indicative of this is “I'll Try Harder Next Time” in Helvetica Bold (naturally, it's standard), a semi-permanent installation from 2010 behind MOCA's front desk. It takes an anodyne declaration and entertainingly gives it a double meaning, either signifying “I'll *sincerely* try harder next time”, or a resigned negation that is the opposite of what the words literally mean. Lawrence Weiner and Bruce Nauman and their spawn are evoked, referenced, again, in a sense, copied, but with virtuosic brio. “I'll Try Harder Next Time,” (the piece) continuing into and through “Next Time” (the exhibition) are wise, informed, bemused, sharp dissections of the world we have created. The mirth occasionally comes at-a-remove, dispassionate, as it must, but thankfully also encompasses a generous measure of compassion. Walking a tight rope of the breeziest joke coinciding with the most acutely somber critique, Von Bergen reveals us to ourselves, figuratively naked in the mirror, throwing our foibles into relief while also celebrating our innovative zaniness and irrepressibility with a sagacity highly unusual in one so young reporting so accurately on his own times.

Alex Von Bergen was born in 1985 in Chicago, IL and lives and works in Tucson, where he completed his M.F.A. in Studio Art at the University of Arizona in 2015. His work has been included in group exhibitions at Fleisher/Ollman (Philadelphia, PA), House for Electronic Arts (Basel, CH), and Gagosian Gallery (New York, NY).

### **Outside Banners**

#### **North Walls:**

*Zona Athletics*, 2015  
Vinyl Banner

*Boys and Girls Club*, 2015  
Vinyl Banner

*Connect Coworking*, 2015  
Vinyl Banner

#### **West Wall:**

*Bourn Companies LLC*, 2015  
Vinyl Banner

*CBRE*, 2015  
Vinyl Banner

Advertising banners for various commercial entities seen around Tucson have been remade sans the text, images, and logos that give them a reason for being, re-constituted as wordless graphical exercises that are perhaps much more appealing than the originals, with an intentional correspondence to non-objective painting. What started as signs to lure customers are given a new look and significance, and certainly not inadvertently end up being more successful as both visual notices and inducements for “Next Time” and MOCA.

### **Great Hall**

*Garage Door 1*, 2015  
Vinyl Decals and Enamel

*Garage Door 2*, 2015  
Vinyl Decals and Enamel

*Garage Door 3*, 2015  
Vinyl Decals and Enamel

*The Quiet Pipe*, 2015  
Printed Vinyl and Lamination

*LiftMaster*, 2015  
Printed Vinyl and Lamination

*Pnl. EM. 17*, 2015  
Digital Video, iPhone 4s, Mounting Hardware  
14 Minutes, 47 Seconds

*asdfjkl1* prints:  
*November 2013*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*June 2012*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*July 2015*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*June 2013*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*March, May 2014*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*July 2013*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*September, October 2014*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*March 2015*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*September 2013*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*December 2013*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*May 2013*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*May 2015*, Printed 2015  
Inkjet Print

*August 2012, Printed 2015*  
Inkjet Print

*January 2014, Printed 2015*  
Inkjet Print

*Decorative Rocks (Set in Stone), 2015*  
Sandblasted River Rock and Enamel

### *Garage Doors*

Three incognito grey garage doors with slanted white and yellow safety reflector strips and red rhombuses are simulated on the west walls, mimicking three actual incognito grey garage doors on the south side of Tucson's Police Station headquarters adjacent to MOCA that Von Bergen sees from his nearby home every day. Displaced three hundred feet, turned ninety degrees, painted and imitated, they call attention to a functional part of architecture that almost always goes completely unnoted, with markings that are both instructive (the purpose being to show the doors are down) and accidentally artful and cryptic. Bringing the outside to the inside, stripped of their use value, they have a purposeful correlation to geometric abstraction, while also creating a "portal" that opens up to nothing.

### *Decorative Rocks (Set in Stone),*

Rocks in the desert are as ubiquitous as, well, rocks, and are so much a part of the landscape (and landscaping) to be almost invisible. Von Bergen has chosen this chestnut of the topography to adorn with the most banal detritus of the marks and symbols with which we are awash in both in the factual visual world and the digital one, from paper clips to YouTube URLs to brand names, regurgitating the endless cannonade of emblems, transferring them to the "natural" world and then bringing them with their new unnaturalness into the museum.

### *asdfjk1 prints*

A selection of photographs taken since 2010 that Von Bergen displayed and deposited on his asdfjk1 blog, now getting their first public, printed airing. Full of a kind of deadpan hilarity only the "real" world can provide, they are an extensive documentation of the mundane, the ridiculous, the sublime, and the sublimely ridiculous. At the very least chuckle-worthy, sometimes even laugh-out-loud funny, there is no end to visual puns and conundrums and pictorial inanity, often in the service of generating publicity. Using tumblr's archiving system as a template for the grid layouts, these pictures are often

great photographs without a capital “P” while also being symptomatic of how stock images and platforms are facts of life, with both subject matter and presentation actively in opposition to more personalized or highly specialized portrayals and arrangements.

### *The Quiet Pipe and LiftMaster*

Again taking note of an almost invisible aspect of the built environment, Von Bergen calls attention to textural aspects of the Great Hall’s technical infrastructure: the writing that appears on the exposed water pipes and the twelve garage door opener mechanisms located right below the sixteen-foot-high ceilings. With their barely-decipherable specifications and manufacturer’s markings, these writings are integral elements of the building’s function and design that most people turn a blind eye to, even if they do look up at them. The vinyl refractions and copies are on the floor directly below where they exist, mirrored at the viewer’s feet instead of above their heads. Looking down, then up, encountering and experiencing the space anew. Deciphering the doubling and relocation from one plane to another furnishes a muted revelation with a subtlety that makes even more of an impression due to its refusal to be overly explicit.

### *Pnl. EM. 17, 2015*

Digital Video, iPhone 4s, Mounting Hardware

This piece is a product of googling the “Pnl. EM. 17” that was written at some point on the outlet box above the door to the East Wing. The arcane meaning behind this combination of letters and numbers on a representatively unnoticed component of the building has been lost, but now takes on a different import. A compilation of 899 images that the eternally crunching algorithms of the world’s leading near-monopolistic search engine serves up yields a deluge of mysteriously linked, cognitively disparate images, completely irrational and wholly divorced from their origin. Pseudo-indexical, yet un-tethered, they are both a comment on the free floating flow of information and a witty nod to how people increasingly look at art, not in galleries or books, but on phone screens. Coincidentally, or not, all the photographs in the “asdfjkl1” prints were taken with this particular now outdated iPhone.

### **Corridor**

*Banana Boat - Summer Color Self-Tanning Mist - Airbrush Color, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Neutrogena - Micro-Mist Airbrush Sunless Tan - Medium, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Ulta - Tinted Self-Tanning Continuous Spray - Medium Deep, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Ulta - Tinted Self-Tanning Continuous Spray - Light Medium, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Kardashian - Sun Kissed Instant Sunless Spray, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Quick Tan - Instant Self Tanner - Medium Dark, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Toma's - Air Brush Spray, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Salon Bronze Airbrush Tanning System, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Equate Beauty - Self Tan Bronzing Spray, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Tanwise - Sunless Tanning Spray, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Sephora - Tinted Self-Tanning Body Mist, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*Neutrogena - Micro-Mist Airbrush Sunless Tan, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*L'Oréal Paris - New Sublime Bronze Self-Tanning Mist - Medium Natural Tan, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

*CVS Pharmacy - Sunless Tan Mist Spray - Deep Color, 2014*  
Spray Tan Solution on Canvas

Crucial to Von Bergen's penchant for excavating and re-arranging is a playful dialogue with art historical genres and tropes. His interest in hackneyed graphical material often has a humorous overlay with the high art tradition of monochromatic painting that goes back to the 1950s. Taking a decidedly "lowbrow" material, he produced this series using an arguably harebrained enabler of human vanity, spray-tanning mist, with a result that waggishly impersonates the appearance of "highbrow" and "serious" art, not only in the way they look, but the process that went into them and its correspondence to endless variations of methods that are legion in the language of formalism.

## Video Room

*IMG\_2073.MOV*, 2012

Digital Video

30 Seconds

*IMG\_4604.MOV (Watching Tiger Woods PGA Tour '14 at the Rec Center)*, 2013

Digital Video

25 Seconds

*IMG\_4709.MOV*, 2013

Digital Video

30 Seconds

*IMG\_4529.MOV (Cafeteria Walk)*, 2013

Digital Video

38 Seconds

*IMG\_8578.MOV*, 2014

Digital Video

6 Seconds

*IMG\_7203.MOV*, 2014

Digital Video

39 Seconds

*IMG\_3286.MOV (Turnin Heads)*, 2013

Digital Video

30 Seconds

*IMG\_7427.MOV*, 2014

Digital Video

27 Seconds

*IMG\_5517.MOV (cya fountain)*, 2013

Digital Video

23 Seconds

These short videos, looped together, are the filmic equivalent to the photographs shown in the Great Hall. Finding the innocuously nonsensical almost everywhere, they include a pan of a two-dimensional humans “existing” on a mall wall mock-up hiding an under-construction cafeteria, a surging and then pathetically declining sprinkler, and wind-whipped revolving signs that proclaim “Turnin Heads” as they redundantly and furiously turn, to cite three examples. With a gleeful pleasure in what is hilariously out there just waiting to be documented, these reports from the trenches of daily life reveal a joyous appreciation for the readymade art that is everywhere if one keeps their eyes and minds open to the serendipitous plentitude of such things.



Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson



## **Central Gallery**

*Tan Line Gradient Studies*, 2013–present  
Altered Digital Images/Postcards

(Museum visitors are invited to take a card for free)

These studies, inspired by the artist's own tan lines, were made by finding pictures of people with extremes of dark and light skin caused by sunburn and then making gradients from pale to tan based on those contrasts that appear in the insert box. Initially fifteen of these were uploaded to the infamous (and now defunct) site thejogging.tumblr.com, where they went slightly viral and caught the attention of curator Alain Bieber, who chose them for an exhibition at the House for Electronic Arts in Basel, Switzerland, and suggested the medium of postcards. For "Next Time" they are presented on racks in the standard manner that postcards are usually encountered. In this way the original idea of them circulating through the Internet is extrapolated into them being appropriately circulated through the mail.

*All of the Media from a microSD Card that I Found in the Laundry Room of My Apartment Complex in Fall 2009 (Plus Bonus)*, 2012

Digital Video

3 Minutes, 59 Seconds

Von Bergen found a microSD card in the laundry room of Capistrano Apartments where it had been left or lost, and made a compilation of all the media it contained, consisting of photos and a clip from the video game "Halo," as well as adding a "bonus" section (such as appear on DVDs) from another misplaced SD card with four pictures found in a parking lot the same year. Two unrelated people's lives come together through their (and humanity's) incessant technology-induced gathering and storing of images, sharing a fondness for collecting incredibly boring pictures of things and individuals that can easily be interpreted as less-than-benign and slightly creepy. Petty, insignificant, but also someone's universe, a reflection of the dialectical relationship between each human being's utter insignificance as seen through their interests and concurrently evidence of their profoundly important (at least to them) unique person-hood.

## **Southwest Gallery**

*SkyMall in Air Vent*, 2013  
Found Catalog

*Ramp*, 2013  
Found Image and Frame

*Offers*, 2013  
Promotional Credit Cards

*Office Depot® Brand Wall Sign Holder, Vertical, 11"H x 8 1/2"W*, 2015  
Inkjet Print and Acrylic Sign Holder

*OfficeMax Vertical Wall Sign Holder 8-1/2" x 11"*, 2015  
Inkjet Print and Acrylic Sign Holder

*Staples® Vertical Wall Mount Sign Holder, Portrait, 8 1/2" W x 11" H*, 2015  
Inkjet Print and Acrylic Sign Holder

*Not in front of a computer? No problem! (Homes and Land)*, 2014  
Paper on Cardstock (Suite of Five)

This gallery concentrates a deliberate and particular focus on the notion of “standard” in size and aesthetics, specifically through the 8 ½ x 11” configuration as seen in the Sign Holder and collage works, along with an affection for cheap typical materials found in the general retail environment. There’s also an interest in the readymade with the *SkyMall* magazine surrealistically poking out of the ceiling and *Ramp*’s found image of a skateboard ramp, a visual pun caused by doubling the curvature of the ramp to the curve of the frame, flattening 2-D and 3-D together to wry effect. The collages are cut-outs of the ever-present silhouette of a hand holding a phone but seen on whatever is printed on the other side of that page of a magazine or catalog, and the Sign Holders are so convincing as to be very easily mistaken for the real thing. In reality they are the product of roughly forty hours of meticulous labor and a painstaking re-creation of these almost offensively bland emblems of mass production. Reoccurring themes and concerns stream through these works, namely the omnipresence and utter inescapability of capitalism in our lives, whether it be trying to sell you something via its placement in front of your seat as you’re trapped on the plane, or the promotional enticements of boundless surrogacy. Interestingly in the case of *Offers* those are surrogates twice over, since credit cards are already proxies for soon to be outdated paper money, with these come-hither fakes acting as sham substitutes for actual credit cards.

### **Southeast Gallery**

*Aqua Blue/Bliss*, 2008  
Lenticular Print

*Everything I've Done Over the Past Couple of Years*, 2008  
DVD-R Discs

*The Result of Attempting to Apply 16 Crayons to an 8.5 x 11 Inch Piece of Paper*, 2008  
Crayon, Crayon Fragments, Paper

The pervasiveness of the “default” mode is illustrated in *Aqua Blue/Bliss*, where two widespread desktop backdrops optically switch back and forth depending on the observer’s position, amusingly, but also with an all-seeing ominousness.

A modern paradox – you can choose everything to the nth degree but everything has a default setting, which gives a strange sense of commonality and community in the face of endless options. *The Result of Attempting to Apply 16 Crayons to an 8.5 x 11 Inch Piece of Paper* is the result of weeks assiduously using up a box of crayons on one piece of paper, rubbing them down to almost nothing, with the outcome being a dense amalgamation of material that has formal qualities of labor-intensive abstraction, with the residue of flakes and bits displayed underneath. Conceptually inspired, it takes a page from the 1970s, when long-term time-based artworks were birthed from motions or ideas repeated to their logical conclusion, while also being a reverse echo of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning*. *Everything I've Done Over the Past Couple of Years* is an archive and index of all of Von Bergen's output from a two-year period, comically commenting on how so much of what we do is kept, sorted and saved, cluttering up our devices with copious amounts of information. On the other hand it is a trenchant rebuttal to the cult of the incorporeal, refuting the fashionable clichés of "immateriality," that are often bandied about in the discussion of video and Internet art. A canard, since all that is dependent on items like these discs, evidence that tangible labor, natural resources, and hardware are integral to the existence of the supposedly ethereal.