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'REFLECTIONS IN PLANE SIGHT'

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by BRIAN LIBBY

For all the fairy-tale aspects of Southern California, from sunny beaches to glitzy Hollywood, flying into Los Angeles International Airport can seem more like a bad dream. Dingy hotels and vast parking lots litter the landscape, with smog and traffic clogging the way. But to photographer Zoe Crosher, LAX (the airport code by which it's informally known) holds treasures both literal and symbolic.

Crosher's show at Small A Projects and accompanying book, both called "Out the Window (LAX)," consist of a collection of photographs shot from inside numerous hotels and motels along Century Boulevard, the primary thoroughfare intersecting the airport. The artist provides an accompanying map of the hotels, which also dictated how the photos were hung in the gallery.

The documentary nature of Crosher's work is balanced by a subtle sense of theatrics -- there appears to be a narrative unfolding, but with just enough ambiguity that one is encouraged to use his or her imagination to fill in the blanks. In each shot, Crosher focuses her camera on a plane rising or descending majestically in the background. But the view is always partially obstructed, coming through a window within a hotel room occupying the foreground, usually blurred. The motion of the planes gives Crosher's photos a cinematic quality, enhanced by the frame-within-a-frame of the window through which they're viewed. There is also a voyeuristic nature to the work enhanced by the collective memory of Sept. 11. (Crosher began the project in July 2001 then put it on hold for a year after the terrorist attacks before resolving to continue.)

Just who's staking out the airport from these hotels? And aside from such extreme cases, the banality of the hotel interiors in "Out the Window" speaks to the lifeless, transient quality of life around the airport. This isn't a place where most people would want to spend much time.

The daughter of a diplomat and a flight attendant, Crosher has always been interested in transience. She was raised in Moscow and Greece before settling down in California, where she studied at the California Institute of the Arts. In "Out the Window" Crosher views the blend of motion and anonymity at LAX as a metaphor for Los Angeles itself. At the show's First Friday opening, she spoke of "the promise of no history" that L.A. offers, acting as a kind of blank canvas onto which one can project his or her fantasies.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Crosher added, "I love hotels. They're totally anonymous, and you can do whatever you want." Even so, Crosher's photos wouldn't radiate nearly as much were it not for the context of Los Angeles as a place of pilgrimage.

But it is precisely these dualities -- drama and tedium, motion and inertia, history and anonymity -- that helps "Out the Window (LAX)" transcend its subject matter and seeks to represent this sprawling megalopolis in its entirety.

Small A Projects, 1430 S.E. Third Ave.
Hours: Noon-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday. Closes May 27.