All images: Simon Leung, "Proposal for The Side of The Mountain."
(installation detail). Santa Monica Museum of Art.
"Proposal for 'The Side of the Mountain'" (2002) is a combination sculpture/theater/opera/music video/video installation by Simon Leung. It is in fact a finished piece that remains a multifaceted proposal—a proposal for another creative project (the opera in its entirety); a proposal for the consideration/acknowledgement of the actuality of lived scenarios that echo in the specifics, drama, theme, and implication of the tale told; and a proposal for the significance/relevance of the piece and its content as an interjection into culture.

The "Proposal" begins with a freestanding room/sculpture that takes its floor plan from that of the Project Room of the Santa Monica Museum of Art—producing the proposal or plan as a materialized form, rendering it both practically and metaphorically transferable and portable, but identifying always its point of origin in Southern California. Inside this space is a sloping stack of blocks fabricated of plywood, which provides seating and suggests the mountainside, thus allowing the viewer to be on the mountainside and be part of its goings-on. Two monitors in the space display shots of two views simultaneously changing as day passes into night. One shows what lies down the mountain: the City of Angles, glowing with artificial light as the sky darkens. The other shows what is perched up the mountain: the Griffith Park Observatory, becoming silhouetted as the sun sets in the western sky.

Between lies the side of the mountain, which is more the side of a hill, in Griffith Park—a chunk of managed wilderness on the east end of the Hollywood Hills, a truly multipurpose site used for nature hikes, dog walks, school outings, family picnics, horse rides, transient camping, and romantic coupling. In this last category of activity, the park has long contained multiple spots used by gay men for sexual activity—business, casual encounters, recurring rendezvous. Among these spots is the hillside that is the setting for "The Side of the Mountain," a three-act opera by Michael Webster (music) and Leung (libretto), the final act of which, performed/acted and filmed on the side of the mountain in question, is played back in a simply edited video on a third monitor in the space. A fourth monitor provides additional views of the park, the players, and information that in a stage opera might be implied from offstage.

Though simple plot coverage hardly does justice to what Leung and Webster have generated in music, voice, word, and staging, it must suffice. Two men, a twentyish tenor and a fortysomething baritone, meet anonymously on a steep, wooded slope. It is dusk, a time of tension in which day, which seems to offer freedom and safety but risk of discovery, is traded for night, which offers cover of dark but also greater danger from man and animal, and greater consequence if one is caught, as the park transforms from public space to trespassing zone. After resolving to remain unnamed to one another, the two men engage in sex, during which the older reminisces about a first encounter in the park, and a past in which this place seemed a location and symbol of sexual freedom for countless gay men in a time before the AIDS epidemic, its decimation of the gay community, and the related fear, repression, backlashes, and crackdowns. The younger meanwhile fantasizes of his own future, when he will be the elder in other encounters in a more perfect world. His would seem a vision either of a changing, perhaps more enlightened, perhaps post-AIDS world as opposed to the world he knows now, or an extension of a naive understanding or fantasy he clings to in the present.

Into the periphery comes a third man, a countertenor, whom the audience knows as an anonymous figure seen from the distance and the back, and whom the main characters know only as a voice calling out from afar to his lost "sweetie." Realizing the countertenor must be looking for a small dog, the young tenor, the baritone inside him, listens as coyotes, hunting at dusk, make their first evening meal of the dog, the slaughter occurring within earshot of the two lovers but not the countertenor, who continues unknowingly to call to his now-dead pet. The tenor rattles off random frightening facts about the tenacity of the predators, mournful thoughts for their victim, imaginings of how terrible the moment must have been, and rationalizations for not yelling out to the countertenor, and in so doing, revealing a secret, violating a social contract, ruining the moment, shattering the intimacy, and perhaps going public, losing anonymity, and drawing attention to himself, his lover, their crimes, this place, its visitors. As the searching countertenor becomes frantic and then gives up, the baritone comes, the lovers resolve to say nothing more of the dog, and they part as quickly and casually as they met.

Spending time in Leung's sculpture/theater and the space around it, and anonymously, wordlessly sharing the experience with other people who came and went in the space, making suppositions about their walks of life and trying to read their reactions to the piece, I was reminded of a lecture I attended at the end of the 1980s, at a time when the AIDS crisis was running full tilt and its ripples—personal, political, sexual, social—were felt everywhere; a time when gay activism was fully activated; a time when a variety of intellectual investigations and practices were gelling into what is now loosely called queer theory; and a time when many artists were leaving behind or augmenting innuendo and suggestion in the making of works of art that openly addressed, professed, or took inspiration from homosexual experience. It was a lecture by an artist whose work addressed many a universal human question or theme filtered through a montage of homoerotic imagery and gay coding. When the artist noted that he wanted to address universal themes like love and desire, an audience member objected that the work in question wasn't about desire, but about gay sexual desire, and that the artist, whose imagery was, among other things, erotic and connected to a specifically male and gay experience, was therefore inaccurate or overly general in discussing his work in terms not specifically linked to gender, sexuality, and preference/predilection. I've since watched similar debates unfold at other lectures, in classroom critiques, in art chatter, and in the press.
I thought of this moment and similar ones in part because of watching how different people reacted to the piece, and because I had been encouraged to see and to write about the piece by my colleague Paul Foss and whenever a colleague suggests a show to me, I wonder why. The debates that came to mind seemed to be rooted in a love-hate relationship with categories, and in the kind of question that might come to play if the art world were a bookstore, with authors, critics, readers, and clerks debating whether or not a work of art should be shelved in a section like history, psychology, philosophy, or even art, or it should be shelved in a section with a heading like “gay interest.”

The characters of Leung and Webster’s opera straddle the ages of myself and Leung, who is slightly my junior, and whom I have never met. The period between the baritone’s memories and the tenor’s future are roughly that in which Leung and I have left behind youth and will enter into middle age. The period since I went to that lecture of memory is roughly the period in which Leung has been active as an artist, and in which I have had my final schooling in art and most of my experience in writing about it. It is also the period during which I have called Los Angeles home, living and working mostly in the city’s northeast corner, in various neighborhoods on the periphery of Griffith Park, near enough from the side of the mountain and its histories/fables. I was struck with the impression that my colleague was curious about a response from someone who had these sorts of overlaps with Leung and with the scene (read setting, read culture) of his and Webster’s opera, but someone who doesn’t know Leung, and who doesn’t spend much time in the gay interest section of the bookstore.

My response, short and sweet, is that my experience of Leung’s project was among the most moving, provocative, and memorable experiences I can recall having had in a museum or a theater. Not being an opera aficionado, I can’t make comparisons, but I can say that I loved it as an opera. Other than that, I can say that I found it a formally and conceptually elegant, economical and layered presentation, in which everything came together to create an experience to be appreciated not only for its rarity in being utterly well done, but for its rarity in conveying a real sense of tragedy and glimpses of the real power of comedy. I also can say that I haven’t stopped thinking about it. This is a work that poignantly dives into the universals: love, death, loss, fear, secrecy, desire, sadness, coping, hope, joy, survival. I should be clear that I don’t regard the success of this work as residing in the fact that it might find resonance outside the confines of a queer theory discourse and related audience, as I regard the universal concerns I’ve mentioned as not connected to gender or orientation (which is what makes them universal), and I don’t believe that a work of art has to transcend audience boundaries in order to be a success. The self-location of a work within a particular discourse is not a liability in and of itself, nor is the shunning of a particular discourse a guarantee of general success. I make these clarifications for the sake of discussing Leung’s work, but not for the sake of the work itself, which doesn’t need them. I am, nonetheless, amazed when a work can convey the story and sense of specific