

# Apartment Living IS GREAT

THE Cinema

LESLEY MARLENE SIEGEL

Names matter. The difference between naming a hapless infant Mortimer or Hercules charts the destiny of that child. The same is true for pets. They have names because they are the object of human affection. The pet's name subsumes the animal persona of the pet within the human milieu. If your new kitten's fur is soft and long, you call it "silky," and you think of it as fluffy and pettable, rather than as a voracious little carnivore. Naming a pet is an act of curatorial editorship that repositions how that pet will be treated by its owner. A dog named "Duchess" inevitably inspires a different reaction than a dog named "Daisy."

Affection can be lavished upon inanimate objects as well, particularly objects with domestic connotations. The apartment building signage photographed by Lesley Marlene Siegel confers a personal relationship between buildings, and their owners and occupants, just as pet names do between pet owners and pets. The occupants of the "Starlet" apartment house probably have a slightly different mindset about who they are, where they live, and what their lives are all about, than do the occupants of, say, "The Diplomat."

At the same time, some apartment buildings in Southern California present themselves as neutral containers of housing. As such they are available to receive narrative meaning. They present little or no obstacle to theming, or to the incorporation of props and iconic decorative elements, such as overscale lamps and signage. The blank box is a backdrop, personalized by lighting, planting, painting and cosmetic frames around fenestration and building edges. Words that have escapist associations with recreation or entertainment, such as "Palms, Sands or Riviera," lend romance to buildings that might otherwise appear as prosaic shelter.



The willing observer is manipulated into accepting an environment as being tied to another era or place. Without names the simply constructed and detailed buildings would not otherwise convey these meanings. Architecture as a plastic medium becomes flattened to a two dimensional tabula rasa on which the naming, landscaping and lighting confer personality and identity. Their decoration and theming are often divorced from the construction of the base building, occurring as a separate and final stage.

Lesley Marlene Siegel acts in the role of curator, or art director, taking existing as-found meaning and rearranging it, amplifying it, and commenting on

what she finds. She joins together the individual elements to demonstrate the way in which names become a reflection of the larger world surrounding these apartment houses. Siegel begins at the point at which the builders of these apartment houses have completed their role in the creation of their original intended meaning. She arranges them as part of a larger set of names.

In her compositions of named facades Siegel reveals the underlying themes common to many of the developers, while at the same time she reinterprets the artifact as an observer, giving it new meaning by grouping individual building names into



larger thematic associations. She appropriates them and repositions them in terms of her own set of visual and symbolic linkages.

The most sympathetic understanding of the function of the signage on the buildings that Siegel photographs is that it simply creates a metaphor that otherwise would not be there. The buildings they adorn were constructed in the commercial vernacular of their period, as a means of housing people as inexpensively as possible. Blowing up the scale of the building name and utilizing it as a super-sized decoration is a cost-effective method of allowing its tenant, and those who pass by it, to understand the building in a more playful, fictional sense.



Siegel further humanizes these named buildings by demonstrating how their facades often represent specific moments in the lives of the people who created them: buildingboard tributes to children, spouses, events and institutions important to them. Her photographs and interviews with the developers and builders of the stucco box analyze the relationship between public and private realms. These public facades offer up their names to the world outside, while Siegel's reportage reveals what private meaning the names hold.

-John Chase

Since 1990, artist and photographer Lesley Marlene Siegel has been documenting Southern California's apartment building names of the 50's, 60's and early 70's through her project, *Apartment Living is Great*. Her work has been featured in gallery exhibits, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times* and *International CNN*.



When they arrived from their native Germany, Ray and Maria placed the name of their young daughter on the apartment building purchased as income property. Janine hoped to one day write her name in the cursive style of the sign which seemed so big to her while growing up. She learned to swim in the courtyard pool to the delight of neighbors who tossed in dimes for her to find. Janine Apts. has now become her "small, yet peaceful oasis in the middle of a huge metropolis."

