

# ARTFORUM

## Scene & Herd

05.20.07

Garden of Eatin'

Los Angeles

Last weekend, I visited the Hammer Museum three times in thirty-three hours to check out “Eden’s Edge: Fifteen LA Artists,” the Hammer’s fourth invitational and Gary Garrels’s first major exhibition since taking the position of chief curator and deputy director of exhibitions and public programs. First, I attended a press preview early Friday morning. Participating artist Matt Greene, with whom I’d been snowboarding the previous three days (Mammoth Mountain, with its perfect mid-May snow), graciously drove. Garrels gave what the professionals call a “walk-through” for the assembled jurors with the participating artists (just in case he needed backup). Greene, who was born in Georgia, was bracing himself for the dreaded what-does-it-mean-to-be-an-LA-artist question, but no one ventured a query in his—or any other artist’s—direction. A local radio critic asked Garrels why he didn’t mix ‘n’ match the artists’ work, instead of giving each artist his or her own room, then looked around for support. He faced a heavy wave of eye rolls from his fellow scribes.

Seven hours later, it was dusk, and the Hammer’s courtyard, with its thirty-foot-tall bamboo trees, was filled with tangy margaritas, killer Mexican food, and multiple Eves. There was white-haired, Edenesque Sharon Ellis, whose saturated landscapes offered an energizing jolt of color after the claustrophobic, gray-gloom-sexy watercolor figures pleasuring themselves with gas masks and snorkels in Monica Majoli’s room. And Stanya Kahn, participating with her partner, Harry Dodge, was a commando Viking Eve distinguished by golden ringlets. Dodge & Kahn’s two video pieces were balls-out adrenaline rushes at the outermost edge of Garrels’s reconfigured Eden. All told, the exhibition reads like a deep, multigenerational novel about human consciousness, optical pleasure, unconventional beauty, voluptuous decoration, solitude, sex, drugs, strategies for survival, organic mutation . . . all quintessentially Los Angeles.

There was something shockingly beautiful, poetic, and moving about Rebecca Morales’s gouaches on calf vellum. Morales, a relative unknown, floored many people with these vivid drawings of mossy grass and tiny flowers sprouting out of braided hair. The undertow of “Eden’s Edge” was in part the presence and loaded absence of the human. When figures were physically present, they were struggling, aggressive, bugged out, at the end of their rope; when there was no trace of the human, nature sang a lullaby or a subtle, abstract requiem. With dozens of orange extension cords running from floor to ceiling like some gothic bloody curtain or wailing wall, the late Jason Rhodes’s *Twelve-Wheel Waggon Wheel Chandelier*, a hysterical meditation on the vagina’s endless vocabulary play, reads like a self-memorial—and, in the context of Eden, a pornographer’s electric dream.

After dinner, Garrels addressed the audience, giving props to several key Los Angeles curators, including MoCA’s Paul Schimmel, who curated “Helter Skelter,” the landmark/watershed 1992 exhibition of LA art. He then cited the Walker’s Kathy Halbreich, his mentor, and began to weep gently. A touching moment, and I fell for it. A quiet sigh was heard throughout the room, and for a moment, everyone seemed closer.

The Hammer, located on a former orange grove at the intersection of two of the busiest corners on LA’s west side, is one of the more artist-friendly institutions I’ve visited. Annie Philbin, the museum’s director, was ever-present in her stylish high collars, adroitly navigating various factions with her wise curatorial mate, James Elaine (best mispronounced Élan), who emigrated with her from New York’s Drawing Center less than a decade ago. The city would be bereft without them.

Saturday night’s director’s opening featured a Hammer constant: the world’s largest breadsticks, which people carried like monks’ staffs. There was hardened molten cheddar running down their sides, and after several bites, eaters gestured with them like symphony conductors. Artist Ingrid Calame, whose huge, densely dreadlocked hair is like the Fort Knox of beehives, wore a wrappy skirt that seemed to have maps of medieval cities printed on it. There was Francesca Gabbianni and her husband, Eddie Ruscha, who, as DJ, spun simply the best music ever recorded. People almost danced. Frank Gehry was in attendance, as well as MoCA’s rock-of-Gibraltar curator, the elegant, pale-skinned Ann Goldstein, and her brilliant betrothed, Christopher Williams. Several sparkly drag queens sauntered about, sometimes galumphing, with big chunks of stained glass, green leaves, anvils, and ropy gold chains clanking in the moonlight.

I usually don’t do this, but I stayed until they blinked the lights and security approached me with a subtle smile.

—Benjamin Weissman