

LIKE A VIRGIN

Andrew Berardini at Frieze Los Angeles

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Artist and writer Ricky Amadour.

I FELT LIKE I was artfairsing for the very first time. Was it always this distracting, so disorienting? The return of FOMO is particularly weird. Between the Super Bowl and the Oscars, Los Angeles had its first major art week since February 2020. Though centered around the Frieze Art Fair in Beverly Hills, the pageantry also included the Felix Art Fair at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood, Spring Break (an artist-directed fairish thing) in Culver City, and about a million parties and openings, dinners, launches, screenings, and talks.

For some, the week began at the beloved artist Kaari Upson's memorial, which I was too sad to bring myself to attend.

Days later, legendary artist Dan Graham passed away. After the millions of fatalities during this pandemic (including 3,187 in the US the day the fair opened), it was hard not to think of all this fanfare as some kind of dance of death. The macabre madness that infects those that survive a plague. Or maybe not. It could be that the frenzied mechanisms of art and commerce haven't changed; I'm just no longer inured to them.

But amid this unfamiliar (or all too familiar) onslaught, there were moments of grace. Tuesday afternoon, wandering with friends through VIP hours for the museums downtown, I lost myself in Ragnar Kjartansson's *The Visitors*, 2012, on view at the Broad. The song, melancholic yet full of hope, played on nine screens, eight featuring solitary musicians spread through a decaying mansion, playing separately but together. As I walked out, the sunset creaming through downtown towers and over the cherry blossoms along Grand Ave, the feeling of Ragnar and company singing Ásdís Sif Gunnarsdóttir's poem wisped through me and the video and the swiftly shifting twilight came together into a place, a moment.

Later that night I attended a private opening for Sayre Gomez's exhibition of paintings and sculpture at Francois Ghebaly. Looking over the artist's layered, fading signs illuminating storefront windows and presiding over abandoned strip malls, I found a city I recognized. Too many second-rate artists depict Los Angeles in a sun-slathered haze so saccharine it causes cavities. Conversely, the seedy underbelly of the dreamfactory can feel equally clichéd—moralizing punishment for LA's tinselly excesses. Here in Sayre's paintings is a city that feels true to the Los Angeles I know and love: working-class and battered (not by its sins, just by time, use, and poverty). Multivalent and complex, full of fading signs posted to wooden electrical poles promising everything and nothing, a city that I love for all its numerous flaws, realized here with a kind of precision that feels like deep affection. Outside the opening, I asked artist Jonas Wood what he saw in the paintings. "I love them," said Wood, "They feel like home." And they feel like home to me too.

The following morning, I started the day at a breakfast preview for solo shows by Phyllida Barlow and Gary Simmons at Hauser & Wirth, which opened with a talk between Barlow and LAXART deputy director Catherine Taft. "We planned the show in 2019, and then the plague struck," said Barlow. "And it went back into storage. Meeting them back here after two years, I felt like a bad mother." The messy beauty of her sculptures—their smeary wood legs delicately holding up paint-splattered balls, a swathe of red fabric, the drape of hardened netting—reflected how I felt: a bit rough but still holding up.

I slipped away before Simmons began his scheduled conversation with Studio Museum director Thelma Golden to catch a press preview across town of “Ulysses Jenkins: Without Your Interpretation” and “Lives” at the Hammer Museum. The title for the survey of Jenkins, a legendary artist and filmmaker in Los Angeles, is drawn from a work he made in the 1980s following a disagreement with a white art critic who, Jenkins said, had circumscribed his work within a “white historical lens.”

Exhibition co-curator Erin Christovale remarked in the final words of her introduction to the assembly of mostly white art critics: “I hope you enjoy, without your interpretation.”

The following afternoon, I braved the Frieze Art Fair’s VIP preview in Beverly Hills. The commercial art conclave’s last edition, held in 2019, was at Paramount Studios, with all the cinematic grandeur and false facades that accompany a historic movie lot. Somehow a white tent behind a hotel didn’t have the same poetry, but its high peak and the carpeted floors felt classy enough, like the wedding reception of an aging celebrity and a minor aristocrat. Perhaps the pomp of the arriviste is truly the spirit of Beverly Hills—or “Beverly Thrills,” as Miguel Abreu jokingly dubbed it from his booth in the fair. He directed me to see the Joan Semmel paintings at Alexander Gray (which I did: moving depictions of the artist’s body, aging with sensual honesty).

In the Focus LA section, the fluid fabric sculptures by Eric-Paul Riege at Stars rippled with memories of his Diné ancestors, Sarah Rosalena’s recuperations of traditional Wixárika craft burst with polychrome cosmogonies at Garden, and sly, sinister pseudo-advertisements by Ben Sakoguchi winked from Bel Ami. I caught a Rodrigo Valenzuela piece in his striking presentation at Luis De Jesus take a dive off the wall (it was thankfully undamaged from its leap).

Wandering further into Frieze’s hundred gallery booths, I found beauty at Roberts Projects in Betye Saar’s mural *L.A. Energy*, a recreation of a lost work from 1983, painted with aplomb by the ninety-five-year-old artist. I’m not sure if I loved the late Chris Burden’s *Dreamer’s Folly*, 2010, a trio of nineteenth-century cast-iron gazebos draped with lace, but it had a certain power in the fair: a work from one of Los Angeles’s most important artists, never before seen in this city (or in the US, for the matter) and a singularly elegant statement in a tent with few of them.

There was an unexpected tranquility about its gossamer curves, a necessary calm amid the turbulence. After swimming through the crowd to glimpse Camille Henrot's solo presentation at the Hauser & Wirth booth (just missing actor Leonardo DiCaprio and his father, underground comix maestro George DiCaprio, purchase a piece), I bolted to find something to eat (of which there was nothing at the fair, to the chagrin of many of the dealers).

That evening, I caught Indonesian experimental duo Senyawa at the Hammer playing deep dark resonances from beneath and beyond abyssal chasms of sound. After circling the block for forty-minutes, I was turned away by an overzealous doorman at the La Pau and Commonwealth & Council party at Soulmate in West Hollywood. At Martine Syms's Prada pop-up club at Genghis Cohen's on Fairfax, erected for a few days during the fair, I witnessed too many influencers taking selfies in front of the logos and admiring their own images in the screens spread outside the restaurant's repurposed parking lot.

Maybe it's a good thing for the city to have all this? Los Angeles has long been a state of becoming, a booster's hard-sell that's never quite arrived. And even still, many come chasing the dream here, especially art galleries, with The Hole, Sean Kelly, David Zwirner, Pace, Lisson, and Sargent's Daughters (to name just a few) either opening or announcing new spaces and partnerships in LA last week. Even though most gallery transplants have a hard time blossoming in the cracks here (Pace has tried to settle LA a couple times before), I warmly welcome them all.

— Andrew Berardini