

## BROOKLYN RAIL

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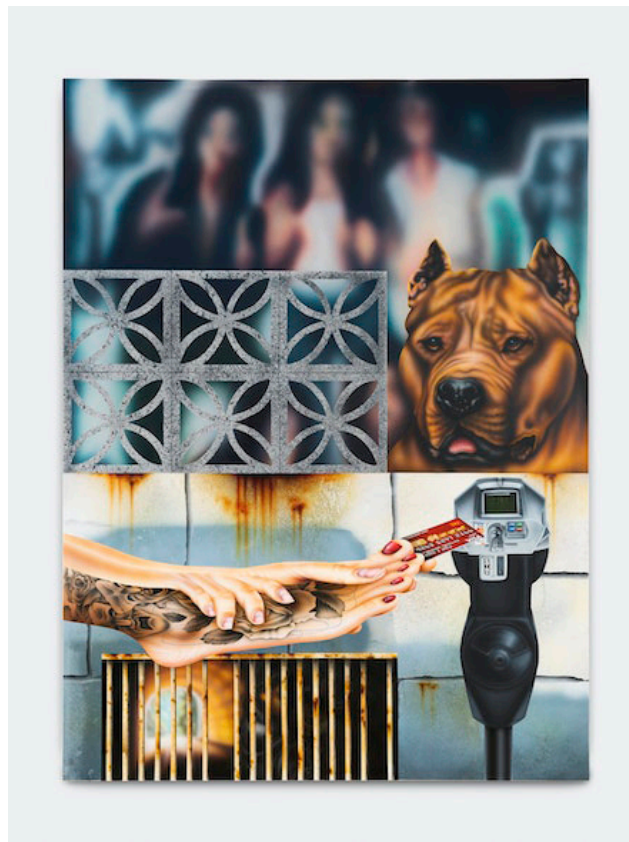
# *Made in L.A. 2020: a version*

By Olivia Gauthier

Conceived prior to the 2020 election and before “coronavirus” became common terminology, the Hammer Museum’s *Made in L.A. 2020: a version*, offers a trenchant and diverging array of artworks under the auspice of locality—Los Angeles as a lens, however ambiguous. The fifth iteration of the Hammer biennial, organized by independent curators Lauren Mackler and Myriam Ben Salah with the museum’s own Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi, brings together 30 artists based in Los Angeles at both the Hammer Museum in Westwood and the Huntington in San Marino. Located on the west and east sides of the city, respectively, it is suggested as a mirrored exhibition “bracketing” the

city. Conceptually, the framework is compelling as a sweeping presentation of artworks that speak to the breadth of both the city and the artists that work within it. In reality, the logistical maneuvering is as romantic and impractical as seeing the exhibitions back-to-back in a single day.

Once one is able to experience both installations, the through lines drawn begin to appear. The exhibitions contain a multitude of works that speak poignantly to the acceleration of contemporary life, the question of archives,



Mario Ayala, *Sign Language*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 64 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Stems Gallery, Brussels.

telling of histories, and preserving local cultural milieus and how artists take up these challenges through varying mediums. Themes that have been thrown into relief over the last year—loss, death, wealth disparity, disease, fact, and fiction unfold through the works sometimes in subtle and sometimes in head-on ways. Los Angeles is the “arkheion”: the home of the archive, as Derrida extrapolates in his 1995 essay “Archive Fever,” but in this exhibition it is an alternative to the traditional archive of the State: one whose power is not used for political command, but for preserving histories otherwise overlooked.

Taking the literal form of a “house,” to draw out Derrida’s analysis of archival technologies, is Sabrina Tarasoff’s *Beyond Baroque: A Haunted House* (2020), an installation in the form of a Halloween-style haunted house at the Huntington galleries. In the form of a “haunt,” Tarasoff’s installation presents her research on the Venice Beach independent literary arts center and a particular group of its poet frequenters, a so-called “poet gang” who gathered and created various experimental writing and performance endeavors from 1976–86. The haunt is laid out as if walking you through a loosely essayistic narrative of the group’s history memorialized in an experiential form. The kitschy qualities of the haunted house aesthetic, such as poet Jack Skelley’s “cave of poems,” a dark narrow hallway with painted faux rock walls and moss where a strange cloaked figure looms, imbue the installation and its archival video footage and ephemera with a theatricality emblematic of the group’s approach to an alternative artistic outpost that pursued a DIY ethos outside of normative institutional art confines.



Reynaldo Rivera, *Gaby, La Plaza*, 1994. Digital print from negative 26 x 26 inches. Courtesy the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York/Los Angeles.

Also documenting performance arts in non-institutional spaces is a selection of photographs and video footage by Reynaldo Rivera capturing the vibrant and rich history of predominantly Latinx queer clubs (such as Silverlake Lounge, Plaza), and house parties through the 1980s and '90s in Echo Park. Rivera's black-and-white images record candid moments of queer performers backstage getting ready to perform, dressing up in glamorous outfits and makeup to entertain with song and dance. Adorned in ruffles, wigs, and feathers, the sparkling lights of the working-class dive bar stages and dressing rooms canonize a community that has been all but dissolved through the closing of bars and the death of performers—violent gentrification and systemic inequalities along the lines of race, class, and gender expression. Rivera's photographs evoke a deep intimacy and display the richness of a vibrant underground queer Los Angeles that may otherwise be forgotten had the young photographer not taken up the camera to chronicle with such a passion and purpose. In the Hammer Museum's installation, Rivera's photographs are hung in a small gallery together where video footage of some of the parties and performances plays on the backside of a freestanding wall, the banter and ballads sung and heard reverberating through the space, immersing the viewer into a past world. Again, Derrida's writing about the death drive of the archive comes to mind: the threat of destruction, the vulnerability of such a world could drive the artist to create such a painfully beautiful tribute.



Monica Majoli, *Blueboy (Roger)*, 2019. Watercolor woodcut transfer on paper, 50 x 74 inches. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

Monica Majoli's "Blueboys" series (2015–19) similarly memorializes a moment in queer cultural history using the centerfold images from *Blueboy* magazine, a gay men's lifestyle and entertainment publication that ran

from 1974–2007. Majoli creates strikingly beautiful prints using a white-line technique inspired by the style of Japanese woodcuts. At the Hammer the prints are all large-scale, blowing up the centerfolds into monumental images of nude men in a soft pastel color palette. The images are dreamy and sensual, the lines are soft and almost blurred through the transfer process of printmaking, losing some of the more graphic content and softening the pornographic detail. At the Huntington, a handful of smaller prints are displayed alongside a vitrine of Majoli's own archive of images from *Blue-boy* and audio from interviews with contributors. Selecting images from the magazine in the years prior to the AIDS epidemic, Majoli culls a history of gay culture on the cusp of tragedy, marking a liberatory and transitional time before such images would be stigmatized and stifled out of homophobic panic and anti-gay political agendas.

Other works in the exhibition carry this through line. The paintings of Mario Ayala use as source imagery quintessential underground Chicano magazines like *Mi Vida Loca* and *Teen Angels* to create surrealist paintings using the vernacular language of tattoo art and automotive artistry using airbrush techniques and acrylic. Ser Serpas's installations at the Hammer and the Huntington, *Potential Indefinite Performance*, *This That and Now Again*, respectively, are gridded collections of found objects telling an alternate story through an archaeology of dispossession and accrual. "There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside," Derrida writes.<sup>1</sup> Of course it is a basic tenant of art history that artworks provide historical or archival evidence, but what some of the works in *Made in L.A.* suggest is these artists are unconventional archons, makers and storytellers who provide contradistinctive archival outputs that are imperative to look to in an age of anti-truth and misinformation. In an age of cynicism, the exhibition argues that art still possesses a critical distillation of our collective histories that may not otherwise be indoctrinated in official institutional records through their work.



Ser Serpas, *Moments are hard*, 2019. Shelf, isolation foam. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Carter Seddon.

Gauthier, Olivia, "Made in L.A. 2020: a version," *BrooklynRail.org*, July 2021

1. Derrida, Jacques and Eric Prenowitz. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics*, Summer 1995, Vol. 25 No. 2, (Summer 1995), p. 14.