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Klaus Weber
Public Fountain LSD Hall
 2003
 Photo by Brian Forrest



Carsten Höller
Upside-Down Mushroom Room
 2000
 Collection of Fondazione Prada
 Photo by Attilio Maranzano

THE ART TRIP

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

"Ecstasy: In and About Altered States," Oct. 9, 2005-Feb. 20, 2006, at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, 152 North Central Avenue, Los Angeles, Ca. 90013

"Ecstasy" is the closest thing to an LSD flashback that you're likely to see, a "sensation" in the truest meaning of the term. The strobe lights alone are enough to jump-start long-dormant memories, many of them quite pleasant.

The exhibition of 30 international artists at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art is bound to break attendance records, which is unfortunate because you don't want to see it in a crowd. Like the mind-altering experiences that the art is meant to emulate, you'll want peak alone, or perhaps in communion with a friend or loved one. But trust me, the best moments are all about you and your senses. If I remember correctly, that was the promise of LSD.

That promise begins in the first gallery of the cavernous art warehouse known as the Geffen Contemporary. Berlin-based artist Klaus Weber (b. 1967) has installed a cut-glass fountain bubbling with a clear liquid purported to be LSD, formulated in a homeopathic lab. Unsurprisingly, the work is secured behind glass walls and is all but impossible to reach. The implicit tease is whether or not it would be worth it to find out if the liquid is what the artist says it is. Is the art bound to represent truth? Is the museum?

With that tantalizing thought rattling around in the back of your mind, walk to the opposite gallery and have the first many enforced solo experiences in this show. This would be alien abduction courtesy of Sylvie Fleury. Climb into the metallic gold orb, a guard shuts the door and twinkly colored lights flicker amid the crystals embedded in black velvet to a muffled sound track of voices, amusing remarks in a familiar foreign accent that turns out to be -- who else? -- Zsa Zsa Gabor, starring in *Queen of Outer Space*. Even without being under the influence, the experience brought tears of laughter.

Fleury's voyage to the stars might have been the high point of this delightful exhibition were it not for Carsten Höller, whose installation is inventive, riveting, hilarious. You walk down a pitch-black corridor reminiscent of an old funhouse, turning this way and that, eyes trying to make out a glimmer of light in the distance and BAM! you're in a white room that is incandescent with lights embedded in the white floor, while huge orange mushrooms turn slowly hanging from the ceiling. I haven't used the word "mind-blowing" since the days of yore but the *Upside Down Mushroom Room* is the occasion to revive it.

It is a hard act to follow, but the other artists manage. Edwin Redl has constructed an



Erwin Redl

Matrix II (installation view)

2000-05

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Photograph by Ira Lippke



Pierre Huyghe

L'expédition scintillante, Acte 2 (light box)

2002

Collection of the Fonds national d'art contemporain



Assume Vivid Astro Focus

Homo Crap #1 (detail)

2004

Photo by Brian Forrest

architectural matrix of tiny green lights; Olafur Eliasson has contributed a 1996 sculpture of contained falling rain that appears to be suspended in space by the effect of the flashing strobe lights; Pierre Huyghe's small stage emits shrouds of tinted fog and an ethereal calm.

In Italian artist Massimo Bartolini's seamless white chamber, I felt as though I was floating, insulated and insulated, the only reference to the outside world being an amateur Southwest landscape painting and a climate recording device. Again, the museum guard lets in only one viewer at a time, providing a momentary if disorienting escape from the show's carnival atmosphere.

I was back in the mix, so to speak, in the next gallery that had been converted into a disco by the artist known as Assume Vivid Astro Focus, with pulsing dance music, mirror ball and huge model of an inflatable sex doll with male and female faces doing a backbend over a neon phallus. Well, goodness me, all I needed was a popper!

Already, "Ecstasy" is being jokingly referred to as "MOCA's 'shroom show," thanks to Takashi Murakami's mural-length painting of mushrooms, Chiho Aoshima's psychedelic video, Roxy Paine's handmade *Psylocybe Cubensis Field* of mushrooms and the aforementioned Carsten Höller installation. But still other mind-expanding drugs are on offer. Tom Friedman used Play-Doh to make pills and Fred Tomaselli showed his familiar but highly appropriate psychedelic mandala paintings of marijuana leaves and pills.

One of most subtly humorous gestures came from Yeppe Heim, who motorized a museum wall so that it slowly closes off the gallery entrance. He also motorized two museum benches, making them move along the floor whenever anyone sits down. One hopes that he also hooked up a video camera to catch those "Candid Camera" moments when oblivious visitors are suddenly shuttled across the room.

Paul Schimmel is the only curator who could have pulled off this wild mélange. In 1992, he propelled a generation of L.A. artists to international recognition with MoCA's controversial exhibition "Helter Skelter." He understands "high concept," if you'll excuse the pun. An intellectual and art historian, he also gets that contemporary art can still make sparks fly. His show is so rewarding and so surprising that it boosts hope for the entire enterprise.

"Ecstasy" brings contemporary art back to where it belongs, into the province of consenting and informed adults. It contradicts a larger museum trend toward do-gooder, expository, or political exhibitions. There is scarcely a wall label in the whole place and I cannot imagine what the docents will have to say to the school children. Unless there is a docent somewhere who can point out that "Ecstasy," most importantly, is about transcendent moments of visual and sensory experience.

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