

METRO PICTURES

Stuart, Gwynedd. "A Long-Closed Masonic Temple on Wilshire Has Become a Dystopian Wonderland," *LAWeekly.com* (May 19, 2017).

LA WEEKLY



Jim Shaw: The Wig Museum, Installation view at Marciano Art Foundation

There's something thrilling about entering the old Scottish Rite Masonic Temple on Wilshire Boulevard in Windsor Square. Abandoned since the mid-'90s by the fraternal order that commissioned its construction in 1961, the imposing structure — its white marble facade replete with various Masonic insignia — has never been accessible to anyone but the Freemasons' white male pledges. Beginning May 25, the massive Millard Sheets-designed building will be open to the public (and for free) as the Marciano Art Foundation, a contemporary art center conceived by Guess Jeans founders Maurice and Paul Marciano. Think the Broad, if the Broads had taken an already existing piece of L.A.'s architectural history and adapted it to their purposes.

At a press preview on Thursday morning, architect Kulapat Yantrasast acknowledged the unique pleasure of taking a space that was "closed in and secretive" and turning it into "something open." At every turn, there are nods to the building's origins. Ostentatious gold-tiled water fountains were preserved even though they're no longer functional. In a wall-sized Cindy Sherman photo mural near the entryway, the photographer wears a tunic embroidered with insignia associated with the Oddfellows, another fraternal order. The mezzanine level features a mini-museum filled with Masonic artifacts left behind by the building's former tenants, from photographs to periodicals to a series of busts that appear to identify different races by their generic physical characteristics. And, installed inside a massive dome tent on the second floor, is Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin's video project *Ledge*, a sort of faux-reality show that was filmed over the course of several months inside the Scottish Rite Temple when it was still abandoned.



The Wig Museum, Installation view

As for the pair of inaugural exhibits — one of which, called “Unpacking,” consists of pieces from the permanent collection — it’s hard to imagine there was any better way to open the place than with Jim Shaw’s “The Wig Museum.” Shaw, who’s somehow never had a major museum exhibition on the West Coast despite that he’s been an Angeleno since the ‘70s, creates work that’s steeped in mid-century consumerism and symbols of white Anglo-Saxon male supremacy, which he believes is in decline.

The exhibit features an actual wig museum, designed to look like something on Hollywood Boulevard (or, even better, *something designed to look like it’s something on Hollywood Boulevard, like you’d see at Universal Studios or Disneyland*). Using wigs as “symbols of authority,” the museum chronicles weird, white-people pageantry through the ages, from a Marie Antoinette-style 18th-century noblewoman’s wig to wigs worn by Masonic elders, the collection gradually veers into straight drag territory; a series colored wigs represent the elements — “Earth” is a tan ‘fro with comically large quartz crystals jutting out from it — and one called “Flat Top” resembles a submarine constructed from long, battleship-gray hair. In the exhibit’s program, Shaw tells curator Philipp Kaiser, “[A wig] represents something I feel is coming to an end, for better or for worse. And so that’s sort of the sub-theme of the whole thing. It is the end of control ... as it’s occurring now.” He says “for better or for worse,” but you get the distinct impression it’s for the better.

That sentiment is well represented throughout the rest of the awe-inspiring exhibit. It’s housed in what used to be the temple’s auditorium, but Shaw’s work doesn’t feel dwarfed by the enormity of a space with 40-foot ceilings. Quite the opposite, in fact. Shaw incorporates into the show a number of theatrical backdrops, some of which were discovered inside the building and others he created, like the massive glowing hellscape that features enormous serpents and people in various states of torture. It’s accompanied by a series of wood cutouts: a sign that welcomes visitors to the “International House of Pain,” a menacing-looking shopping cart that casts a shadow on the scene, and Hieronymous Bosch-style bird people hauling the wealth obsessed away to hell.



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Behind a curtain (we couldn't enter because the black-and-white checkerboard floor was still wet), oversized garden gnomes huddle around a cauldron like they're in the midst of some sort of dark ritual. A cutout of Barbara Bush engulfed in flames makes for an amusing Biblical pun. And in more than one instance, a comic book-style superhero appears to have had his crotch ripped away, leaving a genderless void. Presiding over the whole affair is George Washington as a God figure, holding a cross and sitting on a massive Electrolux vacuum cleaner that descends from the heavens.

Also among the backdrops, is Shaw's 2015 piece *Judgement*, a quaint hillbilly scene that's been invaded by specters. In the background, three figures with coned hoods raise their arms; at first glance they look like men in Klan robes, but one is unmistakably a ghostly version of an Abu Ghraib torture victim. In the foreground, Casper the Friendly Ghost similarly raises his arms, almost in a shrug, as the ghostly outlines of the peasant couple Francois Millet's *The Angelus* stand in their own graves and silently bow their heads to pray; the female half of the couple appears in her earthly form as a giant praying mantis.

The Marciano Art Foundation is an exciting addition to L.A.'s constantly growing, evolving modern art landscape. And, for the time being, Jim Shaw has turned it into Disneyland for pessimists, a dystopia of our own making.