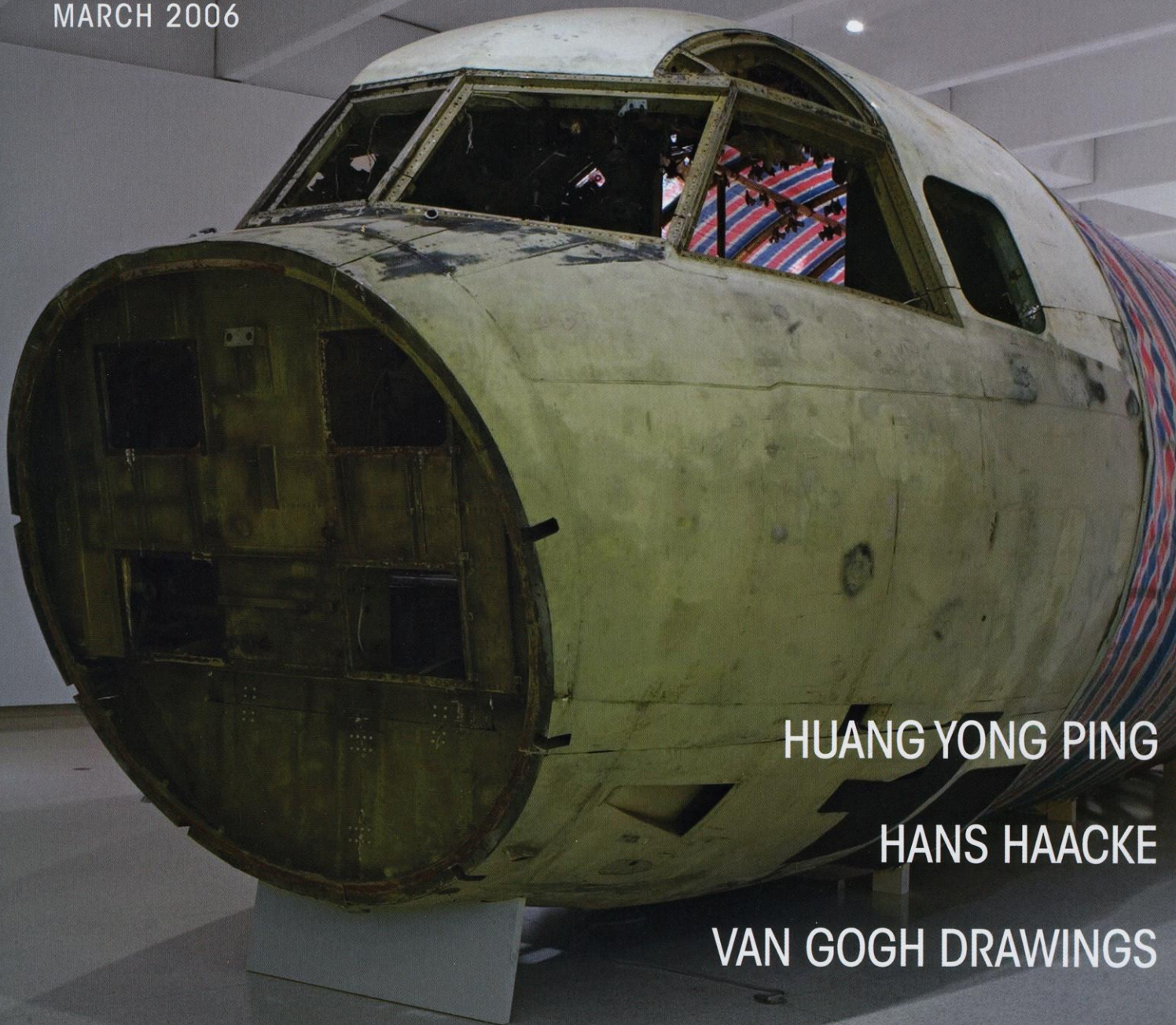


Art in America

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REPORT FROM LOS ANGELES

Ecstasy Now

A recent exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art updated the age-old theme of drugs and art.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

The word “ecstasy,” once the near-exclusive property of sexual libertines and religious visionaries, has in recent years gained currency as the name of a psychotropic drug embraced by underground club-goers. The entertaining exhibition “Ecstasy: In and About Altered States,” curated by Paul Schimmel with Gloria Sutton for the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, played on this confusion of meanings, presenting a group of contemporary artworks that promised to evoke various experiences of psychic dissolution.

In certain ways, “Ecstasy” is an heir to Maurice Tuchman’s exhibition “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985,” which appeared at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986. Like the earlier show, this one promised to counter materialist and formalist definitions of art with a more spiritual, mystical and transcendent approach. But while “The Spiritual in Art” presented an alternate history of modernist abstraction that included a raft of little-known historical figures, “Ecstasy” remained firmly in the mainstream. It reshuffled a collection of mostly well-known artists and, in some cases, much-seen works, to underscore the existence of a hedonistic, antirational sensibility in contemporary art. In some respects, its primary target was a straw man: Schimmel was after the dour, antipleasure tendencies of deconstructive art and criticism, though these have long been relegated to pockets of academia populated by the ever more embattled progeny of Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh. In the outside world, hedonism is big business. Attacks on sex and violence in the media by the religious right merely move such programming to cable television and satellite radio where it flourishes unabated.

As a result, though various of the intriguing catalogue essays attempt to link the work in this show to Romantic-era experimentation with opium, laudanum, hashish and absinthe by the likes of Coleridge, Fuseli and Poe, in person the selections came off more Disney than decadent. Despite the presence of a fountain spilling “potentized” LSD by Klaus Weber, a variety of illegal substances embedded beneath clear acrylic resin in the paintings of Fred Tomaselli and a giant representation of female genitalia in a

disco installation by assume vivid astro focus, the exhibition was essentially family fare, as the large crowds flocking to the Geffen center attested. It offered the opportunity to shut oneself up within a glittering space pod to the soundtrack of a cult sci-fi film, to sashay through a sparkling grid of dotted light, to groove within clouds of manufactured fog illuminated by beams of colored light and to wind through an inverted field of giant hallucinogenic mushrooms. A wall text coyly noted that the show contained two threads—works that represent mind-altering experiences and those that simulate them. Among the efforts were environments that distorted perceptions of time and space, mesmerizing light shows, spaces designed to induce a sense of disembodiedness and an array of multimedia spectacles. Not all the works could be linked to recreational drug use—one, for example, brought us inside the head of a female hysteric, while another was actually about undermining the ecstatic obliteration of self that can occur when watching a movie.



View of Klaus Weber's Public Fountain LSD Hall, 2003, Victorian lead crystal glass, potentized LSD and mixed mediums; at MOCA. Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna. Photo Brian Forrest.

The exhibition was wrapped in a razzle-dazzle show-biz aura, leaving the heavy intellectual lifting to the catalogue. In fact, the catalogue is well worth perusal. The seven essays present a set of intriguing and often conflicting definitions of the phenomena under consideration. Reading them leaves one less sure exactly what the point is, but along the way one is led to some fascinating issues.

Curator Schimmel makes the case that the quest for ecstasy is a form of utopianism. He draws a line from Nietzsche and the Romantic challenge to Enlightenment reason through the spiritualist tendencies of early modernists like Mondrian and Kandinsky. He cites the influence of Freud and Jung on the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists, and ends up with the collective high of the current underground music scene. Carolyn Christov Bakargiev pays more attention to philosophical and religious antecedents, beginning with Plato's dualistic treatment of sense and reality. She traces ecstatic contemplation to the visions of mystics like St. Teresa of Avila and notes that the Enlightenment recast such experiences as symptoms of psychic disorders (particularly of the female variety), and that post-World-War-II art merged notions of transcendence of and immersion in the world to revitalize the notion of ecstasy.

Chrissie Iles examines the ego dissolution characteristic of psychedelic experiences, and connects the hallucinogenic trips of the 1960s to the rave and trance culture of the late 1980s and '90s. Lars Bang Larsen presents a more skeptical take on drug-induced states of ecstasy, noting that their effects lie close to apathy, a condition encouraged by the entertainment industry's commercialization of hedonism. Midori Matsui offers a phenomenological interpretation, seeing ecstatic states as the outcome of McLuhanesque changes in technology and perception that encourage decentered vision and a sense of overall connectivity. Finally, Diedrich Diederichsen follows the permutations of 20th-century drug culture and the concurrent debate on the status of recreational drugs as agents of liberation or indolence.

Together, the essays raise some provocative questions: Is ecstasy—drug induced or otherwise—really a condition of utopia? (One case arguing the contrary is that of the mind control exerted by pleasurable

Among the works were installations distorting perceptions of time and space, mesmerizing light shows, environments inducing disembodiment and an array of multimedia spectacles.



Sylvie Fleury: "8," 2000, fiberglass, metal, fabric, plastic, lights and sound, 100 inches high. Collection Louis Blouin MacBain.

drugs in Aldous Huxley's dystopian fantasy *Brave New World*.) Is madness a form of ecstasy, or has it been cruelly romanticized to shortchange the real pain of mental aberration? Does hedonism really subvert the political order or simply encourage escapism and withdrawal? Is mind alteration a communal or a private experience, and with what social consequences?

Answers to such questions were not to be found in the show itself, which instead focused on perception-bending spectacles. Among the most theatrical were the multisensory environments of Ólafur Eliasson, Erwin Redl and Pierre Huyghe. Eliasson's installation *Your strange certainty still kept* (1996) uses the simple elements of a darkened room, a mist of water falling into a trough and a strobe light to create a mesmerizing veil of illuminated droplets that seem, thanks to the strobe, to be frozen in space. Another such show was provided by Redl, whose *MATRIX II* (2000/05) immerses viewers in a three-dimensional grid of green glowing LED lights.

Pierre Huyghe's *Leapédition scintillante, Acte 2 (Light Show)*, 2002, added music to the mix, as the haunting strains of Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies*, orchestrated by Debussy, floated through another darkened room filled with manufactured fog. The music emanates from a pair of large white boxes, one

of which seems to float 4 feet above the other. These are also the staging ground for the light show, created by colored-gel-filtered spotlights rotating and pulsing according to a computer program. Captured and diffused by the fog, the dancing beams of light attracted, the day I visited, a group of silent viewers who sat on the floor like stoned concert fans.

These environments achieve their hypnotic effects by lulling viewers into a perception of slowed or arrested time. By contrast, an installation by Pipilotti Rist attempts to induce a similar out-of-body condition through frenetic movement. Rist's *Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)*, 2001, mingles an electronic soundtrack with a pair of video projections that sweep through a darkened room hung with transparent lace curtains. The fabric momentarily captures careening images of flowers, cityscapes and scenes with enigmatic narratives. Walking through the space, the viewer becomes part of the kaleidoscopic effects. Even more fevered is a work by assume vivid astro focus. Titled *HOMO CRAP #1*, it is entered through a bead curtain bearing the image of Pope John Paul II. Though the title seems to suggest some kind of argument about gay rights, any serious effort to grapple with politics quickly fades in the presence of pulsing lights, a disco ball, a flashing neon penis, walls covered with graphic black-and-white drawings and a nearly naked, two-faced, three-dimensional giantess who arches like a circus performer over the center of the space. Voluptuous

breasts and a realistically modeled vagina mark her as female, though the version of her face that turns to the back wall has a thick black mustache. Meanwhile, music, strobos and disco ball mark this as a

place where bodies are meant to gyrate and meld in ecstatic pleasure.

The promise of transposition to another plane of existence becomes even more literal in Sylvie Fleury's "8" (2000). This yellow, spherical space pod is designed for a single passenger, who upon entering its rhinestone-studded interior is enveloped by bits of dialogue from the 1958 camp classic *The Queen of Outer Space*, starring Zsa Zsa Gabor. Amid the talk of preparations for takeoff, the viewer is indeed primed for an extraterrestrial experience—one that, for me, was somewhat dampened by the fact that gallery attendants insisted on keeping the hatch open.

In contrast to works providing multisensory stimulation, an environment by Massimo Bartolini came closer to the experience of a sensory deprivation chamber. *Entry to Head n 8 (museum)*, 2004, was also gained one at a time. Here the viewer is closed up in an all-white room with its corners and edges rounded off to destroy any normal sense of perspective. The only landmarks are a humidifier on the floor and a small framed landscape painting apparently floating on the wall. However, the desired effect of expansive space is marred by the scuff marks on the floor, which bring the viewer sharply back to mundane reality.

The theatricality of the show's environmental installations put several other pieces dealing with altered perceptions at a distinct disadvantage. These included a pair of works by Jeppe Hein featuring normally static elements—architecture and furniture—that disconcertingly shift about. *Moving Bench* (2000) is a simple museum-style bench that begins to move back and forth when one sits on it. Similarly, *Invisible Moving Wall* (2001) very slowly slides across a room, dividing one gallery from another before stopping a few inches short of complete closure and then sliding away in the reverse direction.

Even less spectacular is Charles Ray's 1989 *Tabletop*, featuring an apparently very ordinary table set with a plant, a plate, a salt shaker, a ceramic canister, a tumbler and a bowl. Each of these rotates at glacial slowness. Given that the items are mostly symmetrical, their movement is very difficult to detect, and

View of assume vivid astro focus's multimedia installation HOMO CRAP #1, 2005; at MOCA. Photo Brian Forrest.

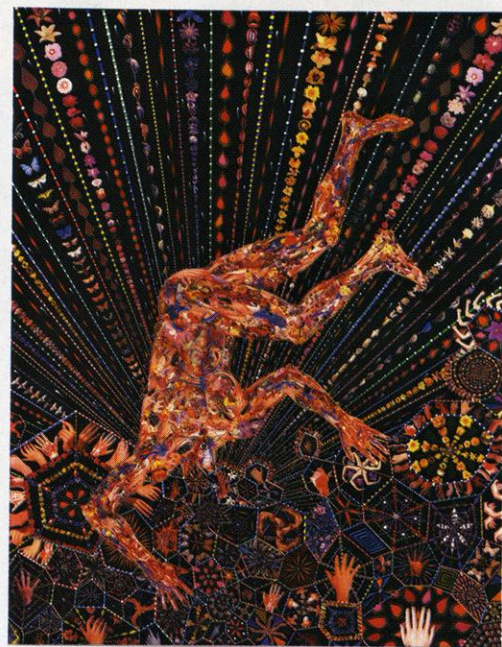


estly scaled paintings of Glenn Brown. Mimicking the compositions of traditional painting—old-master portraits, 19th-century genre scenes and the like—Brown suggests what such images might look like to a viewer on an acid trip. Swirling but strangely flat brushstrokes make the skin of greenish figures and creatures literally seem to crawl.

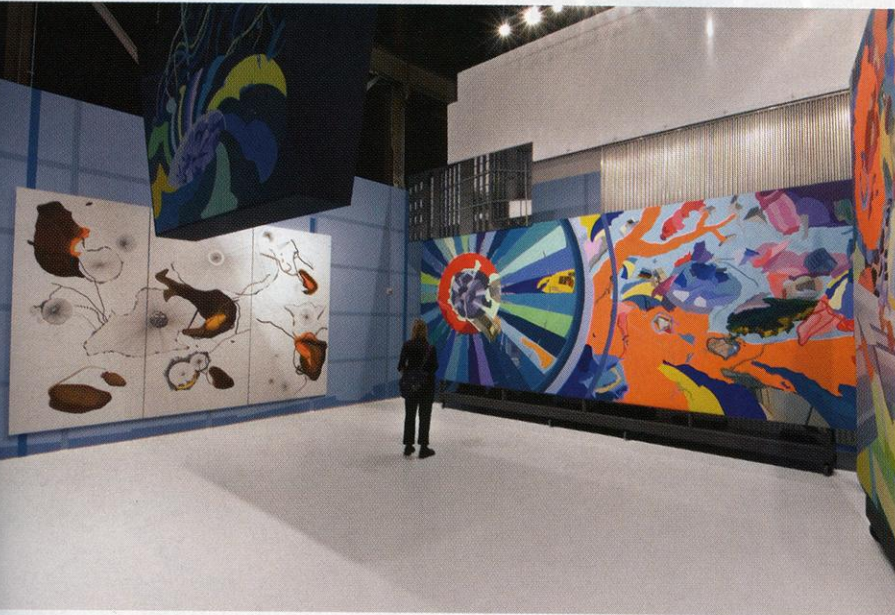
More overtly abstract are the paintings of Franz Ackermann, which were presented in an eye-popping installation. Some of his jazzy compositions were applied directly to the wall while others covered canvases propped casually about or suspended from the ceiling. Shards of bold colors, some in the form of color wheels and others suggesting details of modernist architecture or industrial design, burst outward as if in the aftermath of the Big Bang. Hung on a painted wall was a set of more explicitly representational collages combining abstract patterns with photographic details of cityscapes or historic architecture. Taken together the whole conveyed a condensed and barely controlled energy—an image of ecstasy as eruption.

Most explicitly allied to the druggy overtones of the exhibition were a number of works that offer riffs on various mind-altering substances. Directly opposite the entrance was Klaus Weber's glass-enclosed, LSD-spouting crystal fountain (2003). The authenticity of the "potentized" LSD (the catalogue notes that this substance is illegal to produce but legal to possess in trace amounts) was attested to by a certificate on the wall. A small-scale model suggested how this fountain would look if sited within glass-and-steel walls in a public space.

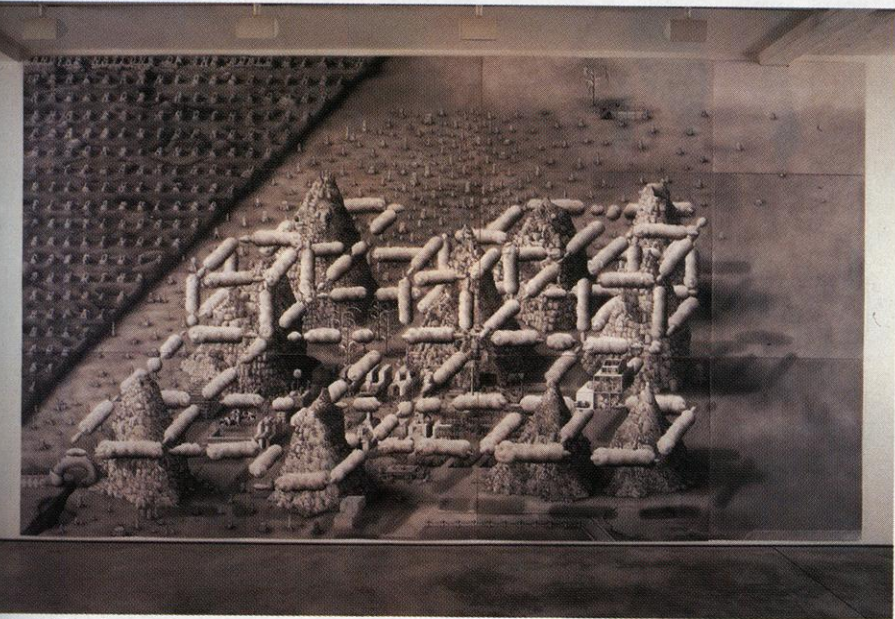
Real drugs resurface in the psychedelic collages of Fred Tomaselli, where capsules and tablets constitute decorative chains looping around birds, exotic flowers, figures and other images created with laboriously arranged cut-outs from magazine photographs. Tom Friedman also turned to the motif of drug cap-



Fred Tomaselli: Organism, 2005, leaves, photo-collage, acrylic, gouache and resin on wood panel, 96 by 78 inches.



View of Franz Ackermann's installation Sky Shop, 2005; at MOCA. Photo Brian Forrest.



Paul Noble: Acumulus Nobilitatus, 2000-01, pencil on paper, 16 panels, approx. 12½ by 18 feet overall. Collection John A. Smith and Vicky Hughes, London.

no doubt many museum visitors quickly passed the table on the way to more sensational fare. Ray's *Yes* (1990) did better. This consists of a framed photographic portrait of the artist that, one slowly realizes, is slightly bowed to match the curve of the wall on which it is hung. Ray's contributions were rounded out with *No* (1991), whose presence was quite perplexing in the context of this show. It is a photographic self-portrait that turns out to be a shot of a highly realistic sculptural self-portrait in fiberglass.

The show was not limited to three-dimensional works. Several of the most effective are more or less two-dimensional and play with conventions of representation to suggest alternate realities. Paul Noble,

whose graphic works were a highlight of MOMA's 2004 "Drawing Now" exhibition, here presented two monumental pencil drawings of cities that look simultaneously futuristic and prehistoric. Mountains seemingly composed of electronic debris; turd-shaped clouds with faces, loosely attached end-to-end to form a near-perfect grid around the mountains; rows of burial markers forming the letters of an almost decipherable text; and eggs ensconced variously as architectural ornaments, objects of worship or sacrificial offerings are laid out in intense and almost hallucinogenic detail across vast fields of large, pieced-together sheets of paper. An equally potent mixture of memory and imagination underlies the more mod-