


Art in America



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View of the exhibition "Urs Fischer: The Public & the Private," 2017, showing (center) *Dazzled*, 2016, glass, ceramic silkscreen medium, silicone adhesive, velvet, and mixed mediums, two parts, each 25½ by 31½ by 25¼ inches.

All images this article courtesy Legion of Honor/ Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Rebels in the Palace

by Kevin Killian

THE FINE ARTS Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF), a private-municipal partnership, governs two museums. One of them, the de Young, has by virtue of a sunny setting in Golden Gate Park the sheen of a "people's museum," something its haughty sister, the Legion of Honor, will never have. The Palace, as we call it, opened in 1924 as a memorial to the California soldiers who died in World War I. It's perched in a lovely location in Lincoln Park, if you don't mind driving through a golf course to approach it, right on the edge of the little Malibu-like colony known as Sea Cliff. The neighborhood was once home to Robin Williams and Sharon Stone, when they were huge stars at the height of their fame. And if you drive up El Camino del Mar to the Legion of Honor, Hollywood glamour will light your way, for sixty years ago Alfred Hitchcock had Kim Novak, star of *Vertigo*, stalk the museum's halls with a cunning nosegay, white gloves, her hair in a classic chignon, to sit for hours daily in front of one painting, *Portrait of Carlotta Valdes*, believing herself to have actually been the woman depicted on the canvas, her own long-dead ancestor.

Both museums now mount one blockbuster exhibition after another, such as "Royal Treasures from the Louvre" and "Casanova: The Seduction of Europe." For viewers interested in contemporary art, or even modern art, there hasn't been much sizzle, though in recent years I escorted my cousin from back East to the survey of Dale Chihuly's fanciful glass works at the de Young, and took my mom and sister to the Annie Leibovitz retrospective at the Legion of Honor—or did we hit their epic show "Artistic Luxury: Fabergé, Tiffany, Lalique"? Before that, I attended Jess's memorial—Jess, the romantic painter and, later, wry collagist who was the companion of the poet Robert Duncan—and the sunset grandeur of the Legion of Honor's basement Gunn Theater was the perfect setting for it. I always wave to the big Monet water lilies, and to his smaller painting of honeycombed ocean waves. I bow to Dalí's *Portrait of Dorothy Spreckels Munn* (1942), depicting a sugar heiress—the worst, yet cutest, of all Dalís I have ever seen. For good luck I salute the servant sponging down her demure mistress, seated on a birdcage in Gérôme's impeccably bad, perfect *The Bath* (ca.

KEVIN KILLIAN is a poet, playwright, and literary historian. See Contributors page .



Top, Julian Schnabel: Untitled, 2017, gesso on found fabric, 24 feet square.

Above, view of the exhibition "Sarah Lucas: Good Muse," 2017.

1880–85). Everyone wants to see *Portrait of Carlotta Valdes*, but the official story is that it was just a movie prop and no longer exists!

Two years back, at a dance show at The Lab, an experimental space in the Mission, curator Elizabeth Thomas introduced me to Claudia Schmuckli, fresh from the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston and the new contemporary curator for FAMSF. I learned that her boss, director Max Hollein (also a recent transplant, from the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt), had hired her to help shake things up around the grand old doze factory. Skeptically I filed her card away in my book and sort of forgot about the whispers of revolution until one night, after an evening in late April 2017 at nearby Lands End, my wife and I noticed the lights aglow over the golf course and recalled that the Legion of Honor was having an opening—for Urs Fischer, of all people! We pulled in and walked into the great courtyard where stands a cast of Rodin's *The Thinker*. I mean, where sits a cast of Rodin's *The Thinker*. I jumped a little when I saw the huge statue aped, surrounded by a dozen or more metal sculptures from Fischer's factory—homages, deconstructions, acts of piety or rebuke? But even

more startling, the garden court and the galleries themselves were packed with people under fifty—a phenomenon I had never before seen inside the Legion of Honor. "Some are under *thirty*," whispered my wife.

One of them was a preparator huddled with two buds in the bar area, where the feverish drinking had long been in session. I asked him if the artist was present. Kindly he took me over and introduced me to sturdy, burgherish Fischer, who might himself have stepped out of a Rodin. I took his hand and thanked him for bringing things to the Legion of Honor I never thought I'd see there! In my autograph book he made a small, neat line drawing of four of the objects he'd produced for this show. Upstairs, in one of the nine galleries, I looked at a desk with new eyes, wondering if it was an antique or Fischer. A chair was tucked into it, and a cup of espresso was staining its mellow finish; suddenly the whole desk began to tremble visibly, dribs and drabs of coffee bouncing out of the cup, but before I could shout to my wife, the piece had gone quiet, assuming once again the "timelessness" of art.

A few months later, in July, I was more ready to be shocked when we went to see the Sarah Lucas exhibition—the Young British Artist's first museum show in the US. Painter Keith Boadwee's husband, Kenny Latham, greeted us: he said Keith was in seventh heaven, since Lucas is his favorite living artist and yet he'd never met or even glimpsed her. The grand Legion of Honor organ had been pulled out from the wall and its keyboard lid drawn back, keys bared; a tall, distinguished man was noodling at them. "That's Andrew Hale," Kenny said. "He plays the keyboards in Sade's band." My eyes goggled. Under a Beaux-Arts arch, stepping briskly through a crowded throng of Lucas's stuffed, puffy cloth sculptures strewn over the Rodins we knew of old, strode Schmuckli and Hollein, smiling broadly and gladly, welcoming us to a show far different from any the Legion of Honor had presented before—and yet Lucas was responding to Rodin's eroticism, we read on placards.

The director and curator must have noted the horror of various trustees and blue-haired museum patrons. Rumor has it that some trustees pushed back against Schmuckli's inspired programming. But you wouldn't have guessed it from their bonhomie. Lucas weaved around the organist, and when she took the mic, nimble Andrew Hale segued into the familiar Rick Wakeman chords that begin David Bowie's landmark 1971 LP, *Hunky Dory*. The crowd was transfixed: plopped down on the bench alongside Hale, a glass of wine rolling in one hand, Lucas sang "Ch-ch-changes." We screamed as she belted out that "these children that you spit on / as they try to change their worlds / are immune to your consultations." She wore tight blue jeans with exaggerated cuffs, a camouflage chemise over a pinstriped shirt, and a wide smile, with a Wife of Bath gap between her two front teeth. On her feet were strappy heels strangely similar to those on the signature sculpture of her show, *Titti Doris* (2015). We could swivel our heads and see first her singing, and then *Titti Doris*, in which a headless woman with a torso studded with at least fourteen cotton

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breasts lounges contentedly in a straight-backed chair, legs like those of Kay Thompson's Eloise sprawled on a gray-pink plinth. Later we watched Lucas leaving the museum with her entourage, weaving steadily toward a town car, and heard them yodeling the old Jeff Lynne number "Mr. Blue Sky," from Electric Light Orchestra's *Out of the Blue* (1977). These were the songs of Lucas's youth, and to our ears they sounded like hymns of triumph or at any rate of battle. It was events like these that interested me again in San Francisco, after years of steady decline of morale, brought on by the city's stultifying celebration of capital in a lovely setting that once brought forth arcadian dreams.

More recently Schmuckli commissioned San Francisco's own Lynn Hershman Leeson to create a *Vertigo*-based installation, titled *VertiGhost*, in which Kim Novak stand-ins enter the gallery to pay homage to *Portrait of Carlotta Valdes*, but Hershman Leeson allows Carlotta to have the last laugh, as she watches us—via camera lenses drilled into her portrait's eyes—with the commanding gaze of one who glories in her own appeal. When the work was on view this past winter, the images of those Carlotta saw appeared on a video feed at the de Young.



View of the exhibition "Lynn Hershman Leeson: *VertiGhost*," 2017–18.

This spring I fulfilled yet another fantasy, to meet Tracey Emin up close, at the decadent Tonga Room in the Fairmont Hotel; she was there for a party celebrating Julian Schnabel's huge installation at the Legion of Honor: six 24-foot-square painted panels, far too big for ordinary gallery halls, hung outdoors. The paintings feature biomorphic forms, like seminal emissions, on studiously dull shades of gray and pink. Inside the museum, a variety of other Schnabel works were installed among Rodin's, as if to suggest the two followed the same career path—from experimentalist to star to legend. This was Hollein's baby, for he has enjoyed a long relationship with Schnabel, as Schmuckli has with Fischer and with Alexandre Singh, whose exhibition at the Legion of Honor opens in 2019.

In the basement, underneath the Schnabel display, we took in the largest Pre-Raphaelite show I've ever had the pleasure to see—examples from all the artists, even the often neglected female painters of the period, together with many of the works that motivated Rossetti, Millais, Holman Hunt, and others to want to return to the art practices that predated Raphael's. So we were walking around and looking at Botticelli's and Van Eyck's next to the Victorian work—again, a tense-confusing schema I never thought I'd find in San Francisco. I can't wait to see what comes next! I've been trying to learn Claudia Schmuckli's curatorial plans. In April, New York's Metropolitan Museum lured Max Hollein away from us to be its tenth director, but Schmuckli vows to remain, and the overwhelmingly positive public response means that, despite iffy trustees, we will be living out the pair's dreams for a while yet, fingers crossed. ○

View of "Urs Fischer: *The Public & the Private*," showing (foreground) *boy w/ tongue*, 2014, cast bronze, 35½ by 18 by 18 inches.



Atlas is a rotating series of columns by writers from San Juan, San Francisco, and Nairobi.