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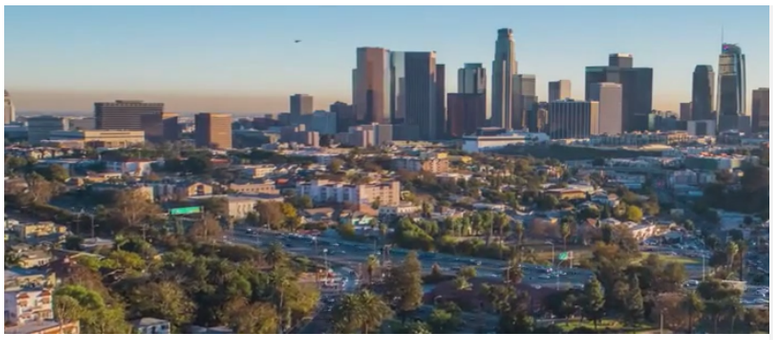
LA WEEKLY



LA WEEKLY

A PAINTING WITH THE F-WORD ON IT CREATES CONTROVERSY IN TORRANCE

LIZ OHANESIAN × MARCH 7, 2014

It only took one anonymous, outraged parent to turn a recent group show at Torrance Art Museum into a controversial art event. "Reverb: Music as Both Inspiration & Content in Contemporary Art" isn't the sort of subject matter that would normally fuel ire. Someone, however, took issue with Inglewood-based artist Steven Bankhead's contribution to the show. Called *Fuck Forever*, the painting (above) features the title in bold letters across a large canvas.

The f-word had the anonymous outraged parent running to South Bay newspaper, the Daily Breeze, where he criticizes the art and the museum.

"That's very inappropriate when you're bringing your kids, teenagers, to a so-called art museum and you have to be exposed to that," he tells reporter Nick Green in the article, "Obscenity or Artwork at Torrance Museum.

Bankhead, the artist, didn't anticipate this kind of reaction. "I'm kind of astounded that this is going on," he says in a recent phone conversation with *L.A. Weekly*. "Here we are, 2014, you can see the f-word anywhere. There is no hiding from it."

For some, though, fuck is still a dirty word regardless of context or intent.
]
Bankhead is an artist with a handful of solo shows, and lots of group exhibitions, to his credit. He's also an instructor at Otis College of Art & Design. Music has inspired some of his previous efforts. In 2009, he had a solo show called "Pretty Vacant," a nod to the Sex Pistols song of the same name, in Munich. *Fuck Forever* is another Sex Pistols reference, one that specifically points to a a poster made by Jamie Reid. It also appropriates the title of a song by Babyshambles. The song was chart hit in the U.K.

"There's kind of a double entendre happening," says Bankhead of the phrase. It could be a fuck that's synonymous with sex. It could be a fuck that's dismissive of time. Bankhead liked that open-ended interpretation.

The words, he notes, are written in flowers. "I thought that using flowers was appropriate because it was a slightly romantic notion in both of those things," the flowers and the sentiment of the words, he says.

Eve Rappoport is the Cultural Services Division manager for the City of Torrance, the department that oversees the museum. "We have a policy that kind of explains what we do and what the staff will do if we have work that we're showing that we feel may be offensive to some members of the community," she says.

Rappoport says their policy usually extends to works that involve nudity or "something really graphic." She stresses that it's similar to what you'll see at other museums and galleries. "Frankly," she says by phone, "we did not think that this piece fell into that category."

The exhibition had been open for about a month at the free museum before the complaint. By that time, an estimated 600-plus people had checked out the works.

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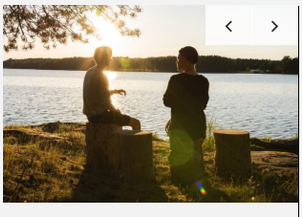

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Once the complaint was aired, the museum did add a warning sign near Bankhead's painting. "Now we know that there's this one person that got upset by it and there may be somebody else," says Rappoport.

Since then, more have stopped by Torrance Art Museum, and no one else has complained. "Reverb" closes on March 8.

According to the *Daily Breeze* story, the outraged parent was at the museum with his daughter when he was offended. But Rappoport is wondering if the parent in the story is the same as another man who came by himself. Two weeks before the *Daily Breeze* story, Rappoport heard from a colleague that a man had complained about a piece of art inside the museum. The man did not leave a name or phone number. Rappoport followed up with one of the volunteer docents. According to Rappoport, the docent had walked around the exhibition with a man who had a "very strong, negative reaction" to *Fuck Forever*. The man told the docent that he would not bring his child to the museum, and the man had threatened to make a call to the press.

"If they had left a name and number, we would have called the person and at least tried to have a conversation with them, find out exactly what the issue is and explain why it's there," Rappoport says. "There's a reason the work is there. He may not like it, which is fine. At least they would understand that it was done responsibly and with a reason."

Bankhead especially disagreed with the parent's comment in the article that the work does not count as art. "Art is the conversation that an inanimate object brings to the table. It's the conversation that it makes," he says. "The fact that they responded to it at all, that, to me, is art, not just the painting on the wall. The viewer completes the work."

He adds, "I don't think they understand art, personally."

The show hasn't suffered since the article. In fact, the museum has reaped the benefits of minor controversy. "There certainly are people who have come in to see what the hullabaloo is about," says Rappoport.

As for Bankhead, he's inspired by the comments. The artists mentions a quote in the original article where the anonymous person says that someone who views *Fuck Forever* as art must have a "jaundiced eye." Says Bankhead, "I think for sure that's going to be the title of my next show."

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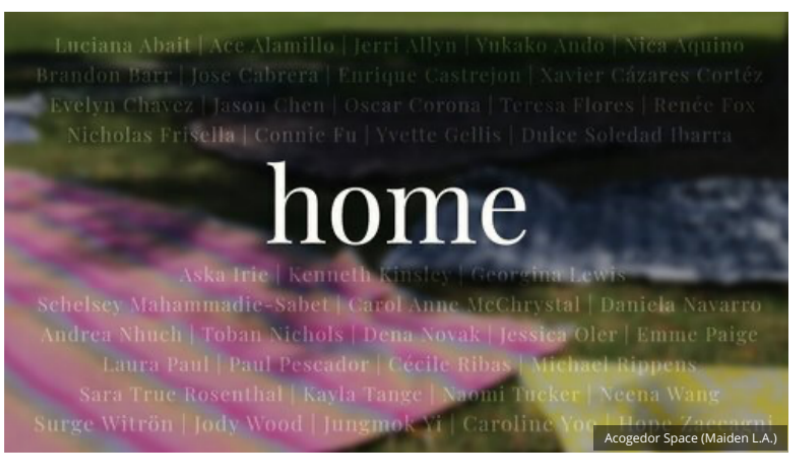
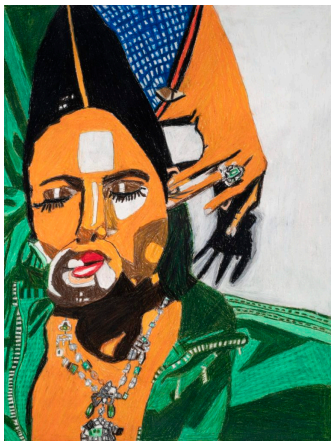


Acogedor Space (Maiden L.A.)

ARTS CALENDAR (SUMMER'S END): SEPTEMBER 4-7

SHANA NYS DAMBROT × SEPTEMBER 3, 2020

Summer may have indeed seemed like 500 days this year, and while technically still on for a couple of more weeks, Labor Day turns the collective psyche towards Autumn — and with it, a new September art season. This week sees a number of galleries open big new shows, many with all-day, masked, socially distant opening receptions, or at least with appointments available starting as of opening day. But there's also still plenty of excellent online/virtual/social media-based work to enjoy from home, as well as a month-long, cross-platform all-city indie arts festival, and a group show propagating across Hollywood and WeHo billboards.



Friday, September 4

Helen Rae at Tierra del Sol Gallery. Helen Rae was nearing 80 when her art career finally took off. As a member of the First Street Art Center community (a progressive studio for adults with developmental disabilities in Upland), Rae perhaps seems an unlikely art-world darling. But the strikingly original, viscerally sophisticated, expressionistic and even Fauvist line and color of her fashion-inspired portraits defy both expectation and convention. With wit and powerful savvy, Rae transforms iconic couture ads into emotionally and optically rich works that have garnered the attention of audiences across the country and indeed the globe. Now 82, Rae has not slowed down one bit. As an exhibition of her striking new works opens, be prepared to be blown away. *Tierra del Sol Gallery, 945 Chung King Rd., Chinatown; by appointment, September 4 – October 23; tierradelsolgallery.org.*

Ariel Vargassal, Defiant, acrylic and 24K gold leaf on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

Ariel Vargassal: *Fables of Emotional and Physical Displacement* at BBAX. Painter Ariel Vargassal combines stylistic cues from Pop, Surrealism, and magical realism in crisply depicted micro-fables of the human condition. In each tableaux the figures are accompanied by domestic and wild animal counterparts whose presence signals a deeper meaning. Each detail of costume, creature, and sometimes confection signals that the scene is a metaphor, despite its plausible rendering. Color is saturated and thus emotional. To be enjoyed for their beauty, puzzled upon for their strangeness, and wondered over for their significance of message, enjoy an exhibition of new works for the modern moment. *Building Bridges Art Exchange, Bergamot Station Art Center, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica; by appointment Friday, September 4 and Saturday, September 5, noon-5pm. buildingbridgesartexchange.org.*

The Bendix Collective: High Beams (Maiden L.A.)

Saturday, September 5

The Bendix Building Collective: *High Beams*. In this one-night event as part of the Maiden L.A. crosstown arts festival, the Bendix Building's studio artists, members of its resident collectives, and many of the tenant galleries will gather for a socially distant rooftop exhibition event on a neighboring parking structure in the downtown Fashion District. Augmented by a downloadable guide that goes into more detail about the artists and the full bodies of sculptural work sampled in this winding installation, for this evening itself visitors can and probably should stay in their cars to cruise the open air lot. *401 East 12th St., downtown; Saturday, September 5, 8-10pm; free; highbeams.art.*

Duke Riley at Charlie James Gallery

Duke Riley: *Far Away* at Charlie James Gallery. In drawings, mosaics, video, performance, and even scrimshaw, Duke Riley combines wistful yet politically salient examinations of the role of the artist in society with imagery dwelling on the fate of maritime and waterfront town culture erased by rampant development. Using maritime traditions as emblems for the energy of a lost way of life, Riley's work evokes both history and allegory in work that is mournful, cautionary, beautiful, ideological, and inventive. *969 Chung King Road, Chinatown; September 5 – October 17, by appointment; cjamesgallery.com.*

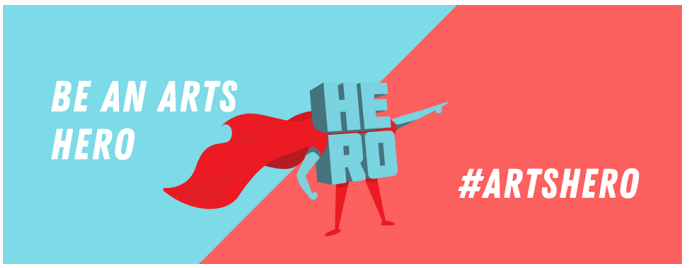
Julie Mehretu, Conjured Parts (eye), Ferguson, 2016. Courtesy of The Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles, © Julie Mehretu (Photo by Cathy Carver)

Poetry in Color: A Virtual Slam Inspired by Julie Mehretu at LACMA. This streaming poetry slam takes its cues from the landmark Julie Mehretu exhibition, which many were able to visit in the before times, but which will sadly close on September 17, before the museum reopens to the public. As Mehretu's work is characterized by a generative abstraction drawing on aspects of colonialism and capitalist history and their manifestations in architecture, landscape, and the movements of peoples, the featured poets Fisseha Moges, Yaw Kyerematenge, and Tonya Ingram explore related dynamics through the agency of the spoken word. *Saturday, September 5, 7:30-8:30pm; free; Instagram Live.*

Dorian Wood at ICA LA

Sunday, September 6

Dorian Wood: *Ardor* at ICA LA. Musician, artist, performer and avant-garde non-binary icon Dorian Wood celebrates the release of a new full-length album with a live-stream performance from the ICA. *Ardor* was recorded at Human Resources in June, and reflects its mid-quarantine moment of shift and trauma that we all experience alone and collectively if at a distance. Cathartic and intense with love and loss, in the end, it gives way to hope. "*Ardor* is a love letter to activists and to all of us doing what we can to survive in today's times," says Wood. "[It is] meant to encourage both acts of resistance and self-reflection." *Sunday, September 6, noon; theicala.org.*



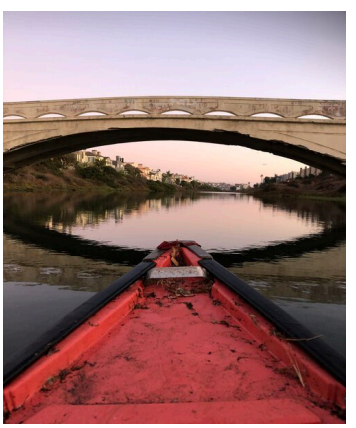
Monday, September 7 (Labor Day)

Be An #ArtsHero Arts Workers Unite Day of Action. Be an #ArtsHero is an intersectional grassroots campaign comprised of Arts & Culture workers, Unions, and institutions in the United States pushing the Senate to allocate proportionate relief to the Arts & Culture sector of the American economy. Calling for proportionate relief to the Arts & Culture sector, this Labor Day, the campaign is organizing a nationwide network of demonstrations, as arts workers demand that their elected representatives advocate for arts and culture institutions and the communities they center. They will also be on Instagram Live, as artists, arts workers, and culture-minded celebrities call their Senators in IGTV at BeAnArtsHero. The day will culminate with a live-stream conversation, The Ghostlight Panel: Changing The Conversation About The Creative Economy, discussing the socioeconomic impact of the Arts & Culture sector in the United States. As the Arts & Culture sector contributes $877B in value added to our economy, there should be a lot to talk about. *beanartshero.com.*

Art by Jonah Welch

Ongoing

SaveArtSpace presents *Looking Forward // Queer Futures.* A billboard-based public art exhibition curated by Mich Miller, Sky Cubacub, & Rebecca Shippee, the scattered installations of work by Brendan Shea, Ari Salka, Marne Lucas, Toni Smalls, Daniel Alejandro Trejo, Hannah Rubin, CJ Miller, Duff Norris, Bailey Davenport, and Dustin Steuck examine the many faces of the Queer community with an eye toward an inclusive collective future. "Queer" is used as an identity and community term for non-normativity — both as a celebration and a reclamation," say the curators. Beginning the week of August 24 and installed for a month in most locations, delight in the sudden appearance of fantastical, fabulous, and funny angels keeping watch from above our Hollywood, WeHo and Mid-City thoroughfares. *saveartspace.org/queerfutures.*



Mike Saijo and Flora Kao (Maiden L.A.)

Maiden L.A. 2020. An inclusive, decentralized arts festival happening at locations across Los Angeles County, the 2020 edition of Maiden L.A. hosts some 75 projects, about half in-person and the rest online. Some highlights include a scavenger hunt crossword puzzle that takes you around the city for clues, a handwashing memorial to essential workers, a film screening that layers 32 kaiju films simultaneously, a range of open artist studio presentations and performances, an exhibition installed on the *Brewery Arts Colony* fencing, a positive affirmation selfie station, a web-based video-based storytelling project, an exterior in-situ photo-bombing of a local museum, the one-night *High Beams* drive-through garage-roof sculpture park (see above), a two-day boat and bridge happening in the wetlands, a hybrid VR/IRL project about the psyche emerging into the world, and an exhibition and events series on the poignant, evolving, and always urgent idea of "home." *September 1 – 20; various times; various locations; maiden.la/2020.*

Museum Adjacent (Maiden L.A.)

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