

Le Louvre, Las Vegas

Pageant of the Masters, Laguna Beach

In 1985 Jean Baudrillard arrived in the warm, verdant hills of Orange County. It was a land of soymilk and honey, humming with sprinkler water and gasoline. He had come at the end of a trip across the anti-Europe, to see a young country that bewildered him.

The French philosopher was delighted and horrified by America. It was everything he expected. The Pacific was a “crystal prison” wall; the desert a “cinematic vision.”¹ Santa Barbara was filled with “funereal” villas and beaches where joggers prolonged death through a “morbid... semi-ecstatic cult of the body.”² Los Angeles, the capital of cinematic illusion, was for him no more than a Hollywood metonym, a real city sloppily slathered with artifice. “For us the whole of America is a desert,” he wrote in his travelogue, which later became his book *America*. “Culture exists there in a wild state: it sacrifices all intellect, all aesthetics in a process of literal transcription into the real.”³

I thought of old Uncle Jean last September, when I found myself in Laguna Beach fifty years after his visit. I had come for the Festival of the Arts, a commercial art fair on the grounds of an outdoor amphitheater. It was a warm weekend showcase of Sunday painters with aspirations of Dale Chihuly—pleasantly middlebrow family fun. The real draw, though,

was a staged performance at nightfall unlike any in the world, a spectacle known as the Pageant of the Masters.

Since 1933, an all-volunteer cast and crew have assembled each summer to recreate famous masterworks in exacting *tableaux vivants*. From unsigned Roman sculptures to Edward Hopper paintings, the program is a broad survey of art history. Each figural subject is a live human posed motionless in an elaborately painted set. No curtains are ever drawn, but in a pall of onstage darkness props are placed, gigantic frames are cinched, and bedecked models take their places. The hyperreal results I witnessed would have given Baudrillard an aneurysm. When the lights went on, those deep sets seemed truly flat; painted shadows on costumes perfectly mimicked blocks of shade in oil. Live actors, frozen still, became statues. Poses were held for only a minute or two, while a narrator described the work being imitated; then the flattened set was dismantled and the next artwork patched together. The whole stunning sequence was set to a live orchestral score. This was a museum with intermission and buttered popcorn, its prep team black-clad stagehands.

“Where Art Comes to Life!” the Pageant website promises. “Why just look at art when you can *experience* it?” What distinguishes the act of looking at art from a true perceptual experience isn’t clear—though I doubt the fair organizers were consciously making phenomenological claims in their advertisement. The experience they sell is a spectacle for awed yet passive consumption. The program is what Baudrillard would call “a mark of cultural ethnocentrism”⁴—an

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art-historical drive-by from the safety of an air-conditioned safari Jeep.

The Pageant's theme, "The Pursuit of Happiness," washed each work with sunny, patriotic pep that made art history cozy and communitarian rather than dangerous and dysfunctional (as I believe it to be). The field felt foreign as I sat there listening to the cheerful story of Norman Rockwell. The syrupy sentimentality of Currier and Ives—an audience favorite—went down like an inedible concession stand sweet. No opinions were necessary but a profound admiration for traditional notions of beauty.

The narrator's soothing baritone lubricated our effortless glide from Mughal India to Rococo France, not unlike those pacifying headsets available at museums for a sizeable surcharge. Lulled by his omniscient tone, audience members' studious gazes glossed into vacant stares. Look away from the frozen corpses strewn before our first President's victorious steed in *Washington's March* (Thomas Ball, 1869); think not on the vicious proclivities of *Shiva, Lord of the Dance* (Anonymous, 950-1000). Cyrus Dallin's *Native American Scout* (1910) knew nothing of the Trail of Tears. In that amphitheater, art history was a pleasantry enjoyed by the rich, cleansed of politics and other nasty blemishes. It was a story of victors; losers don't sit for portraits.

This was Reagan country, and the show could've been mistaken for a late summer Fourth of July extravaganza. In Laguna Beach, recreations of 19th century pioneer paintings felt self-referential, celebrating a Manifest Destiny fulfilled on the Pacific shore. Boucher's *Madame de Pompadour* (1756), plopped awkwardly between Revolution-era American artworks, and was cast as a lush celebrant of aristocratic capitalism. The mercantilism of Louis XV seemed suddenly

close to the austere economics of Orange County, Le Petit Trianon a Neoclassical summer villa on the shores of Emerald Bay. The pursuit of happiness ended in projected fireworks at the show's pre-intermission peak, while an actor dressed as George Washington rode a live white steed before a plaster and bronze-painted flesh facsimile of the Jefferson Memorial.

What is a pageant but a striptease, a cakewalk, a Christmas play—a parade of beauty or patriotism or faith? Pageantry means values presented with panache, ideology displayed with celebratory flair. Its propagandistic spirit makes history into myth, the dialectic of civilization into a precession of simulacra.

Baudrillard believed our modern world to be a stream of copies without originals. America—and especially the West—was founded on this simulacral premise, a desire to resurrect the dead for the pleasure of the living. "One of the aspects of [Americans'] good faith," he wrote, "is their stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away. Renaissance castles, fossilized elephants, Indians on reservations, sequoias as holograms, etc."⁵ For him Disneyland was the consummate simulacrum, a fabricated world that refers only to the realm of fantasy. On his visit, Orange County's infamous theme park cast a shadow of fakery over the entire sunny region, one that gave me chills as I sat in my amphitheater seat that night.

As I watched history's classic artworks shamelessly reconstituted, I sympathized with the departed French curmudgeon. Larger than life, these *tableaux* were actually nothing like the art they aped, a fact made inscrutable by distance. My opera

1. Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London: Verso, 1989.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London: Verso, 1989.

5. Ibid.

glasses grew foggy with body heat as I clutched them close, trying to spot the cracks in the Pageant's narrative. I felt like a kid on a Disneyland ride looking for exit doors, safety valves, and track lighting; I yearned to dismantle the artifice. But everywhere I turned, it was there to face me off: nothing hid behind its mask but another mask, another layer of illusion.

All of a sudden, I wondered if maybe we were in a museum after all. The narrator could be reading wall labels. Our vantage point was framed by a proscenium not unlike a cordon. The lighting was precisely controlled to amplify a specific perceptual experience.

Both museum walls and theater stages are contextual frames within which work performs; even static objects are full of motion, engaged in a parallax with the bodies that perceive them. Perhaps the Pageant illustrates the way art really behaves before our senses, less a stable material to consume at will than a living force to contend with.

The Pageant tableaux are mimed performances more than faithful recreations, but they transmit images and concepts to viewers the same way paintings do—and ultimately that merits just as much study or casual enjoyment as any Manet. In the end I resisted Baudrillard's poststructuralist panic: though overwhelmed by the ideological spectacle my field of study had become, I was fearful of being too rooted in the discipline. The faces around me were alight with wonder; art most of them probably knew from dry textbooks felt suddenly dynamic and alive. Their excitement might be worth the whole simulacrum. If we were in Las Vegas or the Louvre, it didn't really matter. I decided to relax and enjoy the show.

1

Pageant of the Masters (2015) (backstage). Live recreation of Edward Percy Moran, *The Birth of Old Glory* (Betsy Ross Presenting Flag) (1917). Image courtesy of Pageant of the Masters.

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Pageant of the Masters (2015). Live recreation of Edward Percy Moran, *The Birth of Old Glory* (Betsy Ross Presenting Flag) (1917). Image courtesy of Pageant of the Masters.