

# The Mess We're In

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Steve Mnuchin already owned IndyMac and was swiftly becoming “Foreclosure King” when he joined MOCA’s board in December 2009—*ProPublica* pinned 39 percent of national foreclosures between 2009 and 2015 on his company, OneWest.<sup>1</sup> His gallerist dad was about to open L&M Arts in Los Angeles, which debuted with an animatronic Paul McCarthy sculpture of George Bush fucking pigs, and no one protested Foreclosure King’s appointment to the museum board. Then, seven years later, when Donald Trump nominated him for Secretary of Treasury, his orientation to power and politics suddenly became a problem. Petitions circulated amongst art-worlders: “kick Trump’s minion off your board.”<sup>2</sup> Mnuchin resigned from MOCA in December 2016, to focus “full-time efforts” on the treasury, he said.<sup>3</sup> Robert Mnuchin, his dad, told the *Wall Street Journal* he’d “do a good job.”<sup>4</sup>

Trump came to town on March 13, 2018, the day MOCA parted ways with its outspokenly feminist and first female chief curator, Helen Molesworth. “This is the first time I’ve seen traffic the color of shit,” said writer Carol Cheh on Facebook, posting a color-coded traffic map. “Also, Molesworth and [Secretary of State Rex] Tillerson got fired today.”<sup>5</sup>

“I can’t believe Trump fired Helen Molesworth,” tweeted @dookie\_williams, joking.<sup>6</sup> We’re often not joking, though: “in-your-face pro-sex feminism” is risky in the “Age of Trump” and “may not be entirely profitable,” wrote Linda Yablonsky in *Artforum’s* Diary,<sup>7</sup> as if those truths emerged post-election day. We now use “in the age of Trump” liberally in art writing,

sometimes forgetting how much art world shadiness predated the reality TV star in the oval. For example, trouble at MOCA first brewed back in 1980, when billionaire Eli Broad took the board’s reins. It began boiling over dramatically and repeatedly a decade ago. The museum’s current tangle—the cancellation of a gala, resignation of a respected board member, and poorly explained firing of a curator on whom we staked too much hope—just further evidences a systemic mess. Rooted in self-interest and power grabs, the mess has many palpable symptoms, but each time we hurl our outrage at them we sidestep the illness.

Novelist Maria Hummel set her new murder mystery, *Still Lives*, in an L.A. museum that’s a cross between MOCA and the Marciano Foundation (named after a collector, dependent on a board, wracked by controversy). The action plays out in the recent past, though the way things are going, MOCA-meets-Marciano could be the future, and few prospects better indicate systemic messiness than a public museum blurring into a private one. *Still Lives* is a trashy novel in which bodies get shoved into art shipping crates, the murderer makes declarations like “you have no idea how much it’s costing the [museum] just to own things,”<sup>8</sup> and registrars and development staff unwind together at spinning class. The book leaves out everything that makes art interesting, which is probably why hate-reading it as an art world allegory kind of works.

*Still Lives* begins with a gala at the Rocque (pronounced “rock”) Museum honoring hot L.A. artist Kim Lord, a flattened-out cross between Cindy Sherman and Kaari Upson. The museum’s director, Bas, pushed through Lord’s solo show of paintings of herself posing as murdered women, and chief curator Lynne wears her disinterest on her sleeve. “I thought she was highly over-rated,” Lynne says at one point, in private.<sup>9</sup>

Helen Molesworth opted not to visit the studio of Mark Grotjahn, the MOCA board’s chosen honoree for

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1. Paul Kiel and Jesse Eisinger, “Trump’s Treasury Pick Excelled at Kicking Elderly People Out of Their Homes,” *ProPublica*, Dec. 17, 2016, <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-treasury-pick-excelled-at-kicking-elderly-out-of-their-homes>.

the 2018 gala and the subject of a 2020 retrospective at the museum, sending a junior curator in her stead.<sup>10</sup> The retrospective wasn't her idea and Molesworth rarely shows interest in male market darlings, though multiple board members collect Grotjahn's repetitive abstractions. A few weeks before the curator's ouster, Grotjahn turned down the gala honor, saying in a note to board chair Maurice Marciano, "There is a new urgency to change the power dynamic and we have an opportunity to do so."<sup>11</sup> It was a smart move, post #MeToo—choosing not to be the white man in the spotlight—but the board seems to only know how to honor white men (Jeff Koons in 2017, Ed Ruscha in 2016, John Baldessari in 2015).

Kim Lord never arrives at the gala at the fictional Rocque. No one knows yet that she is herself a victim, but her work's murder theme carries over to the gala's décor: "Bare lights resembling those in interrogation rooms hang from poles," writes Hummel. "Even the appetizers have a corpse-like color scheme: [. . .] some smeary fig-paste chèvre concoction that resembles an infected wound."<sup>12</sup>

Such macabre details recall an actual MOCA gala from 2011, art dealer Jeffrey Deitch's second year as MOCA's contested director. (After board members hired him, a YouTuber posted a video of Hitler reacting to the news: "That little Warhol wannabe? Are you kidding me?"<sup>13</sup>) Marina Abramovic masterminded the event, enlisting young artists to pose as centerpieces, select women nude on lazy susans with skeletons draped over their bodies and other performers perched beneath tables on rotating seats, their heads emerging through holes. Artist Blaine O'Neill told me five years ago that he performed as a head at a table for Eli Broad, Mayor Antonio Villarogosa, and other collectors. "The only person who gave me more than five minutes [of eye-contact] was the mayor," he recalled.<sup>14</sup> MOCA warned performers that guests might poke or touch them and paid each \$150. LACE

held a post-gala panel, interrogating the event's ethics, and Deitch slipped in near the end. "Why no naked men?" someone asked him. "That was my request to Marina Abramovic," Deitch answered—businessmen find male nudity uncomfortable.<sup>15</sup> Sexist, indeed, but we acted as if, had Abramovic and Deitch not collaborated like this, "businessmen" would take interest in more than lady parts.

The April after the Abramovic gala, MOCA partnered with Mercedes Benz, which funded a month-long exhibition, *Transmission LA*, curated by Beastie Boy Mike D.: a big metal Benz logo hung outside the Geffen Contemporary, a new CLS 4-door coupe debuted in the galleries, accompanied by Cory Arcangel video installation and a room full of pinwheels designed by Jim Drain and Ara Peterson. *Transmission LA* "expands—and complicates—the comfortable moral outrage against Deitch and MOCA," wrote Greg Allen at the time, "because the forces and assumptions that gave rise to it—art as [. . .] consumption experience, luxury good and corporate branding project—are already operating across vast swaths of the contemporary art and museum world."<sup>16</sup> Deitch's commercialism hung out too blatantly for us, but he was mostly on trend.

In *Still Lives*, the museum's board chair and main funder hires a detective before the artist Kim Lord even goes missing. She can't buy Lord's work—someone else keeps getting to it first—and wants the detective, Hendricks, to find out why. It's merely coincidence that Hendricks also helps solve the artist's murder; Lord's market was his mandate.

Deitch and Eli Broad fired chief curator Paul Schimmel in late 2012, all the artists resigned from MOCA's board and pundits fleetingly complained market had triumphed over meaning. But then Broad, already building his own museum across the street, pulled his financial support, LACMA and USC both offered to merge with the financially failing

MOCA,<sup>17</sup> and Deitch resigned in summer 2013. “Now that [Deitch] has fast-forwarded himself right out,” wrote critic Jed Perl, “the time has come to revisit the insidious assumptions that put him there in the first place.”<sup>18</sup> After a stint of treating museums like box offices, maybe MOCA could return to serious programming. The board hired former DIA director Philippe Vergne in January 2014, and artists—John Baldessari, Barbara Kruger, Catherine Opie—resumed their former roles on the board. In late 2014, Vergne hired Molesworth, who posed questions in her writing like, “what forms of history can feminism offer in [. . .] the museum?”<sup>19</sup> and reinstated the permanent collection to give women more space, juxtaposing Lee Lozano with Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Smithson with Valie Export.

Optimism that Vergne and Molesworth could right the ship persisted for a while, even as former board chair Broad opened his museum across the street and new board co-chair Maurice Marciano finished up his own museum, now open on Wilshire. The programming split, progressive exhibitions running alongside blockbuster shows (by men). Doug Aitken followed Matthew Barney in the cavernous Geffen, while Molesworth collaborated with artist-founded Underground Museum and curated Kerry James Marshall and Anna Maria Maiolino exhibitions. When Vergne brought to MOCA the Carl Andre show he organized at DIA, Molesworth invited a roundtable of women to discuss Andre, who was ambiguously acquitted of artist Ana Mendieta’s murder. Molesworth argued “it was not the right moment for such a show,” reported Julia Halperin in her *artnet News* postmortem on the curator’s firing. She also, apparently, refused to stroke egos. One anonymous donor said he “felt naked” when she came to see his collection. “She didn’t even pretend to like it,” he told Halperin.<sup>20</sup>

Back in the fictional realm, Kim Lord donates her whole *Still*

*Lives* series (her posing as Nicole Brown Simpson, the Black Dahlia, etc.), to the Rocque, citing the museum’s historic “support of women artists.” She mostly does it to keep the male collector who has dominated her market from dominating again, and it’s unclear how well, exactly, the Rocque does support women, since most other artists mentioned are male. One man comes up often: Jason Raines, who sounds a lot like real-life Jason Rhodes, once installed an electric chair in the galleries. “You can’t just kill people in your chair,” he said, after deciding the installation would be participatory. “That part is pretend anyway. You need to make them part of the system that kills. That’s real.”<sup>21</sup>

In the days following Molesworth’s firing, whispers about her difficulty surfaced. *Frieze* published an article based only on anonymous sources, one of whom said Molesworth disrespected her colleagues “and made their daily work lives miserable.”<sup>22</sup> Even if they’re likely part or mostly true, such accounts contrast the praise showered on openly difficult Paul Schimmel after he lost the same job, or the praise showered on, say, Walter Hopps—an oft-fired drug addict who demanded the impossible of colleagues. It’s also hard to imagine anyone working her way up the ladder in the museum world, while criticizing the museum world, and not being difficult.

Before Kim Lord’s body turns up, buried in the Angeles National Forest, the Rocque board considers voting out their director, Bas. After her death, attention turns to ownership. Bas, the board chair, and Lord’s gallerist meet to determine who owns her final series; the super-collector hoarding her work agrees to donate many paintings to the Rocque, on the condition that his name—not Lord’s—appears above the gallery’s entrance. *Still Lives*, an annoyingly familiar soap opera, paints L.A. as a city defined by private museums, driven by deals like this. The novel’s narrator escapes it all by moving back to Vermont (“There

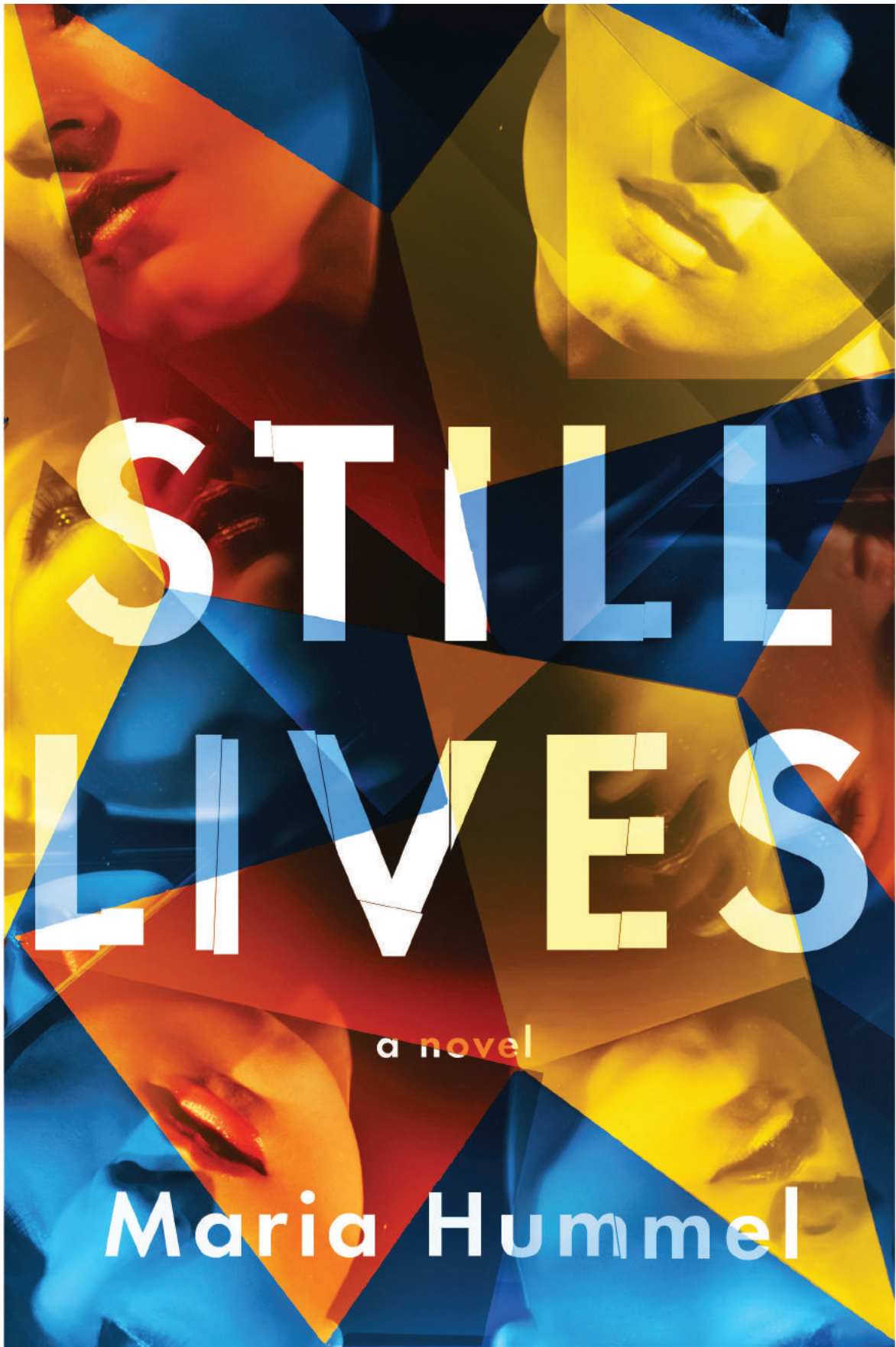
2. “LA MOCA take Trump’s minion off your board!”, Ipetitions, <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/la-moca-take-trumps-minion-of-your-board>.

3. Yvonne Villarreal, “Steve Mnuchin, Trump’s Pick for Treasury, Resigns as MOCA Board member,” *LA Times*, Dec. 3, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/museums/la-et-cm-mnuchin-resigns-moca-20161203-story.html>

are some new graduate programs at the university,” her mom tells her<sup>23</sup>), then musing about the city where “monstrous appetites” devour hopes and dreams. She treats the power structures as inevitable, the countryside her solace. But we’ve yet to really try directing collective outrage exclusively, consistently at those appetites (not at programs, directors, curators), calling for the resignation not just of the Mnuchins but all the players who put their names first. If we did, success or not, we’d be shaping a truer story about the mess we’re in.

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4. Anupreeta Das and Rachel Louise Ensign, “Treasury Pick Steven Mnuchin Bet on Donald Trump and Won,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 29, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-plans-to-name-steven-mnuchin-as-treasury-secretary-1480459950>.
5. Carol Cheh, March 13, 2018, Facebook post.
6. @dookie\_williams, 3:32 pm, March 13, 2018, tweet.
7. Linda Yablonsky, “Deep Frieze,” *Artforum Diary*, Oct. 9, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/diary/linda-yablonsky-at-the-15th-frieze-art-fair-71526>.
8. Maria Hummel, *Still Lives* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2018), 131.
9. *Ibid.*, 133.
10. See, among others, Julia Halperin, “Clashing Visions, Simmering Tensions: How a Confluence of Forces Led to MOCA’s Firing of Helen Molesworth,” *artnet/News*, March 16, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/moca-helen-molesworth-tension-1246358>.
11. Deborah Vankin, “Mark Grotjahn declines a MOCA honor, and an art gala turns into a deeper discussion about inclusivity,” *LA Times*, Feb. 2, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-mark-grotjahn-moca-gala-20180129-htmlstory.html>.
12. Hummel, 18.
13. 334point5, “Hitler Learns MOCA Job Goes to Jeffrey Deitch,” Youtube video, 3 min., 45 sec., posted Feb. 8, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9r-SRyO3d4>.
14. Catherine Wagley, “Marina Abramovic’s MOCA Gala Controversy: Jeffrey Deitch Confronted and the Performers Speak Out,” *LA Weekly*, Dec. 19, 2011.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Greg Allen, “Concept by Mercedes,” *Greg.org*, Aug. 6, 2012, <https://greg.org/archive/2012/08/06/concept-by-mercedes.html>.
17. See THR Staff, “LACMA Proposes Merger with Museum of Contemporary Art,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 7, 2013.
18. Jed Perl, “The Departure of LA MOCA Director Jeffrey Deitch: How the Box Office Took Over the Modern Art Museum,” *The New Republic*, July 26, 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/114049/jeffrey-deitch-leaves-moca>.
19. Helen Molesworth, “How to Install Art as a Feminist,” in *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).
20. Halperin, “Clashing Visions.”
21. Hummel, 114.
22. Frieze Staff, “Ex-Employees of Fired LA MoCA Chief Curator Helen Molesworth Claim Poor Leadership,” *Frieze*, March 14, 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/ex-employees-fired-la-moca-chief-curator-helen-molesworth-claim-poor-leadership>.
23. Hummel, 266.
24. *Ibid.*, 273.



*Still Lives: A Novel* by Maria Hummel,  
published by Counterpoint Press, June 2018.



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*An Artist Life Manifesto*,  
directed by Marina Abramovic for MOCA  
Gala (2011). Photo: Frazer Harrison.