galleries west

The Last Great Art Show
What kind of art still resonates, when the world is ending?

Future art history will record that the last great art exhibition took place deep in a forest in 2027.

At the end of a long path, two mechanical automatons will appear. Kara Walker's Fortuna, a Black prophetess in a gothic-Victorian dress, and Shary Boyle's White Elephant — a white woman in Ralph Lauren, possessed by the spirit of anorexia, with a spinning exorcist-like head.

In a silver mist we'll behold these ancient-future hybrids made with cutting edge technology and the dust of the earth. We'll behold their two essences between the trees. Porcelain. Obsidian. One will heal the world. The other, like the Narnian Queen, will freeze it. We'll look from one to the other. Will our flesh turn warm? Or cold? The moon shines through a spider's web.

Fortuna lurches forward and spits something from her mouth. A typed sentence flutters to our feet. "Beautiful souls seeking absolute freedom will find only abjection."
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In reality, Walker and Boyle's robots have appeared separately, as part of larger solo shows. Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine) can be seen at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until 2026. White Elephant, part of the show Outside the Palace of Me, toured extensively in both Canadian and American galleries. I'm convinced the two creatures should meet.

Kara Walker, “Fortuna and the Immortality Garden (Machine),” 2024, installation view, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, (photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co. and SprüthMagers)

I invent last art shows because it feels like a fitting mental exercise when everything feels so dire, yet so blasé. The empires have fallen. We no longer believe, easily anyway, in the powers of humanism or art or activism, in religion or politics or democracy. Simple, unwavering faith in any one of these things seems delusional.

“The art world is over!” I shout into my imaginary megaphone. “That’s all folks. It’s over!”

At least the part that’s tied to academia, to major institutions. It’s done. Collapsed. Not its bricks or its mortar, not its commanders with prestige and power. There are no crushed bodies, no literal rubble. But some élan vital, some shimmer that hung around the edges, is gone. I have no proof of this. It’s just a feeling, a symptom perhaps, of how we live now: in post-failure. I invent last shows as a way to ask — what kind of art still matters?

Last summer I was lucky enough to encounter some other creatures. Not in the imaginary trees, but in The Museum of Fear and Wonder. Housed in a former army barracks in southern Alberta, it displays the personal collection of Jude and Brendan Griebel, who don't collect capital A art but crafted bodies: ventriloquist and obstetrics dolls, crash test dummies, surgery-practice and mortician cosmetology manikins, carnival knock-down characters, the mechanical figures of roadside attractions and religious theme parks.

It's an astounding collection that allows the Griebel brothers to research antiquated craft techniques, as well as the changing ideas around representation of bodies. They have a 1960s CPR doll for example, Anatomical Annie, whose face was cast from the death-mask of a girl who drowned in the 1880s. It's fascinating to compare Annie, and the emotional connection she likely compelled in her 'rescuers,' to the faceless, genderless, raceless CPR manikins of today. The manikin I learned on recently was silver. I pushed my breath into a featureless alien. Alas, I couldn't save it.

Shary Boyle, "White Elephant," steel, foam, porcelain, knitwear, fabric, 9" tall (photo courtesy of Mackenzie Art Gallery)

But the museum is a kind of spiritual orphanage too. All the objects (and their makers), so terribly unimportant in terms of canon or acclaim, have been found and given a home. Crossing the threshold was like discovering a hoi polloi of vagabonds and delinquents. I met a defeated Goliath, several long-nosed Pinocchios, a Humpty Dumpty with eyes startled wide in the millisecond before his great fall. The personalities felt decidedly gathered, not, like the disparate identities in our current art milieu — cancelled, scorned, bullied apart.

There were cabinets of brains, wombs, fetuses with delicately painted veins. And cabinets of wax heads too — variously bald and hairy. Several religious ones wore expressions of ecstasy. These, so far removed from their original bible-story dioramas, looked especially freakish. I followed the direction of their gaze, but nothing was there. I felt a kinship with them. That's not far off, I thought, from what it feels like to be religious now. Out of time, out of place.

Wax head of a neanderthal, created for a British Museum display (provenance not confirmed), c. 1950 (photo courtesy of the Museum of Fear and Wonder)

Humpty-Dumpty Ventriloquist figure created by Oscar Oswald for the Supreme Magic Company of Bideford, Devon, England, c.1965 (photo courtesy of the Museum of Fear and Wonder)

In Anna Kornbluh's book Immediacy or the Style of Too Late Capitalism, she characterizes the 2020s as having a hunger for nowness. This hunger is fed with what she calls a "slurry" of omni-sensory, rapid-uptake content. I won't spend time detailing this here. We're all online, and many of us have been struck dumb — not in the good way — by Immersive Van Gogh. We know of what Kornbluh speaks. We grow thin on this slurry. I'm thinking again of the anorexic soul of White Elephant. Part of the process of starving to death is losing your appetite.

But the Museum of Fear and Wonder has no nowness. The objects "were." As I met each crafted body and heard its story, the sense of human suffering and resiliency compounded. These bodies were created to be knocked down and beaten up, to be surgically experimented on, to serve our theatrical personas, to entertain. They had worn out leather torsos, degraded foam and rubber lungs, frayed limbs, heads of dented tin, chipped lacquer

faces, gouged wax, scarred wood, cracked plaster. They had blitzed-out circuitry and mouth-holes stained by decades of breathing. They wore the patinas of abuse and the textures of repair — re-stitching, re-patching. These wonderful Frankensteins, these long-suffering sacrificial surrogates, could now, finally, rest.

My soul, on the long drive home, was quiet. It felt a little worse for wear, too. At the same time, I was oddly elated. This art mattered. Maybe, in post-failure, these canon-rejects will come back to life, will inherit the earth? Maybe we'll believe in fairytales again?

Many of us want to believe in ghosts or shapeshifters or God or gods or "the transcendent," even though we can't. Charles Taylor, in his book The Secular Age, writes that while the western world is disenchanted for "us moderns," we nonetheless experience a sense of loss or existential malaise in the wake of this. Though we're too enlightened now, he says, to actually believe, we are "cross-pressured" by a residual need for enchantment. Capitalism's cycles of desire and fulfillment can feel endless and empty. And all the ways we construct our own personal frames of meaning can fail to contain the mounting, swelling absence we feel, of anything beyond them.

A perfect illustration of Taylor is something the painter Kim Dorland said on Instagram recently: "I don't believe in ghosts but I believe in the people who believe in ghosts." This, I thought, was disappointingly noncommittal for an artist whose paintings are so deeply, beautifully, haunted. I don't blame him. But apparently my own cross-pressured psyche needs Dorland's visions to be autobiographies rather than fictions.

I can't be sure if it's just the bias of my own algorithms or some truer trend, but so much art on Instagram does seem to be about the supernatural or the metaphysical these days. I see so much otherworldly whimsy, or, conversely, art that describes what transcendental beauty can be milked from the mundane. I so appreciate this kind of art. It feels so not part of the slurry. Hazy shadows and 'what light, from yonder, breaks' emanate from the work of Vivien McDermid. And oh, do the paintings of Claudia Keep ever impress upon me the profound worth of casual, humble things: bedsheets, lampshades, moths pressing up against backdoor screens.

This art reminds me that the world is still so beautiful. Every night the sky darkens. Every morning it lightens. Snow still falls. The birds go on singing. In fact, the ruined empires in

post-failure look remarkably similar to the pre-failure ones. We put one foot in front of the other. We shop. We wait for the bus. We vote.
But the sky is weighted with strange, burning atmospheres, now. Of course, there have been wildfires, plagues, fascists, and wars before. Every century's philosophers and poets diagnose their age as being 'the end.' Violence and suffering are part of history's repeating cycles. But it is the lateness of the hour that is the added factor in this freshest go-around. The world is heavy with the traumas of previous generations. Like the bodies in the Museum of Fear and Wonder, it has bruises on its bruises.

But also, there's the factor of the Internet. Owing to the gross amounts of information we absorb — information we can't necessarily trust — our minds are sludgy stews of ennui. Sometimes, stray facts bubble to the surface. In the desert of Chile, a man-made mountain has grown. The pile of discarded clothes is visible from space. Radio astronomers have discovered the darkest galaxy ever not quite seen. Its our mirror galaxy, they say, but void of constellations. I don't even have a way to absorb the significance of this. Terrifyingly beautiful facts about our mad, mad world just sit on the shelf and shine at me, like strange trophies.

"It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism," wrote Mark Fisher in his 2008 book Capitalist Realism. He also compared our present political and social dystopia to the one in the movie Children of Men. Action, he said, is pointless in such a world. "Only senseless hope makes sense." Superstition and religion, he added, the first resorts of the helpless, will proliferate.

Personally, I have no trouble admitting how helpless I am. I have no trouble admitting my need for an opiate, either. Another doozy: Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics." Amen, Mr. Fisher.

I've been accused of worshipping ruins. I'm more at home in ghost towns than boom towns. I'm more comfortable in back alleys than posh streets. I prefer the shattered perspectives of Cubism, The Waste Land's "heap of broken images," to anything whole. Ruins are a more honest reflection of post-failure, of who we are.

Comparatively, the palaces of the art world feel inert, with their rooms of money, slick veneers, and signs that rarely point past themselves. Members of the art world are like an

intellectual version of wrestling fans, upholding a snootier kayfabe. Alix Rule and David Levine's 2012 essay International Art English was a nail on the coffin of artspeak, and still the kayfabers continue to pry it open. Strangely, when claiming to amplify the voices of the marginalized, they use classist, elitist language! Whenever I attempt to read exhibition texts written for rarified groups who already agree on a pre-determined set of ideologies, I smell zombies.

Joshua Hagler, "Nihil," detail, installation view, 2020, New Mexico (photo by the artist)

But there are some artists who have managed to begin again — through ruin, through a kind of death, through failure. Joshua Hagler (who recently changed his name to Æmen Ededéen) is one. In May 2020, he began installing his paintings and sculptural works in abandoned buildings found in unpopulated regions of rural New Mexico: schools, churches,

post offices. He called the project Nihil, a word that for him means “having nothing left to say.” Eventually, he found that all the abandoned sites began to seem like a single place. “There is the feeling,” he wrote on his website, “that this architecture, with its many rooms and hidden treasures, resembles the unconscious self.”

His abstract paintings look like wounded, healing skins. Patches of colour have scab-like edges or look like new growth. When hung on walls with peeling, time-blistered paint — many of which are also layered with graffiti — their textures coalesce. The art and the ruin become one miraculously necrotic yet living thing. One blurred spray-painted sentence on a church wall reads “blessed be the old gods.” Another message, in an obviously amateur hand, simply reads “Jesus.” I’ve only seen Hagler’s installations on my laptop screen. But I know if I was there in person, I’d weep. In the current state of the world, it feels like Fortuna and White Elephant, if they met, would destroy each other. But in Hagler’s work, somehow, I can feel damaged tissue repairing.

A few weeks ago, Harper’s Magazine published a contentious essay entitled The Painted Protest, in which writer Dean Kissick took aim at the art world’s entrenched identity politics. We’ve become so bombarded with these marginalized identities, he wrote, that they’ve become “a hollowed-out trope.” He’s right. But the art world’s insistence on diversity was an appropriate reaction to inequality.

And, its turn back to precolonial forms of knowledge is an appropriate ongoing reaction to the direness of now.

When it feels like we’re already living in a coldly secular, late-capitalist technocratic future, one where we have forgotten key parts of our human selves, a swing backward — to ancient fires — is necessary. Some of us need a little magic. Some of us are experiencing a crisis of meaning, and are looking to art that reaches for the ‘something else.’ Is not the looking back I take issue with, but the use of one theoretical, intersectional lens to do so. Its strict morality and rules of engangement have sucked all the air out of the room.

Perhaps it is time for its golden dictum — inclusivity — to extend past its own mono-lens? Perhaps it’s time to reach beyond narratives of self to that inkling of transcendence beyond the frame? The art world has always appropriated spirituality from non-Western cultures, either turning it into mere aesthetic (Picasso’s riffs on African ceremonial masks, for example), or, deadening its potencies with obfuscating artspeak. Its not lost on me that the

art I'm drawn to breathes freely in rural Alberta, in rural New Mexico — and is not imprisoned by stultifying text. Is there not a place, within 'the discourse,' for some sense of real awe and wonder?

Joshua Hagler, "Nihil," detail, installation view, 2020, New Mexico (photo by the artist)

If not, no matter. Wonder will thrive everywhere else. When I knelt at Fortuna's feet, she told me this. Beautiful souls seeking absolute freedom will find only abjection.This was writer Marie Cardinal's line before it fell, in my imagination, from the prophet's lips. Philosophically, abjection is what disturbs us. It's what we feel when we encounter a corpse, an open wound, a pair of degraded rubber lungs. Our own bodies ripple reflexively with the sense of our own mortality, with how fragile civilization is. There is suddenly no distinction between ruin, and our own skin. This disturbing blur is magical. It can encourage reckoning.

“We are walking through the dark forest,” wrote mythographer Marina Warner in her book Fairy Tale, “trying to spot the breadcrumbs to follow the path. But the birds have eaten them, and we are on our own. Now is the time when we must become trackers and readers of signs.”

My own prediction: Wonder will grip the world with more strength than a virus or a plague ever could. It will gnaw at the mind like a hunger does. It will eat away at the seat of the intellect like acid on metal. It will feel, at first, ridiculous and irrational.

It won’t only be stray facts that bubble up through all this relentless nowness. Whether or not the art world has anything to do with it, we’ll be able to hear the clear, bright notes of a long-forgotten song.

—SARAH SWAN