

Cultural Daily

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LACMA Loses Vision In 3D

James L. Chapman · Thursday, August 16th, 2018

LACMA knows better, and this won't be the last time you'll read that statement. The museum stands as perhaps the most luminous cultural gem in Los Angeles, which is why— if you'll allow us the luxury of candor— their latest special exhibition, *3D: Double Vision* arrives with such puzzling disappointment. Before launching a literary assault on one of the most preeminent art museums in the world, let's establish that LACMA — the Los Angeles County Museum of Art — boasts a stunning permanent collection, curates some profoundly relevant special exhibitions each year, and provides crucial, educational services and cultural amenities to the Los Angeles community. There's possibly no other place in the city where you can learn so much in a single afternoon, which is why this exhibition's fiascos are so perplexing. Fair warning, this critique may seem proverbially “hard in the paint” — pun totally intended — but LACMA deserves it when they have failed at something they typically do so well. Explicitly stated, *3D: Double Vision's* greatest tragedy is not for lack of great art, but rather the fact that the exhibition is a curatorial nightmare. A gallery can hang the most rudimentary pieces on its walls, but if the space is curated well you'll exit the exhibition still thinking and talking about it. Good curation means the conversation crafted between you and the artwork presented is so simultaneously immense, direct, and conducive that it simply cannot end upon your exit. Sadly, in the case of *3D: Double Vision*, all you'll leave (or run from) the gallery with is a headache.

Imagine yourself on a summer afternoon in Los Angeles. The midday sun is high in the sky and the air lingers at an oppressively dry 90 degrees. Your apartment building doesn't have a pool and MoviePass just changed their rules (again) so you decide to seek refuge in the glorious air conditioning of an art museum. Brilliant. There's just one problem; everybody else had the same idea — and they've each brought their family of 5, who for some reason, require approximately 7 strollers. For this exercise, we'll spare ourselves the added anxiety of thinking about the hordes of tourists joining in on the madness thanks to their Phaidon city guides. This is your first mission checkpoint as you attempt to view the beast that is *3D: Double Vision...* for one does not simply enter this exhibit. No, instead you wait in line while a single LACMA volunteer hands out flimsy cardboard, 3D glasses at the exhibition's entryway. Sure, the doorway is large enough to accommodate a small yacht, but this systematic meet-and-greet causes an unnecessary bottleneck effect for the herd. Finally it's your turn and the exhausted volunteer hands you your glasses and mumbles a few directions that they've now recited about 4,001 times. Grand. You decide to relish in this person-to-person contact (how quaint!) and begin to brace yourself with excitement for the 3-dimensional world of wonders that surely await you in the gallery. Sigh. In retrospect, this process will seem even more annoying later when you realize there are other glasses you'll need which are found throughout the exhibit in plastic buckets on the walls, thus causing you to think

the volunteer at the front must just be some poor victim of LACMA staff hazing.

Finally some good news: the museum is courteous enough to post directions at the entrance, which indicate the fact that next to each installation is an icon on the wall representing which 3D glasses you're supposed to use to view that particular piece... BUT SOME pieces won't require any glasses at all which will be indicated by NO ICON. Remember this. Remember this for your own personal entertainment later on as you witness dad after dad scratching their chins in front of installations— already 3-dimensional to the naked eye — donning crooked, cardboard glasses, entirely stupefied as to why nothing is happening. Perhaps if they were not shepherding a caravan of baby carriages, they too would have noticed the “no-icon-means-no-glasses” memo. For the record, baby-movers are an absolutely delightful necessity to families everywhere and the glasses debacle is totally the fault of the museum and their bad advertising. Simply put, in an exhibition that sometimes requires special viewing methods indicated by an icon on the wall, those pieces that require no extra effort should be given an icon of their own to clarify this. The fact that they don't have one is just laziness on the part of LACMA. We must remember the subject matter here is “art,” so if someone doesn't immediately grasp the concept of the piece in front of them their immediate inclination under these circumstances will be that they must be viewing the work incorrectly... And so on will go those ridiculous glasses— the great enemy of LA County's most frazzled, young fathers. While this is a minor annoyance, it's an injustice to the presentation of the artwork and causes unnecessary gridlock... But at least what this exhibition lacks in coherence it makes up for in people watching.

At this point, you've barely set foot in the actual exhibition space and already so much has gone wrong, but — ahhh, finally — the museum's air conditioning welcomes you inside. You're now sweating, you've been waiting in line, and you're clearly not the least bit annoyed, so — please — feel free to take a seat on the singular bench that graces the most heavily trafficked room in the museum. Surely you won't be competing with any other disgruntled museum-goers for this real estate. This coveted throne also happens to be situated in front of the projected Computer-generated 3D animation by A. Michael Noil. It would theoretically be such a lovely endeavor to sit in front of this black and white, looping animation and absorb the fact that it was created in 1965 — to fully embrace its archaic glory and recognize how far CGI has come — but you won't. You won't because this piece, along with all the other projected images in this portion of the gallery, is indiscriminately subdued by bright, overhead lighting as if it were any ordinary canvas. In an utter disservice to the work, you'll barely be able to watch how these elegantly minimal, twin hexagons somersault along their Z-axis within a black abyss because they're relegated to mere shadows thanks to the lamps above. Spoiler alert: projected imagery requires strategic lighting to display the picture in full effect. This is basic knowledge to anyone who has ever sat in a movie theater. LACMA of course knows this, or should I say, LACMA knows better.



Computer-generated 3D animation by A. Michael Noil (LACMA)

Here we'll break momentarily from observing this logistical mess and contemplate the show's greater meaning. The theme of the exhibition is obvious: “Hey, here's a bunch of 3D art and technology.” Obvious is not bad. On the contrary, an obvious curatorial point of view makes the artwork much more accessible to the general public. LACMA deserves applause for this and for doing this so effectively so often. You can learn a lot about artistic styles and time periods (the “isms”) by simply gliding through LACMA's cavernous halls and noting which artists hang in unison. Considering that many visitors to *Double Vision* will enter the space without art

backgrounds or as part of a collectors' circle means there is an inherent responsibility on behalf of LACMA to curate the artwork in an acute context. Most importantly, when the museum charges non-members an admission fee (\$20 per adult + parking) they are effectively entering into a contract with the patron for educational or experiential services. This is not a revolutionary premise in this arena as indicated by the fact that even the most abstract art hangs in any given art museum with specific purpose. For the record, the cost of LACMA admission or membership is totally worth it — generally speaking. Where *Double Vision* falls so fundamentally short of LACMA's characteristic value, however, is the collective theory's lack of declaration. This is evident in a sign near the exit that proclaims the exhibition you just paid to see is designed to expose simply that each generation utilizes "3D" to fit their own particular needs. Right. At this radical impasse in human history, when augmented reality fits in our pockets and virtual reality goggles are poised to become the universities of the future, to charge the public to view an exhibition about 3D technologies and completely neglect to address how this mix of machinery and software has altered societal advancement is audacious. In fact, it seems more defective in concept than those flimsy, 3D glasses ever could be in practice. Most importantly, the exhibition remains devoid of any commentary as to where we are going as a culture and species whose evolution is now bound to such technologies. *Double Vision's* flame goes out quietly when it doesn't have to. The exhibition could have been saved by a closing remark— an exclamation point — if only there was a final installation that spoke to how tomorrow may look in 3D, and this feels like a majorly missed opportunity when futurism has become such a talking point so embedded in contemporary, public awareness. A lesser quantity of pieces throughout the exhibition in exchange for a larger installation à la Rachel Rossin's virtual escapism or Alexa Meade's breathing portraits would have sufficed. In this regard, *Double Vision* lacks surprise and spontaneity. Everything you see is everything you'd expect... in primitive 3D of course. The museum's own words on the exit signage then serve as a resounding admission of guilt that this exhibition's concept is altogether quite without concept.

With *3D: Double Vision*, LACMA does a disservice to the public, the artwork, and most of all itself as a competitor in a rapidly changing landscape of artistic priority and mass appeal. While this exhibition may have seemed cutting edge 10 years ago, today it showcases in danger of dismaying and/or confusing visitors prone to fall in love with the Infinity Room's and Happy Place's of the "must-see," limited run milieu. And this is sad. If LACMA spends copious donor funding and corporate sponsorship dollars (in this case Hyundai) on lackluster demonstrations of art and technology, they will not only fail to compete with trendy, pop-up installations, but they will run the risk of disenfranchising a novice public who would rather spend their money on attractions with greater social media equity. Until LACMA understands that they must allow visitors to record video footage inside of special exhibitions like *3D: Double Vision* (which they absurdly do not) they will do more detrimental harm to themselves than an Instagram story ever could. This also negates the mission of a public art museum by reinforcing high art's specter as an unapproachable clique, with rules and constraints, which hint towards inaccessibility for some socioeconomic classes— a premise that must be (and will inevitably be) defeated as ever-burgeoning digital avenues create immediate means of consumption, transcendent of subcultures and their glass walls of exclusivity. Encouraging visitors to share their experience should also come as even more of a requisite for LACMA in an era when artist survival is categorically linked to social media renown. Ironically, the exhibition's closing statement again captures this essence perfectly: the way the public consumes art is ever-changing, and so long as LACMA charges admission fees, they must agree to change with it.

Returning our attention to the doomed curatorial design makes one wonder if any staff members

actually attempted to walk through this exhibit before the doors were opened to the public. The floor plan creates so much congestion it should be sprayed down with Zyrtec. Some installations are lenticular and require you to move from side to side to view them in full effect, some require special glasses as previously mentioned, and some are presented via a limited number of viewfinders you'll have to wait to use. All of this is contained in an archetypal gallery setting where the pieces are arranged along four walls. This setup ensures more wait times, excessive shoulder bumping, and frustrated visitors swarming around the most eye-catching pieces. Rarely will you be afforded the luxury of standing in front of a single piece alone. This is epically infuriating when the solution is so obvious, though it may make some aficionados cringe. An exhibition of this nature and subject matter would be so better served by copying the blueprint of... Duh, an Apple store. Occupying the central, negative space within the gallery with tables to hold the interactive and smaller scale pieces could have created better pedestrian routes and alleviated the traffic jams along the walls of the space. Misfortunate right up until the very end, two of show's best pieces, the great Ed Ruscha's *The End* — an eerie holographic departure from the artist's canon— and Peggy Weil's magical *3D Wallpaper* are presented as afterthoughts, tucked away in hallways that you just might miss if your claustrophobia forces you to duck out too early.

The collective brain and heart of Los Angeles is so lucky to have LACMA as an institution committed to enriching the community with arts and culture. Rarely does the museum fail, but when it does we must address why and how as we should with any institution that serves the public. As a society, we must grow comfortable and accustomed to questioning any institutional authorities that may assert themselves as sources of information or educational reference. Ill-curated experiences are detrimental to building symbiotic relationships between artistic platforms and public patronage, and they must be scrutinized in order to enhance how museums, galleries, and artists themselves inject cultural consciousness into their communities. Of course, not every exhibition can be executed with curatorial precision and LACMA is at least making an attempt; albeit a convoluted one far from their best work. Is *3D: Double Vision* groundbreaking? Not at all, especially without any risk or lunge towards a curatorial point of view. But is it at least worth a trip to the museum? By all means yes, if only for historical value and canonical merit. For despite the curatorial disaster trapped within the confines of the gallery, it is the pieces themselves that still justify a visit. Not to mention, admission to see the 3-dimensional disorder of *Double Vision* means you can also check out *In the Fields of Empty Days*— a beautifully articulate, special exhibition on Iranian art, which is currently on view and provides an exquisite example of effective curation. The stark contrast of the 2 exhibitions under the same metaphorical roof induces bitter irony, but offers a master class in how a gallery's setup commands visitor experience. Despite its pitfalls, you should definitely not avoid *3D: Double Vision* as *3D: Double Vision* tends to avoid its own identity. Instead you should treat yourself to some of the historically significant relics and very cool holographs included among the show's pieces, and discover your own conclusions about the works and themes presented. When it comes to *Double Vision*'s presentation, sure LACMA knows better, but hey... At least they let you keep the 3D glasses.

LACMA provides free admission Monday through Friday after 3pm for everyone and on the first weekends of every month for Bank of America cardholders. LACMA's 3D: Double Vision is on view until March 31, 2019.

Top image: 3D: Double Vision on view at LACMA until March 31, 2019 (LACMA)

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