by Andrew Beradini
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CLOSE-UP

INSIDE OUT

ANDREW BERARDINI ON JOHN BOSKOVICH’S BOSKOSTUDIO, 1996-2006

JOHN BOSKOVICH’S BOSKOSTUDIO was a darkling cave of wonders: twirling statues, concave mirrors, and walls painted colors I can only describe as poisonous. The artist said it was a “literalization” of Jean des Esseintes’s secret hideout in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s 1884 novel À rebours. A monument to the inward spiral, it was also, quite simply, Boskovich’s home, studio, and showroom in Los Angeles, a set he constructed between 1996 and his death in 2006 at the age of forty-nine. Except in the pages of Interior Design’s October 1997 issue, Boskostudio was rarely accessible to the public during his lifetime.

A number of the artworks that populated Boskostudio were recently installed at O-Town House, in arrangements echoing the original setup, by gallerist Scott Cameron Weaver. Within “Psycho Salon,” the largest presentation of Boskovich’s work since his untimely death, I found an artist retreating from the exterior world in a struggle for meaning, drinking deeply of both poetry and literature, with a wry, referential sense of humor and a penchant for the theatrical without the vulgarity of entertainment. His aesthetic wrestles with queer romanticism, self-aware critique, New Age syncretic spirituality, and the skeptical eye of post-Conceptualism.

In their transference to galleries, artists’ homes can’t help but lose a lick of their vitality. None has suffered more than Kurt Schwitters’s fabled and enigmatic Merzbau, 1923–36, destroyed by Allied bombers in 1943. (Its re-creation was also destroyed, less than a decade later, in a fire.) One of Schwitters’s titles for his masterwork, The Cathedral of Erotic Misery, doesn’t feel wholly out of place next to Boskostudio, its distant heir. In a 2002 letter to his former student Hedi El Kholti, the artist wrote, “My studio/residence has never been in the genre of Installation Art as some have considered it . . . but more akin to something like a John Cage or a Fluxus performance where there is a non-narrative structure with a beginning and endpoint. The art lies in the ensuing theatrics.”

A student at CalArts during the tenure of iconic West Coast artists John Baldessari and Douglas Huebler, Boskovich shared his forebears’ impulses for collating image and text, as well as their sense of humor. But his laugh feels more refined, as bitter as it is beautiful. While Felix Gonzalez-Torres took the languages of Conceptualism and Minimalism and queered them into a mournful and generous eroticism, Boskovich queered the Pictures-generation critique, twisting it back on itself as if it were a smirking snake eating its own tail and coiling ever more tightly around its broken heart. One of Boskovich’s most tragic works, Feel It Motherfuckers: Only Unclaimed Item from the Stephen Earabino Estate, 1997, is an electric fan the artist found in his lover Stephen Earabino’s apartment after Earabino’s death from AIDS—everything had been cleaned out (including many of Boskovich’s own possessions) but this. It reads as some kind of evidence, encased within Plexiglas, with a vinyl faux etching of its title. A few circular cutouts in the Plexiglas suggest that the appliance could still be used, lending the case a quality more protective than funereal. Gonzalez-Torres’s famous billboard, Untitled, 1991, of the empty bed of his lover Ross, who had died of AIDS, captures loss so poetically that it tightly stands as one of the most significant works of love and grief made during the epidemic. But Boskovich’s box fan recorded another kind of loss: the denial of love, the denial of mourning, the loss of everything except what was deemed almost worthless, the churn of empty air.
Above and right: John Boskovich, Hare Krishna Lamps, 1997, triptych, found papier mâché statuettes, metal and electrical lamp fittings, paper lampshades, Formica. T. S. Eliot texts, each approx. 75 x 23 1/8 x 22 7/8".

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from a cheap fan. Was it his lover’s family who cleaned it out? Boskovich was not left even the bed.

A set of elegantly framed Polaroids, “Rude Awakening Series,” 1997, included in “Psycho Salon” and originally hung in Boskostudio, records intimate and mundane moments. Each is adorned with a silk-screened sentence (money comes easily to me, I am successful and prosperous) from a book of positive aphorisms gifted by someone to the same lover in a well-meaning attempt to help him through his illness. I would never begrudge anyone comfort on their deathbed, but these trite affirmations trouble me. Not only do they smother the very real conditions of a very cruel world, but they deny the right to respond with anger and sadness, to mourn. Another adopted sentence, embroidered on a Navajo blanket, is both more resigned and more hopeful. Its author is Allen Ginsberg: America, I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.

HUYSMANS’S À REBOURS is a dangerous book to read at the wrong age (as Dorian Gray painfully learned). Its title commonly translated as Against Nature, the story relays a corrupt aristocrat’s withdrawal from the world into a singularly reclusive sensuality. Even though the main character, Des Esseintes, has become mortally sick and insane by the conclusion, his descent is described in such delicious detail that it retains a toxic allure. Boskovich finds an acerbic beauty in this tension between the decadent’s retreat into sensuality and the ascetic’s rejection of the flesh? If the world is doomed, what is the difference between the decadent’s retreat into sensuality and the ascetic’s rejection of the flesh?

Throughout the section of Boskostudio included in “Psycho Salon” were meditations on mortality excerpted from Eliot’s 1936–42 masterpiece The Four Quartets and printed on the trapezoidal bases of a trio of sculptures titled Hare Krishna Lamps, 1997, as well as on the base of a dancing Shiva (One Day at a Time, ca. 1996–97). (Eliot’s third quarter invokes Krishna’s teachings.) The poet’s verses could be interpreted as an elegy for those sailors who, knowing it might be their end, set out to sea, and for their loved ones who might never see them return—a faded rose, a regret of the future. “People change, and smile: but the agony abides,” wrote Eliot. The line is printed beneath the figure of Shiva next to the slogan of the twelve-step recovery program Alcoholics Anonymous: “One Day at a Time.” The main theme of The Four Quartets is time; in its finale, Eliot folds the end into a beginning: “And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / When the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the fire and the rose are one.” Boskovich painted this stanza above his fireplace, its final line ending behind the wrought-iron screen. Both poet and artist point to a cycle of eternal return. All things are recovered in time.

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