

# ARTFORUM

by Andrew Beradini  
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CLOSE - UP

## INSIDE OUT

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



View of "John Boskovich: Psycho Salon," 2019-20, O-Town House, Los Angeles. Photo: Riccardo Banfi.





Opposite page, top: John Boskovich, *Rude Awakening Series: Big Blow-Out Sale! All Items Reduced*, 1997, silk screen on Polaroid, framed 9 1/8 x 9 7/8".

Left: John Boskovich, *Rude Awakening Series: I, Tina*, 1997, silk screen on Polaroid, framed 9 1/8 x 9 7/8".

Right, top: John Boskovich, *Color Correction Series/AA Bumper Stickers: Powerlessness (After Ryman)*, 1997, ten oil-on-mahogany panels, mahogany frame, 13 1/4 x 13 1/2".

Right, bottom: John Boskovich, *Feel It Motherfuckers: Only Unclaimed Item from the Stephen Earabino Estate*, 1997, electric fan, vinyl faux etching on Plexiglas, casters, 56 7/8 x 22 3/4 x 12 1/2".

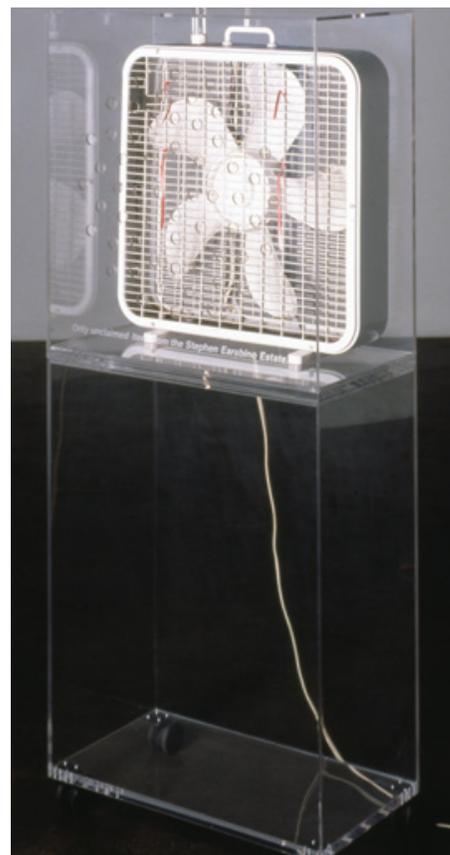
JOHN BOSKOVICH'S *BOSKOSTUDIO* was a darkling cave of wonders: twirling statues, concave mirrors, a carpet emblazoned with a pentagram, and walls painted colors I can only describe as poisonous. The artist said it was a "literalization" of Jean des Esseintes's secret hideout in Joris-Karl Huysmans's 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. With both endeavors, the risk of losing something in translation is far outweighed by the benefits of making the work accessible. In David Rimanelli's piece on the project in *Interior Design*, Boskovich described

his aesthetic in relation to that of Jacqueline Susann, author of *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), not to Dada. And in a 2002 letter to his former student Hedi El Kholi, 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 box 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 funeral. 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 rightly 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

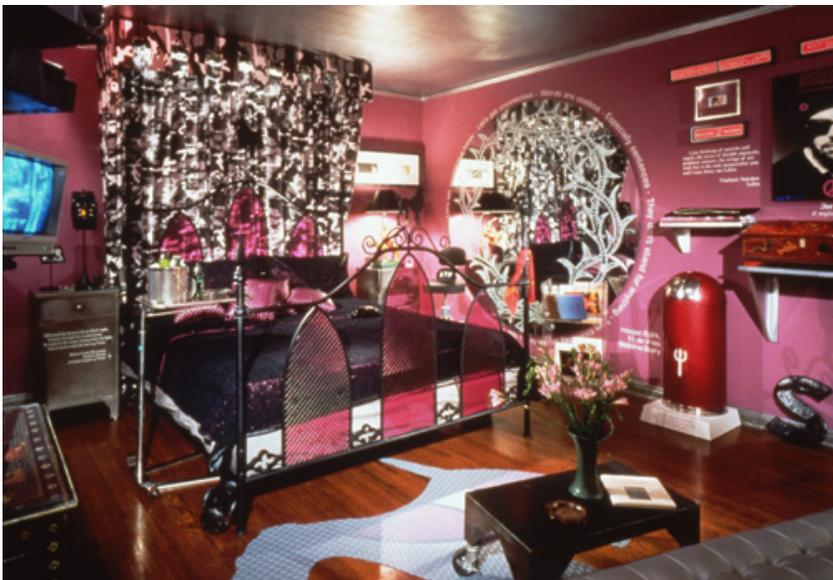
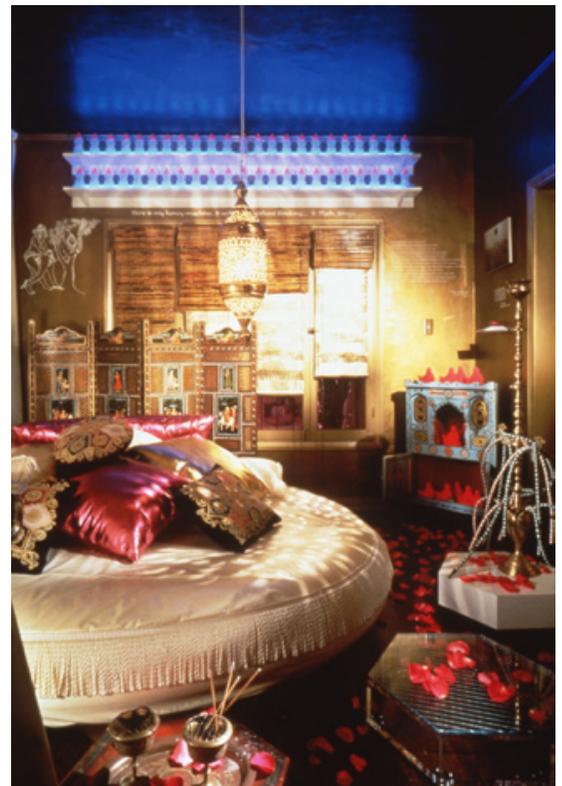




Above and right: John Boskovich, *Hare Krishna Lamps*, 1997, triptych, found papier-mâché statuettes, metal and electrical lamp fittings, paper lampshades, Formica, T. S. Eliot texts, each approx. 75 x 23 1/8 x 22 7/8".



Clockwise from above: Views of John Boskovich's *Boskostudio*, 1996-2006, Los Angeles, 1997. "Hell's Kitchen," "Mess Hall," "Meditation Room," "Prince's Chambers." Originally published in David Rimaneli, "The Mirror Has Two Faces," *Interior Design*, October 1997. Photos: Toshi Yoshimi.



## If the world is doomed, what is the difference between the decadent's retreat into sensuality and the ascetic's rejection of the flesh?

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 shunning society and yearning to find grace alongside others within it. Not unlike Huysmans's hero, Boskovich began to withdraw from the world as he developed *Boskostudio*, and his final days are shrouded in mystery.

"The secret lies in knowing how to proceed, how to concentrate deeply enough to produce the hallucination and succeed in substituting the dream reality for the reality itself," wrote Huysmans. "Artifice, besides, seemed to Des Esseintes the final distinctive mark of man's genius." Certain authors invent themselves through their environments; their lives are all interior. Boskovich

titled many of his works some variation of *Self-Portrait*, as if each were a warped mirror reflecting his aesthetic creation of himself. In the "Meditation Room" of *Boskostudio* (each space had its own name), a circular bed was upholstered in pearlescent satin beneath tantric drawings on a gold wall. Close by, a shelf was neatly lined with half-full honey bears, stand-ins for the artist. In the "Vanity Room," a silver lamé bondage-mask chandelier was embellished with teardrop crystals. In the "Prince's Chambers," the artist's bedroom, the elaborate wrought-iron bed was inset with chapel windows filled with security glass, while the mobile bedside tables came from a mail-order catalogue for medical supplies. And on almost every flat surface, another quote appeared in vinyl lettering.

I see myself in *Boskostudio*. Locked in an interior world, I seek meaning in the sensual, in poetry, in spirituality, in drugs, in not taking drugs. As a teenager dipping into culture, I, too, passionately read and listened to all the authors and musicians quoted in *Boskostudio*, from T. S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg to Jean Genet and Patti Smith. Many of them proposed that however grim this world might seem, it could be revolutionized for the better. I later turned to books laced with sinister sarcasm, by Michel Houellebecq and Brett Easton Ellis, and played on repeat songs like Leonard Cohen's "Everybody Knows" that outline the failure, betrayal, and anguish of those hopes. Only in punk, poetry, art, and sundry subcultures did the defeat not feel total: Even if we could not save the world, we could maybe save each other. And perhaps that is enough. But that luscious escape into voluptuary seclusion always beckons. Huysmans's garden of poisonous flowers, exquisite library, gallery of favorite paintings more hallucinatory than real, and collection of perfumes fetid, floral, and intoxicating constitute one such closed universe, and *Boskostudio* another; both were designed for personal pleasure and eventual destruction. If the world is doomed, what is the difference between

View of "John Boskovich: Psycho Salon," 2019-20, O-Town House, Los Angeles. Center: *Self-Portrait Sculpture (Honey Bear)*, 1993. Photo: Riccardo Banfi.



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 quartet 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 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.

"JOHN BOSKOVICH" RUNS MARCH 6 - APRIL 19 AT DAVID LEWIS GALLERY IN NEW YORK. ANDREW BERARDINI IS A WRITER IN LOS ANGELES. HE CO-CURATED THE ESTONIAN PAVILLION AT THE 2019 VENICE BIENNALE. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS).