

# Contemporary Art Review .la

## John Boskovich at O-Town House

by Keith J. Varadi  
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John Boskovich, *Psycho Salon* (installation view) (2019). Image courtesy of O-Town House and the John Boskovich Estate. Photo: Riccardo Banfi.

A few weeks ago, when I entered the surreal, gated plaza near MacArthur Park that O-Town House calls home, I regained some hope—and belief in California dreams—that L.A.’s rising rents and growing wealth gap have recently smothered. *Psycho Salon*, an edifying restaging of the late John Boskovich’s live-work space, puts you in the grips of a mindfreak, but one with the actual ability to be magical. In contrast to many of the conceptualists who preceded him, like his mentor John Baldessari, Boskovich seemed to understand that balancing coolness with warmth can be awfully powerful. Sure, the elder John and his fellow SoCal smarties added some laughter to conceptualism, but there is always a decent amount of distance created when irony is involved. Authenticity is a raw vibe; it doesn’t hide, it seeks.

All of the downstairs walls at O-Town are painted a putrid olive green. In the front room, sitting on the gallery desk, is *Self-Portrait Sculpture (Honey Bear)* (1993)—a partially used plastic honey bear bottle placed on a miniature stand, encased in Plexiglas and wood. The sculpture is spotlit and surrounded by a collection of identical (fully emptied and backlit) honey bears, lined along a long, right-angled shelf that hangs above. The work conveys a vulnerable sense of isolation: the lone honey bear with its still-sweet core is segregated and sheltered from the creepy sterility of the corresponding overhead clan. Opposite this grouping is *Bondage Menorah* (1997), a black lampstand with metallic chain arms holding camouflage flashlights that take the place of candles. The Formica base contains an excerpt from Jean Genet’s *Prisoner of Love*, engraved in a white, serif font: “Put all the images in language in a place of safety and make use of them.” Chains, flashlights, religions, images, languages—these things can be protective or they can be



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oppressive. Artists who constantly code-switch between sub and dom roles can get lost, sweating, without a safe word. This artist knows what to hold onto, what to hand out, and when to do what.

Boskovich's capacity to be at once direct, complicated, sober, and humorous reaches its apex once you have scanned his *Rude Awakening Series* (photographs from 1997 with comically crude, yet intensely personal image-text combos) in the corridor and entered the main space. There, the installation flaunts a wild confluence of spiritual ecstasy and dramatic excess: a giant convex security mirror; an even bigger pentagram; Alcoholics Anonymous mantras on bumper stickers; Hare Krishna lamps; a Shiva sculpture; and a Navajo rug featuring an Allen Ginsberg quote, tossed on a footstool. It's as if the artist imagined himself as his own harmless cult leader in an attempt to survive. Manic, dualistic themes such as surveillance and rebellion, despair and aspiration have been constants throughout the ongoing cycles of civilization. Every generation deals with existential bummers, yet they always figure out ways to plod through the bullshit. Boskovich seemed to strike a balance between chaos and order by pushing both to extremes. Now, as we Americans find ourselves in a vicious swirl of epically repetitive dour circumstances, it's time for us all to chin up and figure out our own ways to do the same.