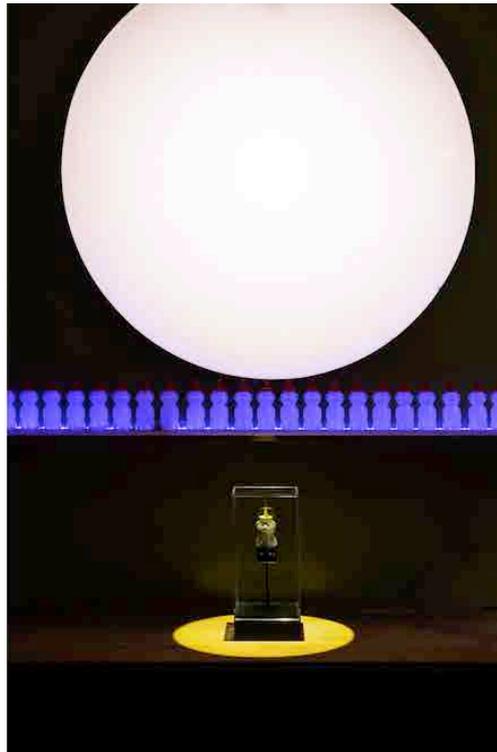


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John Boskovich Steers His Own Recovery

by Grace Hadland
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John Boskovich, "Psycho Salon" (Installation view), 2019.

In the fall of 2018 the Guggenheim presented a retrospective of 19th-century Swedish artist Hilma af Klint to a zealous, if unsuspecting, audience. The show received rave reviews and became a true blockbuster. I never saw it, but I watched af Klint become something of a trendsetter; suddenly we all had these swirly, witchy paintings as our phone backgrounds. My roommate and I hung up prints in our new apartment. Much of the writing about the show regarded af Klint's biography, prefaced by the tale of her obscurity and her wish to withhold her work from the public until now. With shows like these – of artists suffering the supposed malady of “being ahead of their time” – the audience gets to feel like they discovered something. And remarkable though that discovery may be, I find myself reluctant to participate in the critical fanfare, which tends to cloud the artists and instead spotlight the curators or institutions who admit the newly discovered work – the arbiters of canonicity. At this exact point, we're confronted with an all-too-familiar problem: unsure how best to contextualize the work of artists from marginalized communities or subcultures, of how to frame them other than as winners of an art historical lottery as if rescued from the void. Questions of representation and ownership arise; the politics of who should make decisions around the recuperation of an artist's career can confound institutions. Most often they opt for the easy out: to wait until a trend settles, when evidence of a market for the work reveals itself (eg. when reclusive occult Swedish women have become sufficiently fashionable).

The beginnings of this phenomenon are implicit in *Psycho Salon*, an exhibition of work by the late artist John Boskovich at Los Angeles gallery O-Town House. Organized by Scott Cameron Weaver, much of the work has not been shown since the artist's death in 2006. Boskovich grew up in the San Fernando Valley where he was born into the agricultural family that owns Boskovich Farms (a friend of the artist's told me he thinks of John every time he buys cilantro in LA). Boskovich attended USC and earned an MFA from CalArts in 1985, placing him at the center of the fervor of West-Coast Conceptualism. Boskovich resisted this association, though; in 1993 he told *Venice* magazine, "Conceptualism is so repressive and elitist and uptight about homosexuality. It's all so uninteresting to me, a big ruse like the Emperor's New Clothes."



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Though Boskovich gained recognition in the artworld during his lifetime, his work has been sidelined without gallery representation or proper management of his collection. Given these circumstances, the precarious project at hand is a familiar one: to reconstruct an artist's legacy and wedge it into the contemporary artworld.

Much of *Psycho Salon* deals with the concept of rehabilitation. Many pieces are focused on the ethos of the recovery movement and its relationship to the AIDS crisis. Boskovich critiques and distorts the rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous in his piece *Rude Awakening* (1993), a series of Polaroids with affirmations about acceptance and fate drawn from Joyce Strum's book *Loveliness*, which was handed to his friend while he was in the hospital dying of AIDS. Quotes like "I embrace and accept my body as it is," and "I have plenty of time today" caption images of marijuana and the artist's naked buttocks. While tongue-in-cheek, the work underscores an insidious social pressure to embrace the kind of hollow positive thinking that encourages repression in the name of wellness.

Mindless submission to a higher power was something Boskovich challenged in his work while simultaneously reveling in imagery of the divine. Hindu, Buddhist, and Catholic motifs reappear throughout the show. These clash with fetish objects and paraphernalia: regal purples and demonic reds blur with army camouflage and black leather. *Bondage Menorah* (1997) a menorah made of chain and US military-issue camouflage flashlights greets visitors upon entry. His living room, which he called Boskostudio, has been recreated here. Furniture adorned with symbols, mantras, and quotes from Genet, Ginsberg, and Eliot collects in the space like little monuments. The space invokes both a psychosexual dreamscape and a state of religious ecstasy. It's hard not to feel the man's presence, to speculate what he thought about in that room, who he prayed to, who he fucked. The space seems to suggest that Boskovich liked playing God himself; a large convex mirror serves as the centerpiece in Boskostudio, suggestive of some central omnipotence. He had surveillance cameras and monitors all over his house and a complex alarm system. By emulating idolatry and the language of spirituality, Boskovich presents us with a distortion of conventional values and imbues his own life with a kind of ecclesiastical drama.



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Many of the works in Psycho Salon are forms of self-portraiture: encased in glass, placed on pedestals, or behind ornate frames with inscriptions. A work from 1997 called Right Rectangular Chamber Having the Volume of the Artist's Body is as-advertised, bearing an inscription from Jean Genet's Prisoner of Love. This work, like so many others in this show, suggests the artist's anticipation of his own posthumous success. In building these little monuments to himself and his demons, Boskovich participates in the construction of his own mythology. He recognizes himself as a figure to be remembered and, maybe optimistically, to be worshipped.

It's hard to ignore the parallel here between recovery and recovery – that of a body and that of a body of work. Recovery in the corporeal sense has a distinct trajectory (twelve steps) and a clear goal, to return the body to its initial healthy state. In the case of rehabilitation in the artworld, the process is murky. What the twelve steps should be and where they lead to is unclear. The whole idea of consensus seems like a moving target. Psycho Salon reflects an awareness of the limitations of curatorial recovery and calls for a kind of collaboration, rather than seeking a single arbiter of canonicity. Boskovich seems to sponsor this approach. He projects, with a kind of dark irony, what many artists in a similar position may have felt: if anyone is going to recover me, I want to be the one to show you how to do it. In my opinion, a pretty fair request.

On the day I went to visit the gallery two cartoonish "bad day" things happened to me. I fell down by the garbage cans outside of my apartment, scraping my hands and ripping a hole in my jeans. Then, while I was in the gallery, admiring the view from the balcony, I noticed my car was the only one on the block. I sprinted out the door, down the stairs, through the courtyard, and across the street just as it was being loaded onto a tow truck. (Stoic to my frantic, the meter-maid mercifully gave me a ticket and spared me the tow.) I tried not to get too mystical, but then conceded. It was as if Boskovich were hustling me: pushing me out of my apartment and into his living room, then back out to the world. Some strong pull lies in the work but, equally, a strong push. If anyone is going to be rehabilitating Boskovich, he'd be the one to grab them by the shirt collar show them how it's done.