

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



ORIANA KOREN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Kitsch Me If You Can

In Los Angeles, a city unfettered by tradition and well-versed in whimsy, oddball museums flourish. Here, a tour of the most strangely compelling

BY TONY PERROTTET

ON HOLLYWOOD Boulevard, reality felt more tenuous by the minute. I dodged crowds of tourists photographing their feet on the Walk of Fame, wove past Spider-Man, Wonder Woman and armies of panhandlers, then rode an elevator into a sprawling outdoor mall. The Hollywood and Highland Center is anchored by a towering gate and columns topped with rearing elephants—a loopy replica of the set from D.W. Griffith’s 1916 screen epic, “Intolerance”—one of the silent-film era’s greatest flops.

It is the ideal setting for the Museum of Failure, one of the strangest of the strange small museums that have sprouted in Los Angeles in recent years. Inside, exhibits are like comic conceptual artworks. The Rejuvenique, a plastic facial mask from 1999 that zapped the skin with tiny electric shocks to improve the complexion, was doomed not only by its dubious claim but by its resemblance to a “Friday the 13th” costume. Nearby sat the Spray-on Condom, which died because the latex took three minutes to dry, and Fat-Free Pringles, whose secret ingredient Olestra produced mortifying bowel disorders.

Despite its humor, the museum has a serious message, insisted the founder Sam West, a Swedish organizational psychiatrist. “Fear of failure is the greatest barrier to innovation,” he said, noting that the

museum also includes flops from Apple and Coca-Cola. “We all fail—the big guys too, not just the little guys. We need to deal with it, learn from it and move on.”

Back in the 1920s, New York City was considered America’s home for Surrealism, but today a far better contender would be Los Angeles. Even the mainstream art institutions built on the West Coast in recent years—the Getty, Lacma, the Huntington Library and the Getty Villa, which recreates a Pompeian mansion—express spectacular per-

sonal visions. They were all built on a grand scale and with a luxuriant sense of space, looking like the sort of places the gods might vacation. No surprise, then, that smaller museums feel equally unfettered by tradition and celebrate the eccentric rather than the academic.

I recently spent a week bouncing like a pinball around L.A. to visit a string of playful institutions. The contrast between the city’s often-bland streetscapes and the hidden museums only adds to their dreaminess. By a noisy highway in Culver



SELF REFLECTION Museum of Selfies, a new pop-up exhibit in Glendale.



VELVET UNDERGROUND From left: Velveteria, a museum of velvet paintings, tucked away in L.A.’s Chinatown; co-founder Carl Baldwin.

City, a facade resembling an ancient mausoleum, with a brass door buzzer, led into the Museum of Jurassic Technology. Feeling as though I were walking through a Victorian cabinet of curiosities, I groped in semidarkness past enigmatic exhibits to the sound of chirping crickets and waterfalls. Wooden display cases contained ostrich eggs, wolf skeletons and holograms of robbed Egyptian priests. Loving portraits of Soviet cosmonaut dogs lined one of the galleries. A pioneer of the city’s exotic museum trend, the exhibition space opened in 1988 as a homage to antique museums of natural history, designed to evoke a sense of wonder at the world.

I spotted the founder, David Wilson, in the Russian-style tea room, playing an ancient lute called the nyckelharpa. Sporting a silver “chin curtain” beard and spectacles that gave him the air of a Gilded Age professor, Mr. Wilson said his project might not have survived anywhere but L.A., even though he disliked the city when he first moved there from Colorado. “For the first seven years, I thought: This is the ugliest place I have ever seen in my life,” he said, laughing. “Until I suddenly thought: Wait a minute, I love this place! L.A. is so huge and sprawling. Nobody’s watching! You can do what you like.”

In West Adams, one of the city’s oldest neighborhoods, I found the Velaslavasy Panorama secreted within a 1910 cinema. It’s dedicated to the forgotten art of 360 degree paintings, wildly popular in the 1800s. The curator, Sara Velas, argued that L.A. is the natural home for such eccentric spectacles. “So much of the city’s roots are in the development of cinema. It spilled over to other parts of life. The wealthy were building houses straight out of fairy tales, European castles and Arabian palaces. People have always been creating their own fantastical reality here.”

Before long, I began to see the surreal museums as part of L.A.’s urban fabric, where you might order a car, for example, and find it outfitted with disco lights and a ka-

raoke machine, operated by a driver who posts videos of your performance online under #BestDamnUber. You enter secret bars through refrigerator doors, sleep in theatrical hotels such as the Figueroa, which evokes boudoirs of Old Spain, and encounter homegrown folk-art sites in the unlikely places.

Chicken Boy, for one, looms above the hipster cafes and vintage thrift stores on the old Route 66 (now Figueroa Street) of Highland Park. Dubbed “The Statue of Liberty of Los Angeles,” the 22-foot-high figure of a muscular man-boy with a chicken’s head (whose motto is “Too Tall to Live, Too Weird to Die”) represents a vestige of the over-the-top commercial decoration that once dominated roadside L.A.

The most eccentric collection might be at the Bunny Museum in Altadena, opened to the public in 1998 by a couple who had filled their suburban home with stuffed toy bunnies. It gained a cult following in 2015 when actor Elijah Wood made a YouTube video series about the collection. Today the owners, Candace Frazee and Steve Lubanski, estimate they have over 35,000 pieces of bunny memorabilia grouped by theme—Bunnies with Carrots, Bunnies with Human Faces, even a Chamber of Hop Horrors for rabbits with terrifying expressions.

My next stop, the Museum of Selfies, revealed a more provocative look at pop culture. Displays mix the playful (the world’s longest selfie stick; whole rooms on the “gym selfie,” the “bathroom selfie” and the “car selfie”) with an attempt to place selfies in the Western artistic tradition. “The idea of

‘People have always been creating their own fantastical reality here.’

self-imagery is not new,” said co-founder Tommy Honton as we pondered a timeline tracing self-portraiture from the Renaissance (with Raphael including himself in his “School of Athens” fresco), through the works of Rembrandt, to the first photographic selfie, dated 1839 and attributed to pioneering American shutterbug Robert Cornelius.

But for sheer laugh-out-loud pleasure, seek out the Velveteria, devoted to the much-derided art of velvet paintings. Co-founder Carl Baldwin, who has the off-the-cuff delivery of a stand-up comic, gives personal tours of the kitsch classics. In the Hall of Elvis, we admired the King, Marilyn Monroe and James Dean all riding unicorns. “I know it’s gutter art, but these are beautiful!” he exclaimed, pointing to a corner filled with naked Polynesian maidens. “That’s my beef with the Getty. It’s great, but there is a place for all this too.”

For more on touring L.A.’s alternative art scene, see wsj.com/travel.

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