



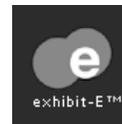
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Growing Pains

LOS ANGELES 08.03.10



Left: Artist Mike Smith as Baby Ikki. Right: Trulee Grace Hall and artist Mike Kelley. (All photos: Catherine Taft)

OF THE MANY OPPORTUNITIES for growth and discovery this summer, West of Rome Public Art's first annual benefit was perhaps the most sensory. Staged inside Mike Kelley and Michael Smith's collaborative project *A Voyage of Growth and Discovery*—a warehouse-size multimedia installation of Burning Man-inspired videos and sculptures—the journey officially began last Monday night at the Farley Storage Building in Eagle Rock once guests had signed a waiver: "... you elect to participate in an 'activity' that may cause social discomfort or distress in some participants." Said "activity" included Nurse Olive's Playroom, where adult babies were spanked and had their diapers changed by an eerily loving dominatrix nurse; the Furry Room, where oversize Marnie Weber animal costumes came to life; the Rebirth Room, where artists Asher Hartman and Haruki Tanaka orchestrated a "complete meditative experience projecting viewers to when time individually began"; and gloomy tarot card readings presided over by a stuffed unicorn in platform boots. Once I'd signed the form, receptionist "Melissa" (artist Matt Greene in drag) handed me a bib embroidered with my name, and I headed into the party.

After being announced over a megaphone (by Stanya Kahn, costumed as some sort of interstellar mammalian bird) and offered multiple cocktails, I settled into the scene. My bib, a natty white and lavender number, matched those sported by Jeffrey Deitch, Deborah Irmias, Ann Magnuson, Stephen Prina, and Nancy Rubins—not to mention Paul, Karen, and Mara McCarthy. It was like a designer accessory, worn on the back so as not to ruin the silhouette of a dress, or artfully tucked into dress straps à la Diana Thater (who, let's face it, can make anything look good). None of this seemed out of place given the mise-en-scène: a row of Porta-Potties, a gutted van, and several jungle-gym structures festooned with stuffed animals. There were also several video projections of Smith's Baby Ikki wandering through encampments of ravers in the Black Rock Desert.



Left: LA MoCA director Jeffrey Deitch with artist Diana Thater. Right: Artist Stanya Kahn.



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A samba troupe stormed the space, followed promptly by plates of hors d'oeuvres by chef and restaurateur Suzanne Goin, who had designed the evening's meal with different stages of baby food in mind (from bottles of vanilla vodka and milk to lima bean puree with pine nut pesto to "solids" like braised lamb daube). But nothing was as tasty as the lineup of entertainment. Jim Shaw, like a maniacally beatific cult leader, guided his band through a psychedelic set of sonic waves. Artist and musician Scott Benzel—who, in addition to making music for Mike and Mike's new video, recently premiered a revisionist score for Roger Corman's *The Trip* at SASSAS's "sound." series—seemed a particularly attentive audience member. Shaw and his contingent were followed by a sizable drum circle that gathered around one of the jungle-gym sculptures, which seemed set up for a ritualistic cakewalk. At the percussion crescendo, Baby Ikki appeared, a little too hairy in his oversize diapers and tiny sunglasses, stumbling about and sucking on a pacifier. Toddling to the music, he dug into the chocolate cakes, offering them to guests before throwing them into a gigantic wok and stirring them around. A blissed out WoR founder Emi Fontana leaned over: "Suzanne's got nothing on him," she whispered.

The mashed-up cake was passed around on silver platters for guests to pick at, and the drum circle dispersed, making way for the far-out improvisational sounds of Ya Ho Wha 13, a band founded by notorious hippie cult leader Father Yod of the Source Family. "We have their box set at home," remarked enthusiastic LACMA curator Rita Gonzalez. "It's basically sixteen hours straight of space jams." As the scent of sage and marijuana (undoubtedly medical) drifted over the intimate crowd, guests seemed to loosen up, finding respite in the mesmerizing electric guitars and smooth but funky lyrics.

Feeling edgy, I sneaked away to Nurse Olive's Playroom, where artist Jennifer Cohen (as the eponymous Olive) was still reading to her two pierced and tattooed adult babies. With only a few other voyeurs in the room, Olive ordered another diaper change. Excitedly, the man-baby prepared for his powdering, an arousing experience that, once underway, attracted more guests. The audience, it seemed, was very naughty, because soon we were all being (voluntarily) bent over Olive's knees and spanked; no one was spared, save Kelley, who instead took to provoking the nurse to hit her subjects harder or softer. Laughter roared, a few buns were bruised, but perhaps the most surprising discovery of the entire night was that more than a few partygoers truly enjoyed their punishment.

— Catherine Taft



Left: Jennifer Cohen with artist T. Kelly Mason. Right: West of Rome founder Emi Fontana with artist Matt Greene and Trulee Grace Hall.



Left: Collector Shirley Morales with artist Stephen Prina. Right: Artist Jim Shaw.

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Left: Architect John Bertram with artist Ann Magnuson. Right: The Box's Mara McCarthy with Shirley Morales.



Left: Jennifer Cohen with adult babies. Right: Artist Jennifer West and friends.



Left: A samba troupe outside the Farley Storage Building. Right: Sculpture by Marnie Weber.

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