

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times  
The Huntington Gets Hip  
Robin Pogrebin  
20 April 2021

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“Made in L.A.” represents an effort by the Huntington to expand its contemporary art programming and present more artists of color.

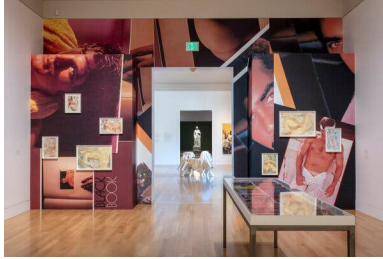


Image: Monica Majoli's installation for the Huntington Art Museum's "Made in L.A. 2020: a version." Her series "Study for Blueboy," named after an early gay magazine, focuses on centerfolds from 1976 to 1979, the halcyon years of gay liberation. Credit: The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens; Joshua White

San Marino, Calif. — The juxtaposition is striking. In one gallery, Thomas Gainsborough's classic 18th-century oil painting, "The Blue Boy," gazes out from the ornate walls, having just undergone an extensive restoration. In another gallery, an installation by the Los Angeles artist Monica Majoli explores Blueboy magazine, one of the earliest gay publications in the U.S., through sultry images of scantily dressed young men.

This is not the institution you thought you knew for its Beaux-Arts mansion, imposing research library and elegant botanical gardens, including one inspired by Suzhou, China. It's now also a hub for cutting-edge contemporary art. For the first time, the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens has joined the Hammer Museum in presenting the biennial, "Made in L.A. 2020: a version," which spotlights videos, films, sculptures, performances and paintings by 30 Los Angeles-based artists. The show, which opened when its host museums were finally able to welcome back the public on April 17, is clearly a departure for the Huntington.

While the museum has presented living artists such as Alex Israel in 2015 and Celia Paul in 2019, "Made in L.A." is its most ambitious exhibition of contemporary art to date. And the show represents an effort to reach new audiences, diversify its programming and feature more artists of color. "It's a shot across the bow," said Christina Nielsen, who became the director of the Huntington Art Museum in 2018. She considers the exhibition "an opportunity to engage with the broader contemporary art community here in L.A. It's really opening the doors."



Image: A pair of Umar Rashid's paintings, critiquing Spanish-controlled colonial California, surround a leaded glass window from the Huntington's permanent collection. In the foreground, Ann Greene Kelly's chairs recall the drapery in the 1859 marble sculpture "Zenobia in Chains." Credit...The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens; Joshua White

Located just outside Los Angeles on a sprawling former ranch purchased in 1903 by the railroad and real-estate magnate Henry E. Huntington, the museum opened to the public in 1928 and still presents a formal, European environment. So even some of the participating artists in "Made in L.A." were initially skeptical about showing their works there.

"I thought it was a strange choice — I was a little concerned," Majoli said, adding that her experience proved to be positive. "It was almost like a rich soil to work with; the work was well set off." Majoli said she was impressed by the museum's openness to her installation, given how directly she deals with themes of gay liberation and self-determination. She felt free to explore what she considers "the queer subtext of 'Blue Boy,'" a painting originally inspired by the Flemish Baroque artist Anthony Van Dyck.

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Other artists also created works that respond to the Huntington's historic collection. Ann Greene Kelly's fabric-draped chairs reflect the draped garments that adorn the Huntington's 1859 marble sculpture of the 3rd-century queen of Palmyra, "Zenobia in Chains." "It became this great opportunity to stress context," said Lauren Mackler, an independent curator who, with Myriam Ben Salah, organized "Made in L.A."

The artist Jill Mulleady specifically requested that her four paintings be located near Zenobia in the Huntington's American Art Galleries. They include a diptych, "Interior of a Forest," that references a work with the same title by Paul Cézanne and also frames the Xenobia statue. "It was interesting to work there," Mulleady said, "not to change history, but to add layers."



Image: Jill Mulleady's four paintings frame the sculpture "Zenobia in Chains." "It was interesting to work there," Mulleady said of the Huntington, "not to change history, but to add layers." Credit: The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens; Joshua White

Some artists discovered the Huntington as a source of inspiration long ago. Robert Rauschenberg credited his encounter with "The Blue Boy" — as a 19-year-old Naval medical technician on leave — with his decision to become an artist. (His 1979 work, "Global Loft (Spread)" on wood panels, was acquired by the museum in 2012.)

The artist Kehinde Wiley has talked about how his paintings of Black men in classical regal poses were informed by his early experience of the Huntington's British portraits. "That was really impactful for me because of all the pomp and circumstance," Wiley told WNYC in 2009, "particularly for me as a young Black kid."

To some extent, the Huntington's "Made in L.A." show echoes a larger trend in the art world away from separate lanes for different types of art (as the Museum of Modern Art has done with the elimination of its discipline galleries) and toward situating historical art in contemporary spaces (as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and now the Frick Collection have done in the Breuer Building).

The Huntington has been increasing its contemporary art initiatives. In 2016, it started five yearlong collaborations with cultural organizations such as the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College in Monterey Park, Calif.

The Huntington, partnering with the Yale Center for British Art, is presenting a trilogy of shows on female artists curated by Hilton Als, the New Yorker magazine critic. Starting with Celia Paul, the series will also feature Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and conclude with Njideka Akunyili Crosby in late 2022.

And while price may remain a barrier for Los Angeles's museum-goers (admission is \$25 for adults, \$29 on weekends), Nielsen said the museum has occasional free days and made the point that "it is cheaper for a family of four to go to the Huntington than to go to Disneyland."



Image: At right, Christina Forrer's "Intervision" (2020), cotton, wool, linen, silk and watercolor. Credit: The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens; Joshua White

Greater efforts are still needed to help the museum achieve more diversity in its audience, programming and hiring. (The Los Angeles Times art columnist Carolina Miranda recently questioned whether the Huntington, as "the benefactor of Gilded Age wealth" could "evolve into the post-George Floyd era.")

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Nielsen said that she plans to fill three curatorial positions with people of color and that the museum has been acquiring more works by female artists and people of color. The entire Huntington institution, including its museum, library and gardens, has an annual operating budget of more than \$50 million, with a hefty endowment of more than \$550 million.

The Huntington recently completed a new gallery dedicated to Chinese art, located in its expanded Chinese Garden (there is also a Japanese garden). "We're located in the San Gabriel Valley, one of the largest Asian populations and Asian-American populations in this country," Nielsen said. Meanwhile, longtime museum loyalists will have to get used to wandering from staple period rooms of Savonnerie carpets and Sèvres porcelain into potentially unsettling installations like Sabrina Tarasoff's haunted house in "Made in L.A."

"I would never say we should turn our back on the historic collection," Nielsen added. "But I am also deeply committed to showing how that historic collection resonates with contemporary issues. "We need to rethink the past — that's what the scholars here are continually doing," she continued. "We're a place where history is preserved and history is written. And it's a place where history is preserved and rewritten."