

HOLLYWOOD FOREVER

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HOLLYWOOD FOREVER Robert Seitz

Almost unnoticeable unless you knew where to look, Hollywood Forever offers a discordant green-gated footprint in one's peripheral vision, uncanny and brief like the lives it remembers. Flanked by the strip-malls and tight crowded lanes of Santa Monica Blvd., it has the uncertain stance of a reveler who has just exited the club, short steps to the pre-dawn stillness of a final rest.

Hollywood is as self-aware as cities come, where the chirping crickets are so light-soaked they confuse an overcast morning with midnight and sing all day long. In every respect, the traditional role of a burial ground remains unchanged but never certain, as though eternity was a daily special that will not be changed until a difficult to inspire cook at long last feels stimulated to take down the chalkboard, wipe it clean, and inscribe a new indeterminably remaining promotion. It is with this casual hand that the cemetery delivers the proclamation of dead memories with as little effort as a physical gesture, wherein the surrounding culture's deepest attitudes are enshrined. In this industry town, indifference to the method is as sacred as the solemnity and righteousness of achieving recognition.

Possibly it is by innocent response to the cultural environment's condition that Hollywood Forever faithfully responds to its situation. In the space of a small city block, it is an anchor of sanctified and unchangeable ground in a city where reduction to quick rubble and replacement is the daily standard. By common law, the first fact of a cemetery is that the face of death seems to retain its permanent seat on the town council. Two merge like a memorial willow whose roots have burst open a wrought-iron burial plot's fence, and the abstraction of immortality spreads its vines into the modern zeal for the new. As a result, ephemeral elements become locked in its matrix like flecks of gold in quartz.

As critic Peter Schjeldahl puts it, the ephemeral is a peculiar breed – firmly rooted in the now, when it fails to predict an outcome it becomes enshrined in value as a relic of the curious past. When it succeeds in predicting an outcome, it is completely forgotten as mere particle in the overarching force of outcome. The intersection of death with the psychic, physical, and historic record of persons who sought after fame and memory are an ephemeral record, their grave having so little in common with the vital animal of life they



James Marshall, *The Black Cat (revised)*, 2011, False wall, fluorescent light fixtures, acrylic paint, conduit, dimensions variable. Photo by Chris Boha.

sought to display. The trick of this, the stark contrast of ruin displayed before the living, has enshrined for all time a steady subject for artists, memory makers and those who seek for velvet curtains to define life's performance. Death can be relied upon to raise the necessary mental adrenaline that will burn some afterimage of the artist's lightbulb-flash of intention into the moment of the viewer. With this subject the fuse is set and primed already in the viewer's mind, leaving creativity to concern itself with the shape of its outline, and the color of its negative shadow.

The quest for immortality has everything to do with the confusion of biology. It seeks to co-opt memory through artifice, creating a mutual silence of selfless admission in ourselves that desire for the image can so easily overtake desire for the daily things that we could actually touch and feel. It exposes the way the unreal can become tangible with a stranger, that celebrity can accelerate a heartbeat as well as any of life's actual people. A stroll with a loved one seems mundane beside two teenage strangers clutching each other in screaming distance of a beautiful teen idol. It is strange, it is paradoxical, and we all know we will do it anyway. This is why Hollywood Forever is as orthodox a cemetery as the most ancient and primal burial mound – we are as superstitious today as the first time a postulation was made that the sun was a flaming chariot driven by a god.

The etymology of superstition means roughly "to stand above, to survive," and boasted such mileage it morphed into "excessive fear of the gods." In the hands of the Enlightenment it showed the striations of evolution even further, becoming "belief in what is not real." One could make an argument that the modern cult of immortality now marks a regression to its incipient meaning, for in every way reverence and elevation remain while fear has all but departed, and we believe whole heartedly in those who stand above. In every move it is understood that greatness is a priestess that produces and directs the spectacles of worship, and as of old the next best thing to being in their service is to be buried under their roof, in the house we call fame. Some do, in pious solemnity, sacrifice everything to reach this inner sanctum. Around the little temple of Hollywood Forever, the high blank walls of the MGM Studios form a faceless enclosure, as though their backs are turned and you stand in some accidentally annexed idleness. The whole sentiment seems to abandon sadness and becomes almost underwhelming compared to the apparatus of these immaterial stories, favoring like the epic sieve of a temple colonnade the palpable sense of distance between the living and the memorialized.



Christian Tedeshci, *40,000,000,000,000 years*, 2011, Toilette paper, polyurethane resin dracula head, globe – 129.5 x 102 x variable cms. Photo by Julie Schustack.

The sacred understanding of indifference to method that is Hollywood scripture has been cultured in the protective shell of developing modernity, and the garish stringing of the results into pearls whose sobering gleam becomes proof that immortality is an illusion that can only be maintained by the elect. In a temporal storm whose calm eye seems an absurdity, it is open country for the art of the final word. Perhaps this is why we have such a love affair with immortality; its sentiment is safely absurd, reassuringly historic, common enough to be self-absolving, and archetypal enough to kindle the letterbox precursors to fantasy and lust. Tragedy, peril, power, folly, heroism, the mundane intricacies of the interpersonal shallow or the unearthly corridors of impersonal propaganda – the central altar in the temple of immortality is an altar where death and psyche are locked in embrace. We each take turns modestly sweeping the sanctuary just to be near its sheer scale.

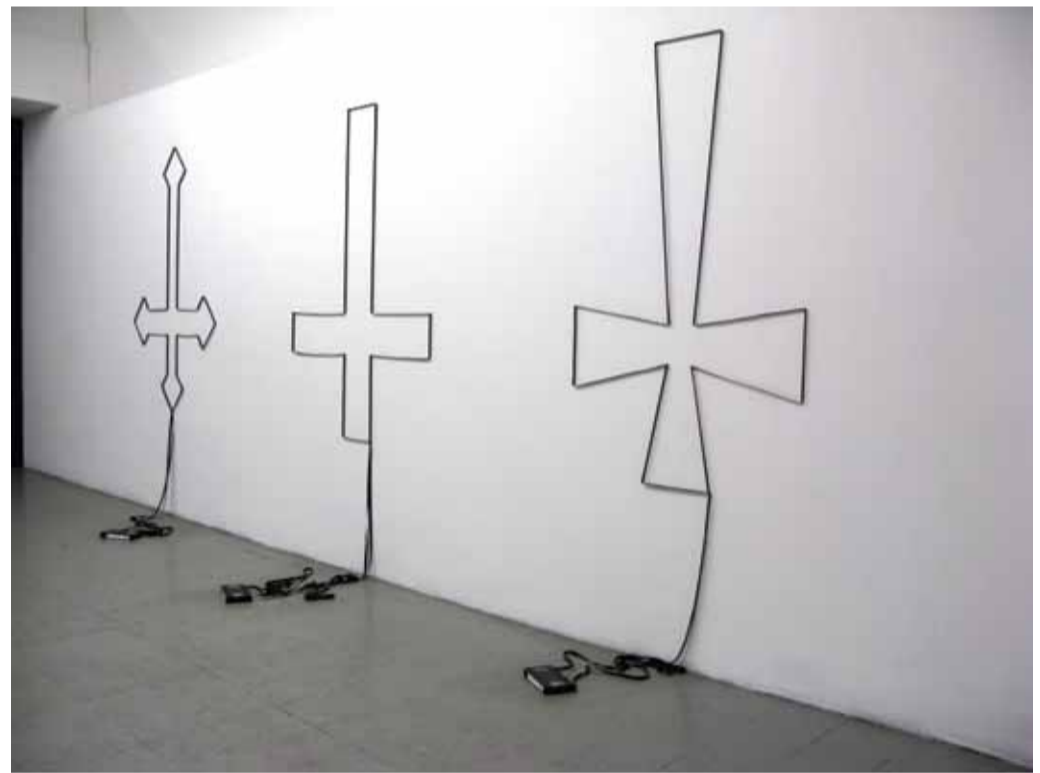
While wandering Hollywood Forever, some are contemplating what diamonds of personhood are found in the coal pile of neurochemistry and endorphins. They might consider just what it really means to include small vials of DNA in one's headstone, a service offered by the Hollywood Forever management company. Perhaps the visitor is tickled by the paradox and uncertainty social values play within the power hungry, like the scrambling mind of mad Jack Parsons listening to L. Ron Hubbard seduce his wife at the local Crowley hall, yet drawn to distraction from his homely concerns by his Cal-Tech scientist's other mind wondering what might be tangible in a universe that may well be holographic. Pitting against the seasick waves of pronouncing a center that will never hold ultimately set fire to his laboratory and magician's career, sparked by the friction of rubbed together oppositions.

Perhaps the visitor contemplates this intangibility as that fabricator of light and space James Turrell does, who teases the occulted magic of light's total underwriting of the ephemera of human endeavor and went on to building his epic cosmological love poem to the ancients. Laying bare his Quaker flavored mysticism where the ineffable and the resulting smallness can be adapted as easy as any previous line of reason, he reaches for a near megalomania of encrypted self-sublimation and strikes the pose of Antoni Gaudi. Building his desert temple Roden Crater is entirely the modern sense of superstition and immortality, a Pantheon of duplicity that worships himself as the author and his idea of selflessness as being naturally gregarious in the face of total illusion, with the project carefully placed like an accent stone in a corroded ring in the northern Arizona desert.

Some may come to the cemetery to motivate regimes of self-guidance in what may be the more beautiful of modern theories, the ones that spring from utilitarian responses to the phenomenological apologetics of our mutually terminal situation. Like Marina Abramovic, they rap their knuckles on the table calling for focus, sweeping to the floor the empty glasses of what's already been drunk, demanding our intoxication be put to some use, at the very least that we are ready for the final ceremony. This could seem apparent for someone attending the cemetery's Sunday night screenings of art films while enjoying a graveside picnic.

Others may travel where the idea of myth is heard ominously bellowing in the distance, but whose meaning is as incomparable as sincerity when faced off against photogenic beauty, and find it clarifying to resolve that flirtation with meaning has a whiff of madness to it. That such an errant dedication can lead to scratching some futile formula on a sanitarium's cell, a Lovecraftian encounter where the deepest truths will destroy your every understanding of what order should be. Accept, this prophet of modernity seems to say, that forgotten secrets and the greater truths are both the most awful and the least profitable to encounter. Embrace if you can that in your ordinariness your distance from the potency of immortality is a blessing. The warnings are plenty, and the plummet of Duadulus-like stars and starlets in flaming spectacles of public madness and overdose are every warning we could need.

Most of us, however, will likely stroll through with the lightest considerations in mind, easy self listening and no doubt periodically delighted in having stolen a moment from the routines of life. Perhaps in between wondering if our car is safe from being broken into and trying to decide which of the dozens of lunch places recently passed are the safest to eat at, we may find ourselves crafting amusing visions of the personages behind the still monuments we encounter. From what dream did the crackled celluloid pre-myth arise, in its modern sense almost the paradigm of 'past'? What to make of Rudolph Valentino's mausoleum, that ghostly Symbolist tomb, now the scene of annual Day of the Dead family festivals of dancing and grave decorating? Do we daydream on that most erotic victory of urchin Dee Dee Ramone, now reduced to the smirk of a tourist who thinks for a moment just what they might do if life tossed them a groupie?



Tony Garifalakis, *Franchise*, 2010, Wall Drawing made with VHS Tapes of Exorcist 1, 2 and 3, Dimensions variable.

Perhaps they are humbled like this author, and there is just a disjointed feeling of visiting some faint relation, like visiting a small rural farm once in the family but long since sold to some major bank by an ancestor stacked among sepia-tones in the attic. In the shadow of the great and forgotten, where a small rectangle of ground is the penultimate example of inflated value, my great grandparents lie buried – a carpenter and his wife. They speak to me of the ordinary origins of any temple complex, anywhere – that myth is a sedimentary process of layering, with its roots sinking continually away from the present and into the abstract resources to become the sandy foundations of Immortality, and whose heights reach into the wide-open and equally as abstract skies of Forever. Here is the field where the farm-wet animists of the past meet the dry urban pragmatists of today – ours is one strange little outpost on a vast boundary line. Visiting my unknown relatives' graves may be just as absurd as visiting the remains of a silver screen star; these people who directly and impersonally made up my genes also indirectly yet inspirationally made up my sense of self. Facing this inconclusive battlefield full of famous corpses, I'll employ the words of a Taoist who made this uncomfortable parlay their neighborhood lounge: "We have our choice in the light of the setting sun, we drum on the cooking pot in song or we weep the laments of the departing."

Robert Seitz is a writer and artist based in Los Angeles, California. He devotes his time working with artist run initiatives, promoting career development and to social justice.