



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: “HOLLYWOOD IS HELL” BY ACTOR AND ARTIST JAMES FRANCO AT GALERIE GMURZYNSKA ZURICH, ON VIEW UNTIL FEBRUARY 17TH

American actor and artist James Franco discusses his exhibition “Hollywood is Hell” at Galerie Gmurzynska Zurich with Purple. Through a series of visually arresting collages and paintings, Franco explores the layered mythology and eschatology of Los Angeles, echoing his own Hollywood image and the recent dramatic wildfires that devastated 12,000 homes and structures, displacing over 100,000 people.

The title “Hollywood is Hell” is striking and provocative. Why did you choose this phrase, and how does it reflect your view of Hollywood as both an industry and a cultural symbol?

It probably should have been called, “Hollywood is Heaven and Hell.” I am very inspired by Kenneth Anger’s book, *Hollywood Babylon*, and as I interpret it, his ethos that transmuted Hollywood legends, tragedies, gossip and celebrity into something else, into something greater, almost spiritual. He turned stars into gods, angels, devils, and tragic heroes. He made the iconography and backstories of the film industry stand for a whole cosmography. Professionally I am a product of Hollywood, but this art show also allows me to use Hollywood as a subject. I am both inside and outside of it.

The show features collages, merging your earlier works with recent creations. Could you elaborate on how revisiting and repurposing your past artworks influenced the pieces in “Hollywood is Hell”?

The collages are bringing together different materials, but also different aspects of Hollywood. I was in LA during the pandemic, when I started to make most of these pieces. Hollywood has been the Dream Factory for 100 years, it is a synecdoche for movies, which are basically out collective fantasies. But during the pandemic, the actual

place was a ghost town. I would take walks and the streets felt post-apocalyptic. At the time I lived near the Hollywood Forever Cemetery where a lot of the old stars like Douglas Fairbanks, Valentino, Cecil B. DeMille, Chris Cornell and The Ramones are buried. I kind of liked all the decay I was seeing. All the aging fliers and posters on the walls, and the graffiti. I started to get interested in the dichotomy between the actual place and the dream space. The collages started to physically resemble what I was seeing on the streets, while the subject matter within was referencing the dream space, the iconic space Hollywood films. There is one more level to the collages, which is my old work with my new work. I was personally going through a lot of changes and I had a bunch of paintings that I had never done anything with. I liked the idea of painting over the old work, or incorporating them into new works. So the paintings represent a kind of personal catharsis.

You describe the exhibition as portraying Los Angeles during the COVID pandemic, with post-apocalyptic atmosphere. How did this environment shape your current work and do you believe it has also left a personal imprint on you?

I started to see messages on the streets. People leaving more than just tags, but actual messages. I loved this phenomenon. It got me to start looking closely at everything, seeing weird symbols and messages in everything. Not that I was going crazy, but it just made looking closely at houses, trees, graffiti, trash, posters, fliers super interesting. Almost in a David Lynch kind of way, where the surface level is the city, but underneath, there is a whole secret world at play. And maybe this secret sub-world is a collective thing. Almost Jungian, where we can all be privy to certain archetypes and messages, a connectivity that is all or collective heritage. It was more a state of mind, a way of looking, of getting out of myself, and listening to whatever was in the wind.

The collages are said to deconstruct the glamorous mythology of Hollywood, with references like Bruce Willis and Batman. What message are you conveying about the entertainment industry's portrayal of masculinity and its cultural impact?

I'm not being critical of these icons, I am just representing them in a slightly new way. Actors become symbols. They, of course, are real people, but they are also something else. By being in movies they enter the collective consciousness, and represent something greater than their individual selves. Actors and characters like Batman have become a new pantheon of angels, gods and demi-gods. Not even necessarily in the reach of their power, (although, in the attention economy, of course some people have great power), but I think I'm referencing their status as nodes of universal recognition. They become shorthand for things we all think about and feel.

You've mentioned that in the highly standardized Hollywood system, art became a refuge and a place of freedom for you. Can you discuss how creating visual art provides a different form of expression compared to your work in film and literature.

Comparing Hollywood and the art world is not about value or hierarchy. It's more about the different forms of distribution, how things are seen, and sold, and what the expectations of these forms are. When I do a movie or television show, if it's a commercial endeavor, it's usually supposed to have a narrative, of which, there are tacit rules about likeability, rising action, climax, etc., about which many books have been written. In that sphere there is critical acclaim, and commercial success, and usually, if you want to keep making movies and TV, you need a certain amount of commercial success, because movies and TV cost money, and the investors want to be sure they're investing in people that will give them their investment back. The art world has its own expectations, but telling a narrative isn't an imperative like in the TV and movie world. By going into visual art I can use the material of Hollywood in different ways, and I am not expected to tell stories the same way. I don't need likeable characters, I don't need characters at all. But I love Hollywood as a subject matter, as I said above, because I do think it has become a universal place for people to connect. We are all drawn to stories and movies and television travel all around the world. So I can use the iconography of movies without actually making movies.

Interview of James Franco by Svita Sobol