

ARTFORUM

Different Strokes

LOS ANGELES

06.05.15

"LAST YEAR on this podium, we were just dating. What do you call it? A one-night stand," said Philippe Vergne. The director of Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art was presiding over his second official gala, held outside the museum's Geffen Contemporary site on Saturday night. This year, the museum decided to honor an artist, the octogenarian conceptualist and MoCA board member John Baldessari, letting his work inform rather than rule the decor, a subtle shift from recent years when the museum would invite artists versed at creating spectacles to turn the gala into a quasi artwork.

Colored LEDs on the floor along the aisles beamed a digital cloudscape punctuated by an occasional orange sun, the light giving guests' faces an underlit death-metal glow. The motif continued in the tabletops, rectangular light-box photographs of clouds, echoing Baldessari's cloudy carpets featured in his retrospective at LACMA, which also honored the artist at its gala in 2011. The admonition "I will not make any more boring art" literally tent-poled the parking-lot dining room, projected large on either side of the long structure. Though a bit kitsch, the scenography appeared infinitely more subdued than, say, the expressionless, rotating heads of the performers used as centerpieces during Marina Abramović's turn as impresario at a rather different MoCA gala in 2011, under the rather different stewardship of Jeffrey Deitch.

Different is the operative word. Nearly sunk by financial mishandling in the era of Jeremy Strick and then rocked by Deitch's controversial (if often crowd-pleasing) programming, MoCA's been searching for a new identity since Vergne took the gig. Perhaps wary of the previous director's penchant for bold, sudden moves, Vergne has gone the opposite direction, slowly and quietly building a new team for the museum, including hiring Helen Molesworth, who showed up in a sleeveless dress that flaunted her distinction as being perhaps the first tattooed chief curator at the museum. Vergne's success at salvaging the wounded pride of the LA art world was evidenced by Baldessari's return to the MoCA board as well as by the huge number of artists in attendance, including Barbara Kruger, Kathryn Andrews, Sterling Ruby, Diana Thater, and Mark Bradford, whose midcareer survey opens this month at the Hammer Museum. But the sign that certain sins had been forgiven was probably most evident by the presence of a gray-suited Paul Schimmel, MoCA's former chief curator and current Hauser & Wirth partner, whose forced resignation in 2012 seemed to augur the departure of the current director's predecessor a year later.

Vergne waxed long about Baldessari's many artistic contributions, the artist himself keeping it short with a few goofy jokes ("When I moved to Los Angeles, I asked, 'What's a gala?'"). But the most touching moment of the evening, or at least the one that cut through all the pomp, was when Vergne and the crowd of almost eight hundred lifted their glasses to honor Chris Burden, who died of cancer only a few weeks before. "Last year one artist was in the room and is not in the room tonight," Vergne said. "So I want to raise my glass to Chris Burden. He brought love to Los Angeles and to MoCA."

With the speeches and main course complete, R&B songstress Janelle Monáe took the stage in a white button-up and black bowtie. Her bouffant recalled the crown of a generation of funky godfathers and songsters, but her verve and upbeat anthems solidly captured the joyful best of Jackie Wilson. A few people slipped out quietly as the first bars of music shook the tent, including Danna and Ed Ruscha, who stopped at the entrance long enough for Danna to take a quick phone snap of Ed and Julian Schnabel near the assembled smokers. Back inside, a gang of LA artists danced alongside Patricia Arquette to Monáe's cover of James Brown's "I Feel Good," a tuxedoed Catherine Opie, tie rakishly dangling, cutting the rug beside a shimmying Thomas Houseago.

I caught artist and musician Stephen Prina slipping out the door before the cocktail afterparty. We talked briefly about the nature of upheaval and controversy. "I always like the argument, but never the conclusions," he said. Poking me in the chest, he added, "And you can quote me on that motherfucker."