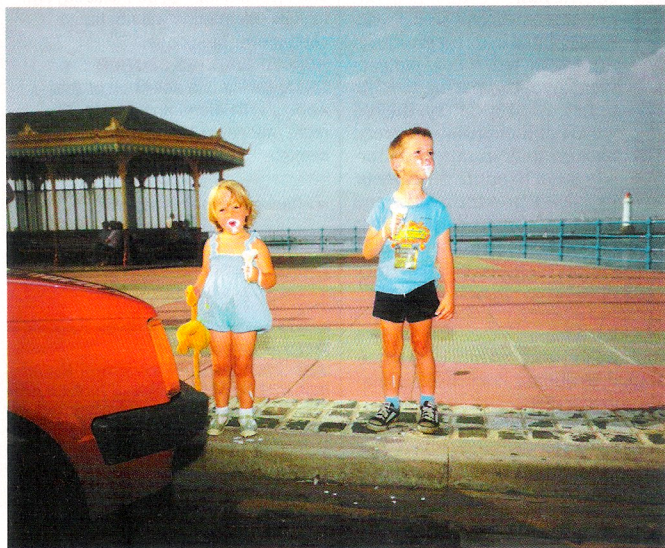


# Art tripping

MCA's exhibition explores a world of ideas

By Ruth Lopez



Martin Parr, *The Last Resort*, 2004.

There are no layovers in “Universal Experience: Art, Life, and the Tourist’s Eye,” the sprawling exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. There aren’t any direct flights, either.

In presenting “both an experience and a show about experiences,” curator Francesco Bonami selected work by more than 70 artists from around the globe. It’s an exhibit heavy on photography, video and installation. If you have an appetite for broad-ranging yet connected ideas, you won’t feel like you just stepped off a red-eye, but rather that you arrived in a refreshing art Shangri-la.

“Universal Experience” was inspired by the 1893 Columbian Exposition, where newness in all its permutations was presented to millions. Here, it’s about travel on display. This approach suits Bonami’s curatorial style as one of an explorer who redraws and refines the map as he sinks further into the interior.

Walking through the galleries, you can feel the thinking. Maurizio Cattelan’s photograph of his Hollywood sign rebuilt in the hills of Sicily? Displacement and the familiar. Images of Las Vegas, Paris, a wax museum in Japan devoted to sex? Destinations both familiar

and obscure. Paola Pivi’s image of a donkey in a boat? Dislocation. A tall tower display filled with multiple small sculptures by Katharina Fritsch? The souvenir. Andy Warhol’s *Double Mona Lisa*? Art as a tourist attraction. (Anyone who has been to the Louvre knows that ridiculously long lines form to see this work while amazing pieces by da Vinci go largely unstudied in nearby galleries.)

Admittedly, these are oversimplifications.

For a more layered approach, consider the large color photograph by Pascale Marthine Tayou, *Traditions*, showing a framed portrait of Pope John Paul II surrounded by carved African statues and masks. The artist encountered this perhaps unintentionally ironic assemblage in a market in his native Cameroon. Tayou is part of a generation of African artists exploring post-colonial culture and *Traditions* is partly a commentary on missionaries and religious tourism. There is something humorous here, since the carvings are mostly of deities, but the inclusion of this image goes deeper. “He is the ultimate tourist who at the same time has become a tourist attraction,” Bonami says of the pope. “He embodies everything.”

Everything seems to be what Bonami is after.

Jim Hodges’s massive lobby mural, *don’t be afraid*, is probably the first thing viewers will see inside. The New York artist sent forms to delegates in the United Nations asking that each write the phrase in his or her native language. The handwritten texts were combined and Hodges initially printed the “drawing” as a billboard. Consider this work a starting point with a message.

The third floor opens to an expanse of bright orange carpet by Italian artist Rudolf Stingel, invigorating a space Bonami considers bleak. “It’s almost always empty partly because there is too much light so [it’s] not a great place to display art,” he says. Bonami decided this “kind of no-man’s land” atmosphere would make a good airport lounge. Rows of chairs by Minneapolis-based design company Blu Dot face each other and overhead are monitors where instead of arrivals and departures, you might catch a fragment of French filmmaker Jacques Tati’s 1967 *Playtime*. On one monitor, a rolling screen lists sites of horror—from battlefields to concentration camps—as destinations. Is there no rest for the weary? If you want a break, don’t look up.

There is also a generous spirit of inclusion. Even a video Bonami deemed “tedious”—about a man in Texas who purchased a London bridge and created an attraction—is presented because it contributes an interesting idea to the enterprise. It also plays off a piece from the MCA collection: Chris Burden’s stainless steel *Tower of London Bridge*, based on an Erector set model.

From Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s disturbing *Chalet Lost History* to Doug Aitken’s dreamy video installation *The Moment*, experiential opportunities of all sorts exist. The space containing Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s work—a narrow, incredibly long light table with 6,000 snapshots—is as calming as a dark, cool cathedral after a hot day hiking among ruins.

Chinese artist Zhou Wang’s *Urban Landscape* installation, made entirely with pots, pans and stainless steel kitchen gadgets, is a moment of pure visual delight.

“Universal Experience” provokes and challenges in ways expected of “big” exhibitions but it also manages to be playful. As a destination, it offers full amenities.