

Take a mind excursion, Christopher Knight

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NEAR the entrance to "Ecstasy," the winning new thematic group exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Little Tokyo warehouse space, Berlin artist Klaus Weber has installed a three-tiered fountain made from Victorian cut-glass. Water gaily burbles from the otherwise rather cheesy-looking fountain, splashing down the crystal tiers into a square concrete pool surrounded by tempered-glass walls.

According to a signed certificate hanging on a nearby wall, the fountain's water is laced with LSD. The most potent psychotropic substance known to science, it was produced for the artist in a British homeopathy lab. The fountain is a signature piece for a show that proposes art as a mind-altering substance. Think of it as the drug culture equivalent of a champagne fountain at a wedding celebration, or maybe a chocolate fountain at the party after a movie premiere.

Presumably, a visitor could reach over the fountain's surrounding glass walls, wet his finger and take a taste, launching into an altered state of consciousness for up to six hours. According to the homeopath's website, a mere 1/6 milligram of the drug is sufficient to induce and maintain the trip.

There's just one hitch. Is it true? Is the fountain really spurting LSD?

We trust what our museums tell us about the art they enshrine. And great art is itself commonly supposed to contain inherent transformational properties. Does this one? There's an obvious way to know for sure, but like Eve with the apple, getting that knowledge requires a long-term commitment after breaking a museum taboo: Do Not Touch. Reaching over the glass barrier is verboten.

What predominates here? Does the authority of the museum prevail -- or the authority of the artist, or the viewer? Does some negotiation take place among all three?

Over in the corner on a pedestal, Weber has installed a small wooden model for a pavilion he wants to build in Dresden, Germany, to permanently house the LSD fountain. His crystal palace is a sleek Modernist box, meant to be plunked down over an existing urban landscape. Instantly all the mundane things on the street -- trees, lampposts, fireplugs, park benches, sidewalks, trashcans -- would be transformed into artifacts in a virtual museum of modern life. The LSD fountain gurgles in the center.

Even without drinking from Weber's trippy fountain, the work manages to nicely alter your consciousness of being inside MOCA. In the 21st century, old distinctions made between the museum and the street, between "the art world" and "the real world," have collapsed. "Ecstasy," whose subtitle is "In and About Altered States," drives the point home.

The show is not, I should emphasize, a "glorification of drug use" -- as some are certain to complain. There's no reason to keep kids from seeing it, any more than there is to stop them from reading "Alice in Wonderland," with its hookah-smoking caterpillar and beguiling magic mushrooms. Honest conversation, not the hysteria or terrified silence typified by the costly war on drugs, is a more productive path. It's good for art too.

Drugs are a metaphor for altered perception in "Ecstasy," and the best works in the show will alter yours while also articulating the nature of the alteration. Take Tom Friedman's tiny little pill.

A seemingly ordinary medicinal capsule is enshrined under spotlights on a pedestal in a display case, like an exemplar of the secular Eucharist that has sanctified so much of modern pill-popping society. According to the label, the hundreds of multicolored little granules that fill the small gel cap are made from Play-Doh. That means Friedman engaged in the repetitive, acutely focused task of rolling each of these teeny-tiny clay spheres by hand -- perhaps the most primitive analogy imaginable to age-old practices of art-making. Suddenly the slow, thoughtful, transformative rituals basic to art become their own soulful brand of mind-expanding medication.

Up on the mezzanine, French-born New York artist Pierre Huyghe has installed "Light Show." A theatrical grid filled with scores of swiveling lights with colored gels surmounts a low rectangular stage. Pillows tossed around the floor invite the audience to linger for the performance -- a Minimalist theater of the absurd.

Music swells, the lights come up and fog rises from the floor of the small stage. Currents of air in the room gently swirl the fog as the shifting colored lights turn the vaporous mist into a spellbinding phantasmagoria.

There is, of course, nothing there but a variation on smoke and mirrors -- which, in today's spectacle-driven society, is also the sum total of so much that is abject and debasing. The difference here is that Huyghe's work pays close attention to revealing the precise manipulations of "the man behind the curtain." The sculpture is candid, not deceptive, and beautiful to boot.

The show's tour de force is Belgian artist Carsten Holler's "Upside Down Mushroom Room," where even the delightful stutter of the 'shroom-room title participates. Holler has constructed a long, zigzag corridor, which switches back around five corners while rising on a gentle incline. The uphill journey starts out dark, but light is glimpsed at the end of the tunnel.

Come around the final turn and the hall explodes into a blinding-white room -- except it's upside down, with rows of fluorescent lights beneath your feet and a dozen gigantic mushrooms suspended from the gray "floor" overhead. The dotted mushrooms, which resemble something from a fairy tale, slowly rotate at varying speeds.

Moving from the darkness of the journey to a place of revelatory light, you encounter a magical description of the way a human eye sees: Images are flipped on the retina, and your brain unscrambles the perception.

Artists have been twisting ordinary perception for a long time. Eighty years ago the Catalan Surrealist Joan Miro got down in the weeds and looked up at the looming blades of grass set against a royal blue sky, in order to put us into a painted "Dialogue of Insects." Most of the artists in "Ecstasy" start with precedents 40 years later: These are children of the 1960s. Twenty-four of the 30 artists were born between 1959 and 1974.

"Ecstasy" has some flat spots, as well as a few overly familiar works by Rodney Graham and Charles Ray, shown before at MOCA. Disappointingly, the show includes only a single L.A. artist under 40 -- Paul Sietsema, whose exquisitely crafted 16-millimeter film is a visually absorbing, conceptually resonant meditation on the sculptural nature of cinematic space. As often happens with MOCA, the majority of artists are based in New York and Germany, offering too narrow a slice of the global art-pie.

But mostly it's a blast. Some of the work is made with pharmaceutical materials, such as Weber's fountain, Friedman's pill or Fred Tomaselli's elaborately patterned paintings, complete with sedatives and pot embedded in resin. A lot refers to hallucinogenic states more loosely, and not only to conditions induced with prescription or recreational chemicals. Finnish filmmaker Eija-Liisa Ahtila's compelling three-screen projection evokes the perceptual slippage of schizophrenia, while Matt Mullican's witty split-screen video shows him messing around in the studio, presumably under the influence of hypnosis.

Still, the psychedelic '60s are frequently recalled. Ann Veronica Janssens' banal, gimmicky projection of intensely colored flashing lights is the most directly linked to Op art. Interestingly, though, it's not the failed high art of the era that serves as primary springboard. Popular culture is more significant.

Tomaselli's intricate patterns are indebted to things like posters for Bill Graham's Fillmore concert halls. Olafur Eliasson visually suspends raindrops in space courtesy of strobe lights. Eli Sudbrak -- who goes by the nom d'artiste assume vivid astro focus (which he spells entirely in lowercase letters) -- has turned a bunker-like room into a Rio carnival-meets-disco, complete with pulsing music and dual themes of erotic freedom and gay liberation.

Sylvie Fleury's marvelous golden meditation orb, whose walk-in interior is lined with thousands of rhinestones glued to black felt, plays a looped soundtrack to the Zsa Zsa Gabor howler "Queen of Outer Space," in which women in spike heels and push-up bras rule the planet Venus. A feminist critique of consumer culture has rarely been wittier.

L.A.'s 1960s Light and Space art -- which differed from New York Op partly by virtue of being rooted less in the art gallery than in the aerospace industry, the science lab and the street -- is acknowledged at every turn. Eliasson's levitating raindrops are unthinkable without it. Erwin Redl's room-size infinity chamber, built from a three-dimensional grid of green LED lights, is part sci-fi movie stage set and part Robert Irwin light installation.

Massimo Bartolini adds an innocuous 1910 painting of the Southwestern American desert to a wall and a hygrothermograph -- the climate recording device common in art museum galleries -- on the floor of a curved, all-white room that is essentially a sensory deprivation chamber like those of Doug Wheeler. The work is a critique of the art museum, where modern science is deployed as a bulwark against time and art becomes arid, but it's undercut by the routine dullness of the chosen landscape painting. Bad art stacks the critical deck.

Still, the patron saint hovering in the show's background is probably the great, wickedly mischievous German painter Sigmar Polke. In the catalog to his magnificent 1990 retrospective in San Francisco, the late curator John Caldwell astutely noted that by 1969 Polke had become perhaps the first artist who "succeeded in creating a precise visual analog of drugged consciousness."

Paul Schimmel, the lead curator who organized "Ecstasy," assembled MOCA's survey of Polke's photographic work 10 years ago. His lively new show is a primer on the continuing possibilities for the pharmaceutically enhanced motif.