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Review: Joe Sola's mega-amusing micro-art



A Joe Sola painting exhibition installed in Tif Sigfrid's ear

By Leah Ollman

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What is the opposite of a blockbuster exhibition? The pomp-free micro-show inaugurating Tif Sigfrids' Hollywood gallery. It occupies a space roughly the size of a hazelnut. It takes but a nanosecond to see.

This anti-spectacle is the work of Joe Sola, among the savviest of today's art-court jesters. The L.A.-based Sola has installed his show of six minuscule portrait paintings (each measuring less than one-tenth of an inch across) in a tiny, tiny box that nestles in gallerist Sigfrids' ear, its one open side facing out. She wears the exhibition during gallery hours, pulling her hair aside to make it visible. The rest of the standard-issue, white-walled gallery is vacant.

Audacious, yes. Absurd, absolutely. But Sola's exploit sets the mind spiraling around ideas, issues and expectations central to the art-viewing experience. "Interrogate" is jargon du jour for the poking and prodding of convention that so many artists lately claim as their mission. Pile on the terms "institutional critique" and "relational aesthetics" and the seriousness of an artist's effort surpasses all doubt. Sola goes a decidedly different and far more refreshing route. He's a teaser and a trickster, a joker with a canny sense of humor and not a shred of pretense. He presses for answers not by beefing up his vocabulary but by playfully, goofily breaking down established strictures — by running amok. Engagement on all levels is irresistible.

Sola has exhibited his (more visible) paintings before, but his characteristic work is performative. He enacts situations and records them on video, antics such as jumping out a window during a curator's studio visit, or inviting a high school football team to tackle him. He enlisted shirtless male models to create conceptual art in public view in a gallery. He's the offspring of Burden and Nauman and perhaps Wegman, too, in his courting of both risk and the ridiculous. Physicality is key to the work's effect and its meaning. What Sola stages is sometimes pseudo-dangerous, an exaggeration of vulnerability and a kneading of the definition of masculinity.

That he planted his miniature gallery in an erogenous zone is no coincidence. Art is part stunt, part seduction. But the ear is also a portal to the mind, and in this sense, the installation mimics precisely the relationship of a gallery's exhibition space to its offices, the brains behind the display.

There is no passive viewing of this show, no glancing disinterestedly at the walls during a swift circuit of the room. Sola has made the act personal. Seeing the work requires a direct encounter, a request, an exchange that is mildly intimate, even slightly invasive. It also feels private. Only one person at a time can have this experience.

And the paintings themselves? Made under a microscope with a filed acupuncture needle, they are daubs really only legible as enlargements on the title sheet. The installation — a great new entry in the history of spoofs and subversions of the white cube — is what so fruitfully tickles the mind, what matters.