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Jeffrey Deitch's Secret LA Life Before MOCA

Even before I first met Jeffrey Deitch, I knew first hand the DNA of Los Angeles was etched deep into his brain. But that didn't keep me from being surprised by his first MOCA press conference. In only a few sentences, he explained LA's financial and cultural condition more succinctly than any economist or university professor I've heard. He then explained his vision of how to fix our city with simplicity - and a complexity - that has long eluded all of our political or business leaders, with the partial exclusion of Eli Broad.

Most of all, though, it demonstrated Jeffrey's Deitch's unique connection with our city.

I'll begin with a quote from gallery owner, Bert Green:

There are not many people in positions of influence in the art world who have the dedication to making a point to go out and see everything they can, and get a real idea of what is going on out there. In New York, Jerry Saltz is probably the best at that, and in Los Angeles, we have Peter Frank. Both of these men go to see almost all the shows that there are to see.

Jeffrey Deitch is also one of those people. I opened a small, out of the way gallery in 1999 in Los Angeles, and one of the early signers of my guest book was Jeffrey Deitch. When I moved downtown in 2004 his name showed up again at my new location.

What Bert doesn't add is that in 1999 he didn't just open a new gallery, he helped start a new arts district when he opened in East Hollywood. And when he opened in Downtown - the first new gallery on the fledging Gallery Row - it was still a drug dealer infested area most of LA's art leaders never visited until the Art Walk - which was started by Bert Green.

Two turning points in the development of the LA World - small and large - and each time New Yorker Jeffrey Deitch was there before most Angelinos.

The second example is more complicated.

It was LA in the early 1990's - riots, earthquakes, rising crime and collapsing businesses. I no longer made monthly trips to the New York art world but was more active in LA until my only non-working activity was power lifting at Gold's Gym.

Eventually, my art world activities required me to change my gym hours, and the loss of my usual training partners, but a close knit group of hard core lifters, without my having to ask, were quick to spot me on my heavier lifts.

Two days later, one of them recognized me from a past world and launched into a story of the night I had fought his brother in a warehouse. Luckily for me, the story's end was that his brother had appreciated how I had ended the fight in way that left him with his dignity intact.

Most of lifting friends had known his then late brother and had heard the story from him, so I was accepted in a way that would normally take a lot longer time. But there was a smaller sub-group of them - guys who were clearly into the gangster life - who had no use for me until one of them noticed my art world friends and began working in with me on a regular basis.

He turned out to be an artist - who also did tattoos. But he didn't want to talk about himself; he wanted me to tell him about a friend of his. A kid who had been jumped into his gang a year ago (i.e., physically forced to join the gang) and who had suddenly started doing some amazing work.

I offered to do a studio visit and, once he realized this naïve white boy was not joking - he explained to me his 'studio' was the safe house for his gang. But he said he would ask the kid if he could show me a few of his drawings.

Some weeks later my new friend showed up at Gold's with two new lifters. A big guy who clearly spent a lot of time in the gym and a younger and much smaller in height guy whose build demonstrated he must have lived full time in that same gym. The tattoo guy and I began doing inclines - but once we moved over to the flat bench - my best lift - the two new guys jumped in and joined us.

We kept bumping the weights up, we would go up, and they'd go up same as they did. But when we saw the big guy - but not the small guy who was just warming up - was about to hit his limit - with just a quick look between us, we ended the session at the last weight the big guy could handle.

Afterwards, I was taken to the parking lot and shown the drawings lying in the trunk of a car. I expressed a genuine enthusiasm about them and that's when the smaller of them two introduced himself as the artist.

Two months - and a lot of serious gym time - passed before I saw the real work.

It was early Sunday morning when the small guy drove me and the tattoo artist into one of LA's deadliest neighborhoods. The area was transitioning from one race to another and from one set of gangs to another, even more violent group of gangs. The safe house didn't seem all that secure when we drove up; the boarding up and metal plating of the doors and windows was not evident until we entered from the rear.

At that moment, my thoughts of art were gone and by the time we left the kitchen for the front of the house, my only thought was if I was going to get out of there alive.

We then walked into the dining room and I could see into the living room when I was suddenly aware that both the small guy - and the big guy - who was in the living room - had their eyes fixed on me.

They wanted to see what my first reaction was to what I saw. And I did not disappoint them. I was stunned.

Rather than go into a full critique, I'll give a CliffsNotes version. The bigger guy had done his first work on part of one living room wall before the small guy was 'recruited' by him (for his reputation as a street fighter and his skills as a tagger, though I don't recall if that term was used by them at that time).

The kid's reaction to his new life - which was largely spent holed up in this house - was to start doing his own work on the empty living walls. But then he began to cover up some of the other guys work with his - which is considered a very hostile act in that world - and altering other parts of it by adding his own work. The other guy retaliated and did the same to the smaller guy's work.

Within a few weeks, though, they worked on the final wall as a team - even though they never discussed anything they were doing with each other. This suppressed conflict had also seemingly challenged the small guy into trying things he had never done before and each new living room wall found him further refining what he had done on the previous wall.

Then, abruptly - in the dining room - he did a complete wall in just 36 hours - by himself - that was far beyond anything he had done.

Ideas that were barely related to what he had done before had begun to appear along with different techniques, an enhanced palette and a complicated subject matter that exceeded anything they had done separately - or together. In the following weeks - he, by himself - took on all of the remaining dining room walls - each time in a single burst of energy - and further developed what he had started on that first wall.

He at last finished the final empty space on the dining room walls - and in the month after that - nothing was added or changed by either of them. It was then that I was asked to see them. They knew what an extraordinary achievement had been accomplished by them together - and then by the kid himself.

That was the first - and the last time - I saw that art.

When I next was there - every inch of the wall board and plaster had been stripped from the walls down to the studs, and no trace of the art was left. The big guy's body was discovered miles away weeks later but the small guy's body was never found - or never identified if it was ever found.

No police report was ever filed about what happened there that night. The house was just empty one morning but it was days before anyone even dared go into the then totally empty house and no one in the neighborhood ever

bothered to tell the police about the missing men.

Within three months of that, both the tattoo artist and my original friend were dead. I was later told that everyone who had been in the house had been killed and I was later told that everyone who had killed them was also now dead.

By the end of the year, the last of the guys I had worked out with were gone from the gym; dead, in jail, moved to other parts of LA or returned to the villages they had come from.

I had never known the small guy's name - just the gang name I had heard him called, but which he never used himself. All that was left behind of the kid was a single nagging memory.

Just before we drove away from the house that Sunday, he had showed me a business card and asked if I knew who this person was. The name on the card - to my surprise - had two, even if differently spelled, of the four names a South American man I once knew had used, and that is why I later remembered the name.

I said I didn't know him and asked the kid who the man was, but he just shrugged his shoulders to say he didn't know either. He then put the card in his wallet, dropped me off at my car and drove out of my life forever.

And the name on that card?

It was Jeffrey Deitch.

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