

MASKS & MEMORY

STAGING
ROSSON CROW'S
PSYCHOSIS

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Rosson Crow on one of her "Madame Psychosis" sets, 2015.

A

round half past noon on November 22, 1963, an unidentified (perhaps elderly) woman wearing a headscarf and trench coat stood on the grass between Elm and Main Streets in Dallas's Dealey Plaza as President Kennedy's motorcade passed by. She was documented by numerous amateur filmmakers, including Abraham Zapruder, holding a camera to her face as JFK was shot. Though countless governmental agencies and conspiracy theorists tried to locate her, this woman—like the assassination itself—remains a mystery. Nobody ever recovered the film from her

camera (assuming it was actually loaded), nobody ever saw her again, and nobody actually confirmed “she” was a female. This mysterious figure is still known only as the “Babushka Lady.” However, in 1970, in yet another bizarre twist, a woman named Beverly Oliver, who performed in the strip joint next door to Jack Ruby's Carousel Club, claimed to be this lost legend. A quarter century after her revelation, Oliver wrote a memoir about her date with destiny titled *Nightmare in Dallas*, and her version of events later became part of Oliver Stone's film *JFK*.

“I just love the idea of all these conspiracy theories,” says Rosson Crow, standing inside her barnlike garage studio, beside her Hollywood home, which is filled with paraphernalia, mural-size canvases (as long as 12 feet), and dioramas evoking various Kennedy myths. Ever since she was a child, the Dallas-born, L.A.-based painter has been obsessed with the assassination—painting various scenes from JFK's funeral over the years—but her curiosity went into overdrive this past spring when her boyfriend suggested the Babushka Lady might make for ripe

subject matter. “She seemed like an interesting portal into historical misremembering, which is something I am fascinated with,” says Crow, who discovered a tabloid from 1970 shortly thereafter with a cover line that read: *JFK Contacted in Séance, Forgives Oswald*. “At first I thought it could be a painting, like a room for a séance for Kennedy. That was the seed of it.”

That seed inspired her to create “Madame Psychosis Holds a Séance,” a new series of hypnotic paintings of interiors that join together, forming three sets for a five-minute film she has shot, loosely based on Beverly Oliver. This month she will exhibit the paintings and the film at Honor Fraser Gallery in L.A.

“Many people present at the assassination—White House aides, other politicians—have said things they thought they witnessed or experienced, only to be proven wrong,” Crow says. “It is almost as though the trauma was so strong and shocking that misremembering of events that day was very common, and not always intentional. Although perhaps these events allow for intentional misremembering to creep in as well.” That interstitial space where fiction and reality blend in the slipstream of memory is the void Crow has been exploring (and exploiting) in her monumental paintings for the past decade. Outrageous in scale and peppered with cheeky art references trapped inside optically explosive historical interiors, Crow's Day-Glo tableaux are a trip—head, drug, what have you—into the dark underbelly of the uncanny. It's a disorienting, intentionally confusing, psychedelic space where images of Bruce Nauman's neons copulate inside the Boom Boom Room (*The Bang Bang Room*, 2010); where the black-light grotesque of Kenny Scharf's Cosmic Cavern grows faces (*Cosmic Cavern*, 2010); where a shadowy Versailles sucks all the lightness of being from Jeff Koons's *Balloon Dog* and *Rabbit* (*Jeff Koons at Versailles*, 2009). It's also a space where the ghosts of a New Year's celebration at the Coconut Grove come out to play, where Hollywood honky-tonks live on in her spray-painted abstract interiors, or Lincoln and JFK's funerals combine into macabre Pop spectacle.

“The scale she works in allows the viewer to become totally enveloped by the paintings, and there is this sense of stepping through them, through this door into an alternate fantastical world where gravity doesn't necessarily apply and colors are a thousand times brighter than you could ever imagine them to be,” says Allegra LaViola, co-owner of Sargent's Daughters gallery in New York, where Crow had a solo show last spring featuring work dialoguing with the equally explosive environments of her modernist analogue, feminist icon Florine Stettheimer. Both used theatricality in work that deals with domestic interiors, but only Stettheimer was critically punished for it. “There can be a dismissal sometimes of work that comes from a female artist, if it portrays a domestic interior, a woman's world,” LaViola says, noting that Crow's Stettheimer-on-steroids aesthetics almost dare people to brush them aside.

Growing up in the Dallas suburb of Plano, Crow wasn't much different from the platinum-bobbed, red-lipsticked, couture-clad force you see today. “I think being Texan has influenced me in the way I make work: It's probably why I like big, huge paintings and why I want to drive a red Corvette,” Crow admits. “This Texas flashiness—I'm really into it.”

Her father was a computer engineer, and her mother, who designed private jets in the 1970s, maintained a constant creative energy in the home. “My mother would always be making Christmas wreaths or flower arrangements, and I would help her do it sometimes,” says Crow, sitting in the Gothic modern dining room opposite her 2006 painting *Silent Rooms with Carpets So Heavy All Footsteps Are Absorbed*, a baroque meditation on historical photos with some imagined elements.

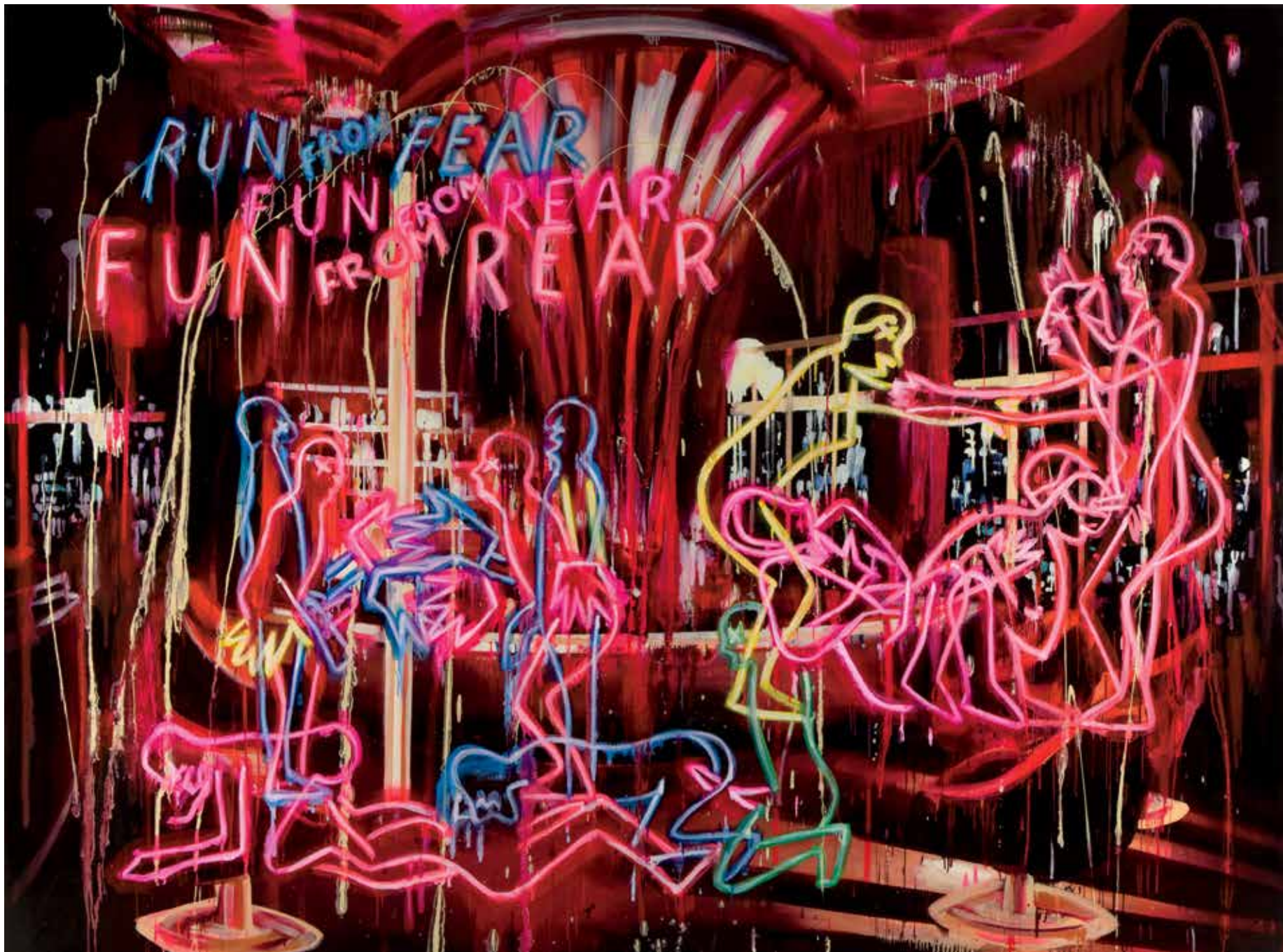


Ocular Maze Work, 2014. Acrylic, Xerox transfer, spray paint, oil, and enamel on canvas, 84 x 60 in.

OPPOSITE: *The Rumor*, 2015. Acrylic, Xerox transfer, spray paint, oil, and enamel on canvas, 75 x 66 in.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: JOSHUA WHITE





The Bang Bang Room, 2010. Oil, acrylic, and enamel on canvas, 9 x 12 ft.

OPPOSITE: *Honeymoon*, 2014. Acrylic, Xerox transfer, spray paint, oil, and enamel on canvas, 78 x 58 in.

“Our house was classic, traditional, very Texas,” says Crow. “She sees my paintings, and they’re insane to her.”

Crow’s early sartorial sensibilities also raised some eyebrows. “I would wear wedding dresses to school and different colored wigs every day,” she explains. “But my parents recognized how this was an important aspect of my self-expression at that age and accepted it wholeheartedly.” In retrospect, this acceptance seems prescient: Crow is now a muse to fashion designer Jeremy Scott. The two met shortly after Crow moved to Los Angeles and have since grown to be best friends: She paints couture dresses for his runway shows; he creates one-of-a-kind fashions she wears to her openings. “I love my very elaborately designed dresses in front of her intensely painted interiors,” says Scott. “It’s kind of an amazing effect, and makes for amazing photos when she’s standing in front of them.”

Scott is also making blank-canvas costumes on which Crow paints patterns—an Old Hollywood gown that is filtered through a ’70s aesthetic (think Jean Harlow at Studio 54); a tight-fitting, flared white-and-green polka dot dress (referencing

the one worn by the Babushka Lady); and a more formal dress invoking a green version of the pink suit Jackie Kennedy was wearing on the day of the assassination—for the three actresses playing Madame Psychosis.

“When Rosson showed me the dioramas for the sets, I was just in awe of how she dug inside herself to push further and also not really care about the trends,” says Scott.

While her indie cred, Pop sensibilities, and knowing art history mash-ups might suggest otherwise, Crow’s process is relentless, and more in line with the Yale MFA candidate she once was than the social butterfly she is today. “The thing with Rosson is that the research is such a large part of the work,” says Fraser. “Her sketchbooks were always really crucial. They’re so important for building up the relationship she has with the work. They’re not drawings, but they work that way.”

Crow walks me over to her library, a smoky wood-paneled affair filled with cascades of art books, prints of her works, an Alex Prager photo featuring Crow’s head among a sea of other striking faces, and her “encyclopedia”—a decade’s worth of her

sketchbooks containing tracing paper mock-ups, advertisements, photos, tabloid clippings, and postcards. “I’ve always used photocopies and collage to build the mock-ups and studies. I spend a fortune on photocopies,” says Crow, as she goes through a five-year-old album and laughs as she spots a clip about JFK’s funeral. “These are all of my random obsessions.”

One of her early preoccupations as an undergrad at the School of Visual Arts in New York was visiting the period rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “I realized that what I like about these restored spaces is the artifice, the theatricality of it, the re-creation instead of it just being a historical home,” says Crow. “You can see the way they lit it through the back to seem like lights were coming through the window.”

Though she let “a lot of dark history sink in” to her paintings of old French palaces and hotels made during a 2006 fellowship in Paris, a Day-Glo brightness crept into her palette when Crow moved to L.A. later that year. She was researching and rendering such Angeleno icons as the Ambassador Hotel, the late Jason Rhoades’s neon installation *Black Pussy*, and defunct North Hollywood honky-tonk the Palomino. “I loved driving around, trying to solve these mysteries and finding these clues to things that could be inspiring,” she says. By 2008, her sleuthing paid off with her L.A. debut at Honor Fraser, “Night at the Palomino.”

“She had these treatments of artificial light in interior spaces, and it’s very interesting how she attacked that,” Fraser says. “And I think *attack* is the right word.”

“There’s nothing I hate more than fussiness. I like to work fast,” the artist says. “The performative element of making these big paintings is very athletic in a sense.” Over the years she has created work by dyeing canvas and drawing on it with bleach; employing acrylic stain to unprimed canvases to render dusty, atmospheric works; constructing the images with tape, then painting over them with oil to reveal the under-painting; and using an airbrush for the under-painting of a classic oil treatment. Before the Stettheimer show, a friend introduced Crow to a paper matte-medium transfer process—she initially tried to re-create Rauschenberg’s solvent transfer process, but it ate through the gesso—which she’s been using to create the under-paintings for her JFK works.

“The transfers are done in layers of color or tones. It’s almost like screen printing, where you do one layer of yellow, then another of black, and so on,” says Crow, who spray paints and uses acrylic washes between each transfer—which may include images of Victorian tables and lamps (like the three sitting on her dining room table that she just inherited from her grandmother’s Arkansas estate), tabloid covers, Don’t Mess with Texas bumper stickers, etc.—adding oil on top for depth. “Each time you do a layer, there is the possibility of the image not lining up correctly, abstracting it, so the more layers you do, the more abstraction happens, intentionally or otherwise.”

Each film set comprises three panels, and the first is a tonal study in cyan with a “ghost of Kennedy” surveying the scene—before which Madame Psychosis will sing “The Shadow of Your Smile,” smoke cigarettes, and pore over tabloids covering the assassination. One of the sets was inspired by old cyanotypes Crow discovered at paper fairs in Pasadena and Burbank.

“We’re probably the youngest people at these fairs by 45 years, if not more,” says Scott, who often accompanies Crow on her research trips. “The excitement she gets when she sees old postcards and viewfinder photos, you wouldn’t even believe it. She’ll be talking to an elderly gentleman for hours about them. She gets really enthralled, and you really see her diving into another world. It’s cute.”

After Madame Psychosis’s song, the film moves to a funeral at a grave site littered with more tabloids, and mourners who are discovered to be paper cutouts. Madame Psychosis falls into

the grave and later awakens in a two-dimensional red room being haunted by a pair of female specters, later to find herself back in the blue room. There, Chief Justice Earl Warren is talking on the phone, and you’re left to wonder if it’s all a dream or if the Madame has in fact been reincarnated.

Crow feels her work has been leading up to this point for some time: the theater of her film sets that draws the vast interiority of her canvases out into the exterior world. She hopes the painterly elements will dissolve into the “truthiness” of the historical events to produce a disorienting montage that almost borders on a psychic experience for the viewer. But it’s also a study of masks and personas: The name Madame Psychosis, who will be played by three different actresses, is a play on *metempsychosis* and the nom du radio of Joelle Van Dyne, the veiled beauty in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, who is described as both hideously deformed and so beautiful she causes paralysis. It examines as well the “ways we attempt to mold ourselves to be more relevant or important or belonging to something historically significant,” says Crow, who plans to tackle Robert Kennedy’s assassination (and a mysterious woman present there) next. “I think this urge is especially strong for women, so this is an exploration of that psychological struggle.” MP

