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Night of a Lifetime

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Julian Wasser's 1963 photos of a world-famous art opening finally get their due

By Kathy Leonardo



Duchamp at his American retrospective in 1963

Photo by Julian Wasser courtesy of Robert Berman Gallery

In 1963, TIME Magazine sent photographer Julian Wasser to cover the opening reception for painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp's much-anticipated career retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum).

Duchamp was one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Wasser, a news photographer, had little idea what he would be walking into: an art party for the ages. The soiree attracted Los Angeles "Cool School" luminaries Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston and Larry Bell (who all lived in Venice at one point or another) as well as actor Dennis Hopper and a young Andy Warhol.

Wasser went with the flow and captured some of the most authentic and compelling photos of

L.A.'s art world at the time.

Duchamp — best known for his modernist/futurist “Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2” (1912) and the nine-foot glass-pane “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even”(1923) — had waited four decades for that much overdue U.S. retrospective.

On Saturday, the Robert Berman Gallery at Santa Monica's Bergamot Station Arts Center gives Wasser his long-delayed due by recreating that historic night in Pasadena through his black-and-white photographs.

“Julian Wasser: Duchamp in Pasadena Redux” features Wasser's photographs alongside artist Gregg Gibbs' appropriations of ready-mades and conceptual works by Duchamp that were on display during the 1963 exhibit. Those include a life-sized recreation of Wasser's most recognizable photograph —Duchamp and a nude Eve Babitz playing chess.

Gibbs is a 20-year veteran of appropriation art (the use of pre-existing objects or images with little or no transformation applied), and his work is integral to recreating the original Duchamp retrospective.

Though TIME wound up not using them, Wasser's photos can be counted among the most recognizable art-world images of the 20th century. It was Duchamp and others who made sure they saw the light of day.

Wasser, says gallery owner Robert Berman, “gave many of the shots that he printed to Marcel [Duchamp], who then handed them out to curators, friends and museums. The photographs were never exhibited until 1973, after Marcel's death.”

That posthumous retrospective, organized by a Duchamp scholar at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was the first time Wasser was credited for the chess photo, which he actually staged about four days after the original opening reception.

“Some of the photographs have been shown through Craig Krull Gallery [at Bergamot] over the years, but they have never been shown together in complete exhibition,” says Berman. “This is the first time that we have dug out the vintage photos, including some rare color shots and the rare later prints in larger sizes of the iconographic shots from both the opening night and the famous composed shot of the nude and Duchamp playing chess.”

In recreating Duchamp's retrospective with Gibbs, Berman is elevating Wasser's legacy as not only a great documentary photographer but also as a talented artist in his own right able to capture moments both raw and spontaneous.

“Marcel [Duchamp] had never gotten his due until this young hip curator [Walter Hopps] convinced him to show in a little-known museum in Pasadena. Wasser really had no idea how very important Duchamp was, but quickly realized he was on to something,” Berman says.

“Wasser was able to absorb the importance of the moment by befriending the most important artists of the 20th century and, in doing so, understood the chance he had to set up this narrative of being able to encapsulate in one photograph the essence of the humor and the entendre of that moment,” Berman continues. “He was able to take the idea of ‘The Nude Descending the Staircase’ and ‘The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,’... [and combine them with] Marcel’s love of chess.”

“Julian Wasser: Duchamp in Pasadena Redux” opens from 5 to 8 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 16, and remains on display through March 5 at the Robert Berman Gallery, Bergamot Station Arts Center B-7, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica. Call (310) 315-1937 or visit robertbermangallery.com.

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