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ART POP CULTURE

Fact and Fiction Collide Inside an Exhibit Inspired by a “Forgotten” L.A. Legend—and *Beverly Hills Cop*

Over the Influence’s latest exhibition, [An Homage to Hollis Benton](#), flips reality on its head

By **Andrea Alonso** - June 12, 2018



In 1980, an ambitious British art collector named Hollis Benton opened up a gallery on Rodeo Drive. It was aptly named the Hollis Benton Gallery, and over the course of ten years it would epitomize the loud, unrestrained culture of the ’80s—from its own chrome and marble surfaces to the loud Don Sorenson paintings on the wall.

But despite playing a hand in launching the careers of art legends like LeRoy Neiman and Patrick Nagel, Benton was never quite accepted into L.A.’s mainstream art world. He was

deemed too commercial and pop-culture-driven, unabashedly placing his artists' work into film, television, and music (you can credit Benton for the album cover Nagel created for Duran Duran's *Rio*).

His influence on the city's cultural landscape is hard to dismiss, which makes his current anonymity all the more surprising. Benton, a man who created so many legacies, has no legacy himself. The only vestige of the Hollis Benton Gallery can be found in the 1984 comedy *Beverly Hills Cop*. Yes, it's *that* gallery, where Eddie Murphy's Axel Foley bemusedly gawks at the incomprehensible artworks alongside hilarious gallery assistant Serge, played by Bronson Pinchot. Aside from this small vignette, Hollis Benton and his gallery have been lost to time.

This is what L.A.-based curator Aaron Moulton has set out to change with his latest exhibition titled *An Homage to Hollis Benton*, which runs through June 24 at Over the Influence Gallery in the Arts District. The show is a celebration and tribute to a forgotten cultural icon, highlighting some of Benton's best gallery shows, while simultaneously showcasing contemporary artists whose work aligns with the gallerist's razor-sharp sensibilities.

But here's the thing: None of what I just wrote is true. Hollis Benton does not, nor has he ever, existed. He's a made-up character. It's "a hoax" as Moulton likes to say at first (in our conversations he later settles on the phrase "art historical fantasy," a semantic shift that shakes off the deceptiveness attached to the word "hoax"). The narrative of the entire show—the homage to this great, forgotten champion of the art world—is completely fabricated.



If you think I've just spoiled the show, breathe easy. In the gallery space, there's no grand reveal, no Alan Abel-like figure pulling back the curtain on Moulton's fantastical charade midway through. All the press materials and exhibition details chronicle this fictional history seamlessly, detailing the facts of Benton's life, his impact on the art world, and the supposed motivation behind the show: "This tribute to his legacy is a celebration of Los Angeles and the '80s, as well as art worlds past and parallel."

It's not as though the narrative of the show itself is so wildly out of the ordinary to raise your suspicions or have you question its authenticity. Its conceit is one we've seen before: a tribute honoring an art-world trailblazer, albeit one that, strangely, has no online presence despite the many artists he allegedly rocketed to fame. (If this detail *does* arouse any doubt, a 15-minute documentary highlighting Benton's life, supposedly unearthed from the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, will greet you at the beginning of the exhibition and abate your skepticism). It has all the makings of a perfectly executed con, yet Moulton will be the first to tell you it's all a front.



“I’ll tell you the cardinal rule when creating a hoax—the most important thing is to never reveal that it’s a hoax,” Moulton says. “But actually what happens when you do that is you’re creating an automatic consensus group believing in the hoax, or at least the reality of its fiction. So I told everyone it’s a hoax, and then they still had to question whether or not they believe [the hoax] or whether it’s real. It’s this excellent opportunity to just sort of play with an echo chamber of belief systems.”

It’s worth clarifying Moulton’s definition of “everyone.” Everyone includes all the artists involved, friends, family, inquiring journalists, and essentially anyone who directly speaks to Moulton. Everyone does *not* include the vast majority of people who will stumble into the gallery while walking along the Arts District’s most trafficked street, nor does it include those who visited the gallery after learning about the exhibition via [Artsy](#), [Autre Magazine](#), [LA Confidential](#), or [Over the Influence’s Instagram](#), where there is no mention of the hoax.

Despite Moulton openly proclaiming the fictional nature of the exhibition, there will be many who simply won’t get the memo, seeing only a glossy layer of ’80s black lacquer masking what’s underneath. By doing this, Moulton has essentially curated two separate shows for two separate audiences. The first audience, those who are unaware of the hoax, could be considered his control group; the in-the-know audience functions as his experimental group. Herein lies the multi-layered, often esoteric, nature of Moulton’s curatorial practice.



Let's pretend for a moment that you are not a member of Moulton's "everyone" and you fall into the control group (as I did my first time around). Despite the hoax, this isn't an Emperor's New Clothes-like prank where Moulton satirizes the art world for its pretensions. Every piece he's selected can stand on its own, with or without Benton's legacy gluing everything together.

What makes this show intriguing enough to visit in the first place is not the mystery or glory behind its protagonist, but instead its most basic element—the indulgence of '80s nostalgia, what Moulton calls "a thing that you can always use, like a high-calorie bubblegum to people." And while the show's an exploitation of our collective tendency to fetishize the decade, that doesn't trivialize the art inside. In fact, Moulton's used the '80s as an enjoyable and easily digestible entry point into more complex themes.

As you enter, you'll most likely notice Don Sorenson's iconic "Greek Temple Painting" to your right, mimicking the entryway to the *Beverly Hills Cop* gallery to a tee. You might bypass the framed exhibition posters on the left and the TV playing that staticky documentary mentioned above, and instead be drawn toward the gallery's spacious center room.

There you'll find yourself in a dopamine-inducing whirlwind of color, geometry, and nostalgic bliss. A rainbow-splattered wall holds some of the exhibition's greatest gems: LeRoy Neiman's *Reggie Jackson* portrait, our favorite DeLorean's "OUTATIME" license plate, a series

of subtly captivating quilt-like paintings from the witchy contemporary artist known as [Lazaros](#), original Patrick Nagel portraits, and a psychedelic oil painting by [Robert Yarber](#).



If it sounds like a recipe for sensory overload, you'll look to the right half of the room and *feng shui* will be restored. A white wall featuring the minimalist works of [Erin Morrison](#) and [Camille Scheffer](#) creates a ying-yang effect throughout the space. The delightful chaos of the left side of the room gets distilled to its bare elements and forms on the right side—Nagel's portraits become Morrison's floating black-and-white eyes, while Peter Shire's whimsical table becomes Matt Johnson's sleek, unembellished paper sculptures.

You'll start to muse on the deeper themes woven throughout the exhibition as the Benton character slowly takes a backseat, becoming the invisible connective tissue that fuses together a larger story. The show artfully twists the concept of time and showcases the aesthetic parallels between generations.

James Havard's abstract illusionism paintings from the '80s are displayed next to one of [Sayre Gomez](#)'s enigmatic acrylic pieces from 2016. With no knowledge of either artist, you'd think their works were produced during the same time period. You could walk around playing "80s or today?" and be thoroughly entertained.

It's hard not to pick up on Moulton's (or are they Benton's?) cheeky undertones in what he calls the "consumer-fantasy" room. Mike Bouchet's blown-up paintings of greasy, glorious burgers sit alongside a bar constructed from trophy parts. It's here where you can wax poetic on society's shallow idea of success, self-indulgence, cheap thrills, or maybe our need as human's to be seen and validated as prompted by Gomez's painting of a woman eerily watching from behind the bar. I can go on, but you understand the message: Despite not being in on the Benton secret, you can extract meaning (and sheer pleasure) from the show.



Now imagine you've been told about the hoax and so you fall into the experimental group. What are you supposed to see now that the truth has been revealed? And is your initial experience and perception of the show now null and void?

Moulton is a self-described "art-world anthropologist." In every show he curates, he plays with the idea of participatory anthropology, challenging the viewer's perception of reality and the basic construction of human beliefs. He's a staunch believer in connecting art back to its original purpose as a means of tapping into higher forces.

“Art’s aboriginal function is a vehicle for spirituality—from cave paintings to the Sistine Chapel. We’ve just secularized it and turned it into this kind of commercial, marketing kind of image porn,” he says.

He’s curated shows on Scientology, kundalini energy, the essence of evil—topics that underscore spiritual and religious experiences. But in *An Homage to Hollis Benton*, these themes aren’t explicitly on display. “The con is magic in itself. It’s the ability to create a state of not-knowingness. And not-knowingness—whatever your spiritual kind of reference points are—is the state of true enlightenment,” Moulton says.

In other words, he wants you to feel a little lost, and to revel in that hazy liminal space between fact and fiction.

Certain moments urge you to pick up on Moulton’s hidden clues. Only after I knew of the hoax could I see these intentional pockets of dissonance. For instance, an exhibition poster of one of Benton’s major shows from 1982, called “Slippery When Wet,” hangs near the entrance of the gallery, but the artwork on the poster is actually Gomez’s cerulean acrylic piece from 2016. If you pay attention, the hoax is out in plain sight.

A TV in the corner of the main room plays a clip of a famous (and unsolved) prank from the ’80s when a person in a Max Headroom mask hijacked the broadcast signal of a Chicago news station for almost 90 seconds. It’s the “Easter egg” of the show, Moulton says, and a sly signal that nothing is as it seems inside the exhibition.

In the age of fake news, Moulton’s “fake” exhibition feels overwhelmingly timely. But recent events weren’t Moulton’s inspiration for the show. “I’ve been doing a lot of work around belief systems and how the art space is this space where we expect, or rather assume, a certain... sincerity,” he says. Still, the art space and the newsroom feel linked within the fantasy world he’s created.

**Slippery
When
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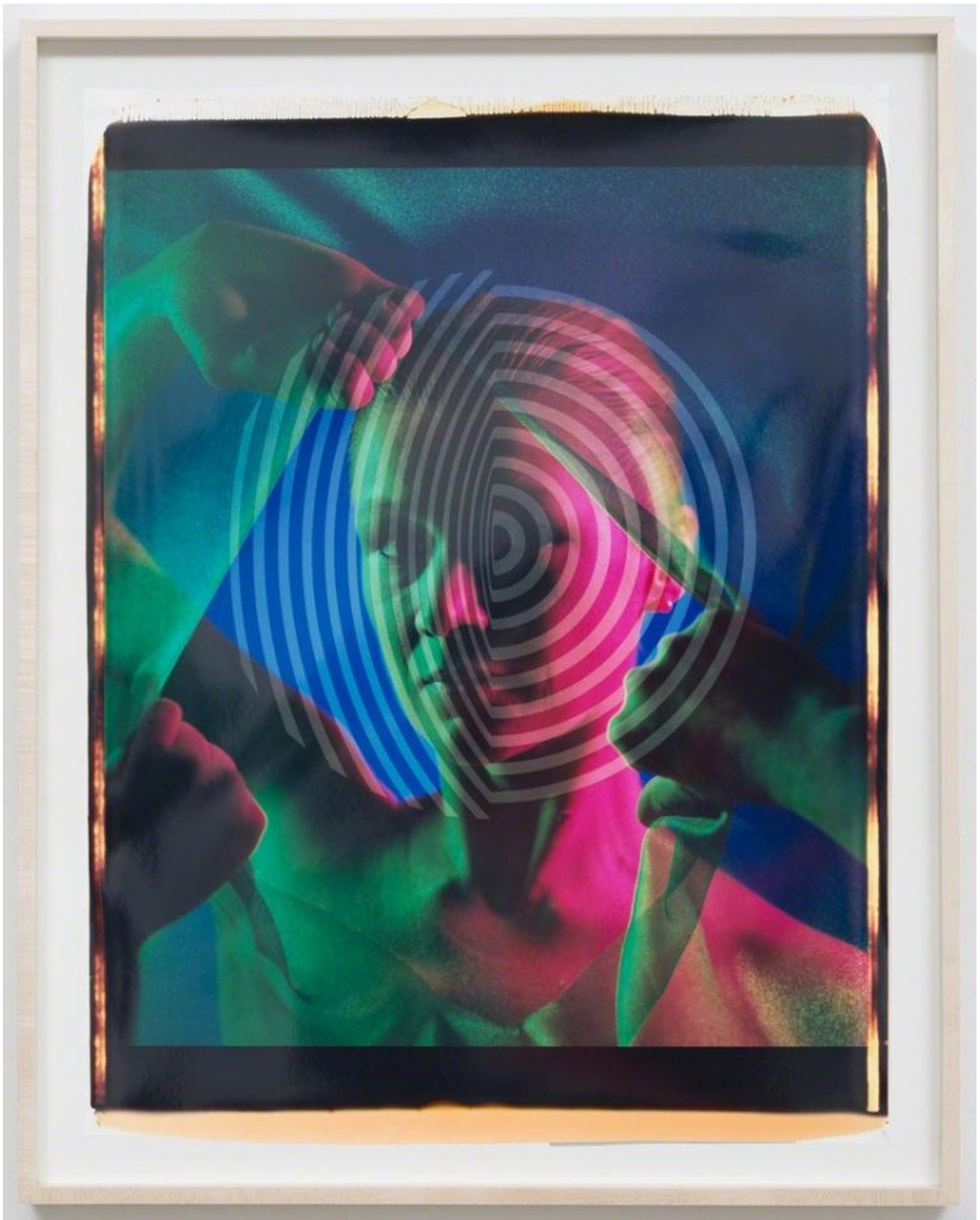
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The most thrilling thing about *An Homage to Hollis Benton* is its recursive nature. The show repeatedly references itself, leaving you scrambling to find which reference is the original. It plays with this idea physically, with various artworks comprised of themselves as in Trent Harris's *The Beaver Trilogy*, in which a movie is made about the making of a movie about the making of a movie. It also urges you to examine the nature of belief and reality—do your beliefs reflect reality or create it?

Maybe the point of it all is to let go of our incessant need to know and understand everything around us. “You’re not supposed to know everything,” Moulton says. “Sometimes it’s better to not know all the details. I was promised so much mystery when I was a kid. In *The Goonies*, *Indiana Jones*—these mythologies, these folklores—they promised me so much mystery of what life had in store. None of it’s there, none of it’s real, it’s just the mediocrity of existence. Or is it? Can I just make these things? Can I make mysteries? And find the lost art? Honestly so much of what I do is based in adolescent angst and desire for what I wished for. So finding Hollis Benton is such a diamond in the rough.”

The thrill is in choosing to believe in Benton or not.



Ellen Carey, "Portrait," 1987

"An Homage to Hollis Benton" runs until June 24 at Over The Influence Gallery

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