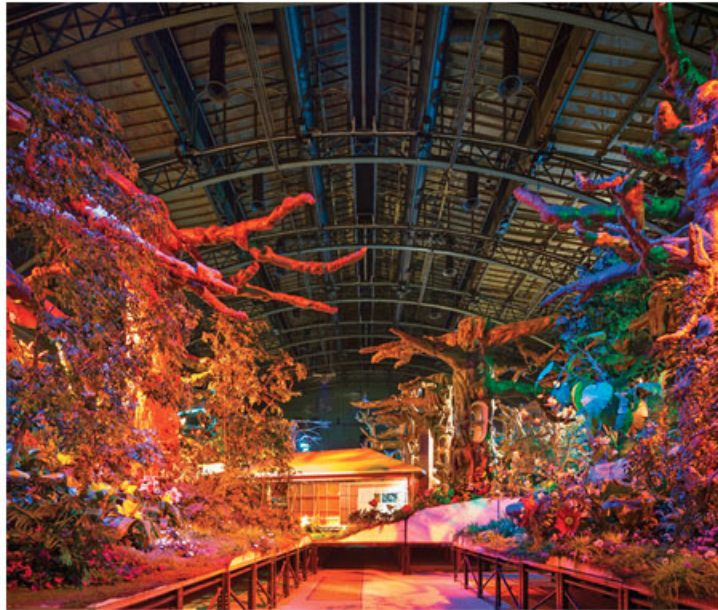


# ARTFORUM

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## Tragic Kingdom

LAURA OWENS ON PAUL MCCARTHY'S WS AT THE PARK AVENUE ARMORY



Paul McCarthy, *WS*, 2013, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: James Ewing.

**FOR MANY**, Paul McCarthy's *WS*, 2013, seems to have said too much. Routinely described as disturbing, oversize, and overwhelming, the eight-thousand-square-foot film set/sculpture featured walls of multichannel projections culled from more than 350 hours of filmed performances shot in the centerpiece of the exhibition, a Disney-like forest containing a replica of the artist's childhood home. But the overly familiar and worn conversations we are having about the show—about its excess, its scale, its repulsion, its clownishness—bespeak the same limitations as the cultural archetypes and stories McCarthy uses as his starting point. Both are safe and familiar yet ultimately unsatisfying. It is easy to position *WS* as a manic, bloated expression of our culture, but that misses the point. *WS* actually reverse kicks our culture's ass: It plunges us into an immersive experience that wears down our habits of naming, categorizing, and containing behavior and identity.

Through the persona of "Walt Paul," McCarthy relentlessly acts out for us our disappointment in prescribed roles, conflating the sculptor, filmmaker, performer, CEO, barfly, American icon, fearless leader, bad dad, and deviant. And his female counterpart, "White Snow," is simultaneously mother, daughter, mistress, sex slave, *kawaii* Lolita, vixen, Virgin Mary, and virgin snow.

One scene projected at the Armory showed White Snow in her messy kitchen: centered in the frame, her arms stretched out, eyes closed, squeezing dough through her fingers, a classic 1950s apron on over her recognizably Disney dress. She cries hard and for a long time. The young actress, Elyse Poppers, convincingly performs the place of deep loneliness we all live with, alone with our own disasters. Hers is the type of cry you have when you know you are never going to be able to clean up the mess, and you will never be a young girl again, and no one cares. She is an everymother—unloved, not an object of affection but the object of abuse—and there's so much to clean. White Snow is not Snow White. White Snow is the complex lived moment that defies a category, and won't sit inside language.

In a nearby projection, Prince Charming arrives in the forest. Unlike the nine dwarves' or Walt Paul's, his body is toned and hairless. His familiar image and understated emotions are out of place. He is not drunk enough and not weird enough; he seems transported from some other film set. His inability to get an erection over an unpainted silicone cast of Elyse Poppers's body was painful to watch. The silicone White Snow is as close as he can get to being in the same frame with the real her, another reminder of his impotence.

**IT'S TRITE TO SAY**, but the fairy tale of our culture, our mainstream culture, is the real feces of our lives. We are living in a shitty, shitty time, when too little—not too much—is being said. The shit storm of capitalism leaves us hungry for something real. McCarthy makes real situations that feel all the more fluent because they talk with the towering voice of Hollywood production. He knows the archetypes of Disney are exhausted and limited, but by wrenching and abusing these familiar scenes even further—whether via a doubly clichéd version of a princess or a drunken, orgiastic party scene—he pulls us toward reality. He submerges us, giving us the feeling of being uneasy, and not just bored, when looking at desperation, hysteria, shame, humiliation, and loneliness.

But we also saw the limits, the edges, of *WS*'s larger-than-life production. In many videos, camera operators were visible in the background. On the set, spray foam could be seen through the crudely painted trees. The forest landscape and the house had been elevated off the ground so we knew they were props. We saw the supports under the set, as if this was where we were positioned: in some basement subconscious. Taking one step back, playing with the seams of production, McCarthy left us disoriented, stuck in the experience of our own conventions, our own self-imposed repressions.

McCarthy uses extremely specific personal references but never allows any biographical narrative to override the moving sense of action and experience. With loose direction and improvisation, the film always pushes toward something weird, but without a need for narrative arc. This is the model of the studio, an expressionistic, impulse-driven place where you move toward what is uncomfortable or unknown, a place where you can get fucked (up) by a bunch of drunk frat dwarves in a replica of your mother's house while your son films you. This is not ordering a shiny ball from a fabricator or cooking some food while a bunch of people play with clay. McCarthy condenses and restages the emotions, hysteria, repression, and shifting sexual roles that happen within the life span of a family. The familiar sublimations of Disney.

McCarthy is choosing a different model of the artist. His lodestar is not the finished product but a place we are not naming, somewhere unknown, foreign, uncomfortable—and true. In an interview about the project, he mentions taking the installation back to Los Angeles for more filming. We see it, and imagine there will be more.

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