

REPORT: Lucas Museum of Narrative Art

Re-framing The Popular Filmmaker's Legacy

by John Seed



When Tracy Zwick of Art in America asked artist Kerry James Marshall—whose retrospective will come to MOCA this spring—“Are you telling stories?” he responded: “Exactly! And these paintings in my stories are connected to larger stories.” So, is Kerry James Marshall now officially a “narrative artist?” Would he or MOCA mind that his socially conscious art has been nudged into a “made-up” category by a new institution? Interesting times are ahead...

The core of the Lucas collection goes back decades to alternative universe of popular and commercial art forms. Vintage illustrations documenting American life, by Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth and Charles Dana Gibson are part of the trove and so are original drawings for “Peanuts” by Charles Schultz. Children’s book illustrations, by Beatrix Potter, Arthur Rackham, Jean de Brunhoff and others form another wing of the collection.

It’s hard to believe, but it’s true: filmmaker George Lucas has never received an Academy Award. “I’ve been nominated, but I’ve never won,” Lucas explained to Charlie Rose in a December 2015 interview; “I’m too popular for that.” Popular and then some, with a net worth of over 5 billion dollars—the bulk of that having come from his 2012 sale of Lucasfilm to Disney—Lucas’s commercial success has endowed him with wealth on a scale that will allow him to do whatever he wants for the rest of his life, critics and doubters be damned.

When Star Wars opened in 1977, Gene Siskel of the Chicago Tribune dismissed the cinematic epic as being “simply a fun picture that will appeal to those who enjoy Buck Rogers-style adventures.” Fast-forward to 2017, after the announcement that Lucas’s newest personal project, The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art would open in Los Angeles in 2021, LA Times art critic Christopher Knight tweeted “Here comes the Treacle Museum.” In a later editorial piece—The Lucas Museum of Art is a bad idea. Here’s why—Knight expanded and clarified, calling it: “a sentimental vanity gallery pumped up on soppy emotional steroids.”

Yes, Darth Vader’s helmet will likely be on display—along with illustrations by Norman Rockwell and Maxfield Parrish—but Knight’s tweet had roughly the impact of a pea-sized meteorite bouncing off the Millennium Falcon: this museum is clearly a “go.” With his unique combination of pragmatism and imaginative drive, George Lucas is very much at home in birthing improbable ventures that break through the force fields of accepted culture into unexplored universes of cultural hyperspace.

The decision to build in Los Angeles came after previous proposals to build on Chicago’s waterfront and San Francisco’s Presidio were sunk by fractious politics. “I’m disappointed,” remarks San Francisco Chronicle art critic Charles Desmarais, “because the idea of the museum on Treasure Island seemed such an appropriate fantasy location. Boating to a museum would have been an extraordinary experience and seeing that futuristic structure from across the bay would have been a vision out of an alternate reality.”

Gratefully embraced in Los Angeles—where mayor Eric Garcetti is calling it an “incredible gift”—the museum will be housed in a raised 275,000 square foot building designed by the starchitect and principal of Beijing’s MAD architects, Ma Yansong. To be situated in Exposition Park, where it will replace two parking lots, Garcetti envisions the Lucas as the “crown jewel” of a cluster of museums that include the California Science Center, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and the California African American Museum. Proximity to schools is another factor, as Lucas’s wife Mellody Hobson explained to Carolina Miranda of the LA Times: “We also wanted to be here because we’d have so many schools around us, and we saw that we’d have a captive audience, not to mention the tourists that we think will come.”

It’s impossible to know just what items visitors will see when they arrive, as Lucas has been collecting for over 40 years, and his personal collection consists of over 10,000 paintings and works on paper and some 30,000 film-related items: curatorial selectivity will be a must. Underlying its variety is a revisionist impulse that unifies Luca’s art collection; a conviction that storytelling and realism—though popular with the general public—are undervalued forms that have been largely underappreciated by art critics and institutions. The website of the planned museum frames it this way:

“By the late decades of the 20th century, a changing cultural climate brought renewed appreciation for realism and storytelling through art, paving the way for Narrative Art’s resurgence to critical commendation. Although Abstract Expressionism had been favored by critics and art connoisseurs, Narrative Art’s popularity with the general public never wavered, pointing to its ability to cross cultural and social boundaries in its plainspoken, genuine style.”

In his recent editorial, Christopher Knight asserts: “‘Narrative art’ is a made-up category,” while the website of the Lucas Museum states “Narrative Art is visual art that tells a story.” You can see the argument shaping up here and it’s a doozy. Do critics and art historians get to name and control the hierarchies and categories of art, or can billionaire museum founders and their curators have a say?

More recent additions, including prints by Kara Walker and a painting by Keith Haring, reflect the taste of Mellody Hobson. An archive of Robert Crumb Zap Comix images and the complete suite of his funky, Rabelaisian “Genesis” drawings will be available: they should work well with Lucas’s trove of Mad Magazine cover art. There is, unsurprisingly, a vast collection of digital material—including films, illustrations, fine art and sculpture—as well as Cinematic Art including set and prop designs, costumes, makeup designs and examples of visual effects.

How this will all come together and relate poses a daunting curatorial challenge, as the varied media and messages represented will need to be shown to work in concert to support the common impulse of storytelling. Important questions will be looming, one of the foremost being “Are Narrative Art and Cinematic Art—both categories appear on the museum’s website—as closely related and compatible as George Lucas believes them to be?” Getting it all to work together and make sense in a gleaming spaceport-like building in a densely populated area of Los Angeles will involve innumerable practical and architectural concerns. Here are two: will the design really allow enough entry points and a substantial loading dock? When I discussed the design with a museum professional friend she noted that although the renderings show big, high spaces, creating adequate display walls might be tough in the museum’s “swooshy-soft, Dairy Queen version of a Zaha Hadid.”

The museum’s problem-solver in chief will be Don Bacigalupi, the former director of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. According to Charles Desmarais, Bacigalupi is “top-notch” and very up to the challenge of launching the Lucas Museum: finding the right curators will be a primary challenge. “So much depends upon what the curators do with the collection,” Desmarais reflects. “I’m hoping for a deep and thoughtful dive—though lively and done with humor—into the history of visual storytelling. But, if they screw it up, the museum could end up looking like a Star Wars convention.”

Desmarais makes a good point and any Museum with “Lucas” in its name will always be inescapably associated with Star Wars. To be fair, Lucas is really about more than that, as his drive to produce Red Tails (2012)—a film that blended history and fiction to memorialize the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen—demonstrates. In his interview with Charlie Rose, George Lucas acknowledged that his interests “have shifted to more mature things” in recent years. The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, an ambitious and groundbreaking venture, has the opportunity to be a mature accomplishment that expands and reshapes the public’s perception of his legacy.

—JOHN SEED



CONCEPT DESIGNS: LOS ANGELES RENDERINGS FOR THE LUCAS MUSEUM OF NARRATIVE ART, MA YANSONG, MAD ARCHITECTS BEIJING, CHINA.
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LUCAS MUSEUM OF NARRATIVE ART