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Review: Oscar steps into artist Joe Sola's sly Hollywood hall of mirrors

BY Christopher Knight

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Joe Sola, "Oscar in Mirror" 2020. (Jeff McLane)

Joe Sola's digitally fabricated "Oscar in Mirror" is a cogent reference to the hugely prominent Academy Awards — rare in a work of art.

The pigment print, one of 12 in the artist's sly exhibition at Honor Fraser Gallery, is pretty funny too. Sola shows the Oscar statuette from behind. That derriere view prompted Bette Davis' perhaps apocryphal claim that it reminded her of her first husband (Harmon Oscar Nelson Jr.) when he got out of the shower — hence the award's eccentric nickname.

Sola tweaked the naked swordsman's pose a bit. The Art Deco symmetry of the original 1928 design is transformed into something closer to an artistically venerable contrapposto pose, traced back through the European Renaissance to antiquity. Oscar peers at his golden mirror reflection like Greek mythology's Narcissus at the pool, viscerally entranced but cluelessly unaware that he's in love with his own gilded likeness.

A generic, eternally sunny California plein air landscape painting hangs on the wall behind Oscar's reflection. Art is metaphorically placed behind a viewer who follows Oscar's lead and peers at Sola's digital image. We are, in other words, helplessly sandwiched inside a Hollywood hall of mirrors.



Joe Sola, "Knotted Palm," 2020. (Jeff McLane)

The show is titled “I Drove to San Francisco and Back,” and five more digital prints expand on unpopulated California vistas. Sola gilded these digitally manufactured landscapes, whose subjects range from the mountains to the deserts to the sea. The trunk of a golden palm is tied in a knot, El Dorado unfurls in gold nuggets bigger than a house.

Throughout, a layer of gold drenches the Golden State in the dull, alien shimmer of that metallic hue. This is Oscar’s kingdom, legacy of a mad foundational gold rush.



Joe Sola, “Stool (Apollo Era),” 2020.

The six remaining prints add something witty but grim to the witty but soulless glitter. Warhol-style cans of Campbell’s tomato soup erupt like Vesuvius at Pompeii, here gushing floods of red pigment into digitally fabricated rooms filled with computer hardware. As the blood-red pigment rises, the inhabitants stare defenselessly — or drown. Some record their doom on cellphone cameras held aloft, a frenzy of fatal selfies.

Satire has been a staple of Sola’s past art — typically gentle, as it is here, rather than edgy or sharp, and all the more seductive because of it. Over in the corner, before entering the next room, a sign asks visitors to sign lengthy liability waivers, not unlike those a web surfer must accept before accessing a site.

When you get inside the room, stepping up onto a slightly raised stage, the gallery turns out to be empty — save for a single crimson light bulb shining overhead. As red-light districts go, this one is simultaneously a pleasure zone with a distinct potential for theatrical self-reflection, as well as a place that registers quiet alarm.



Joe Sola, “Waive Everything,” 2020. (Jeff McLane)