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The Ultimate Platonic Experience

JUNE 4, 2018



A Q&A with curator Donatien Grau

By Dawn Moore

“Plato in L.A. represents a moment of engagement between contemporary artists and a philosopher commonly deemed their enemy, who might in fact be their best friend.” – cultural critic and curator Donatien Grau

Whether you’re from L.A. or from somewhere else, the Getty Villa is a singular experience. Designed as an authentic replica of a 1st century elite Roman’s coastal retreat, it was the passion project of J. Paul Getty to display his vast treasures and happens to overlook some of the best surfing in the world. That the Villa is dedicated to antiquities in a town whose favorite day of the week is tomorrow, makes it the perfect institution to host a mind-bending look at Plato. After all, Plato was a wealthy and perhaps rudderless young man until his relationship with Socrates set him on a journey of metaphysical and political contemplation, so where better than L.A. to probe this eternally relevant Greek philosopher.

In a first for the Getty Villa, *Plato in L.A.: Contemporary Artists’ Visions* features some of the 21st century’s most celebrated artists and is the inaugural exhibition accompanying the opening of the Villa’s newly reinstalled spaces. Thought-provoking original works by Rachel Harrison, Joseph Kosuth, Paul McCarthy, Whitney McVeigh, Raymond Pettibon and Adrian Piper have been created specifically for this exhibit alongside Jeff Koons’ *Play-Doh* and, naturally, the most important of Mike Kelley’s *Plato’s Cave* drawings.

We asked some probing questions of Donatien Grau,

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author, art historian and guest curator of Plato in LA: Contemporary Artists' Visions from the posh lobby of partner Hotel Casa del Mar. Let the Platonic dialogue begin...

How did your collaboration with the Getty come about?

It started at the Getty Research Institute, where I was a Guest Researcher twice. There is, however, another story to it. When I was a teenager, my father would tell me about the Getty. He is a lawyer, and he had never been there, but he would tell me about this great place for art and knowledge. So it's been a particular privilege to conceive this exhibition.

In today's selfie-obsessed culture, how would you contextualize Plato and his eternal relevance?

Plato is anti-selfie; he is the antidote to selfies. The whole point of the selfie is to state one's importance at a given moment. It is transient and self-oriented. Plato, through his engagements with knowledge, gives us a sense of our world's extension. There is so much more to it than what we think, and the best thing is, if we are wise enough, serious enough, devoted enough, we can be part of it.

If Plato lived in LA today, how do you think he'd be perceived?

Plato lives in L.A. today: his name is Paul McCarthy. Just look at Paul's works.

When envisioning this exhibition, what thread were you looking for in contemporary artists' work to form your narrative?

Having new works created seems both exciting and daunting...

I don't see myself as a narrative sort of curator, inventing a story and using works of art as vehicles for it. As a

devotee of artists, I am fascinated with what they have to say, their vision. So that was my work, basically. Going to artists, asking them about their relation to Plato. In the case of the late Mike Kelley, it was clear.

These artists have each acknowledged Plato's influence. How do you see that dialogue playing out?

For me, the dialogue opened, each time, in a very distinct way. The first aspect of this dialogue is very immediate, very basic. These are works of art. We are not dealing with theory that's spelled out, even though we do have a significant amount of thinking in each artist's interview in the catalogue. We are dealing with art. Each work is a window into a world of thought, whether it is through civil disobedience, music, poetry, representation, ideals, the destructive consequences of ignorance, the importance of books in the time of digital. It is up to every viewer to make up their own perspective and read, not just books, but our world. In other words, think.

Tell me about the arrangement of the pieces and what I'll learn from their progression?

This exhibition can be experienced in many different ways, and every narrative is open. If you follow the path we designed, which you absolutely do not have to, you go from a series of works relating to the visualization of the text and how Plato's writing itself is relevant today (Joseph Kosuth, Whitney McVeigh, Paul Chan), to a series on dialectics, the confrontation of negativity, with major works by three artists from Los Angeles (Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon), to an ensemble on the contemplation of the ideal (Rachel Harrison and Jeff Koons), and finally a room on the Cave allegory and politics titled "the Political Cave," with works by Huang Yong Ping, Adrian Piper, Michelangelo

Pistoletto. Quite a journey...What you'll learn is that reading does not go one way, it can go many ways. There are direct references in each work, but the narratives are also set to be as open-ended as possible.

All the "firsts" of this exhibition are pretty amazing. As it was coming together, did you have moments of doubt?

The exhibition grew progressively, and for that reason it has been a construction, going up and up and up. The trust that was placed in the conversation by the artists was so inspiring that I don't see there being moments of doubts. A number of the works preexisted, so we merely had to select them. Others were made for the exhibition, but by artists who have already deeply engaged with Plato and somehow related to other bodies of work they had already made.

What one thing do you want visitors to walk away from this exhibition with?

The most important thing in museums is to be open and to keep questions open. In the grander scheme of things, I would love for visitors to leave with greater knowledge, whether it is from the aesthetic experience of art, from thinking, from reading, or from studying. This exhibition can be of interest to scholars and the general public alike. Plato belongs to everyone.

If you were to have dinner with Plato, in what direction would the conversation go?

I'd try to convince him to take a selfie with me in front of the poster of the exhibition. That would be great publicity.

Plato in L.A.: Contemporary Artists' Visions through
September 3. Visit www.getty.edu

Getty Villa celebrating the new exhibit "Plato in LA: Contemporary Artists' Visions." In this highly anticipated exhibition, celebrated artists such as Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, and more, consider Plato's impact on the contemporary world.

As part of this partnership, Hotel Casa Del Mar is offering guests a chance to reserve the "Plato on the Beach" package which includes:

- Two welcome signature "The Art of The Cocktail: Artist Inspired Libations" cocktails
- Complimentary parking and access to the Getty Villa to see *Plato in LA: Contemporary Artists' Visions* and other Villa galleries
- Complimentary valet parking for one car during stay at Hotel Casa del Mar
- 1 copy of the exhibition catalog by Donatien Grau, titled *Plato in LA: Contemporary Artists' Visions*

* Offered for stays from April 18, 2018 – September 3, 2018. Offer is subject to availability at the time of reservation. Blackout dates may apply. May not be combined with any other offers, not valid for existing reservations. Contact your travel professional. *



