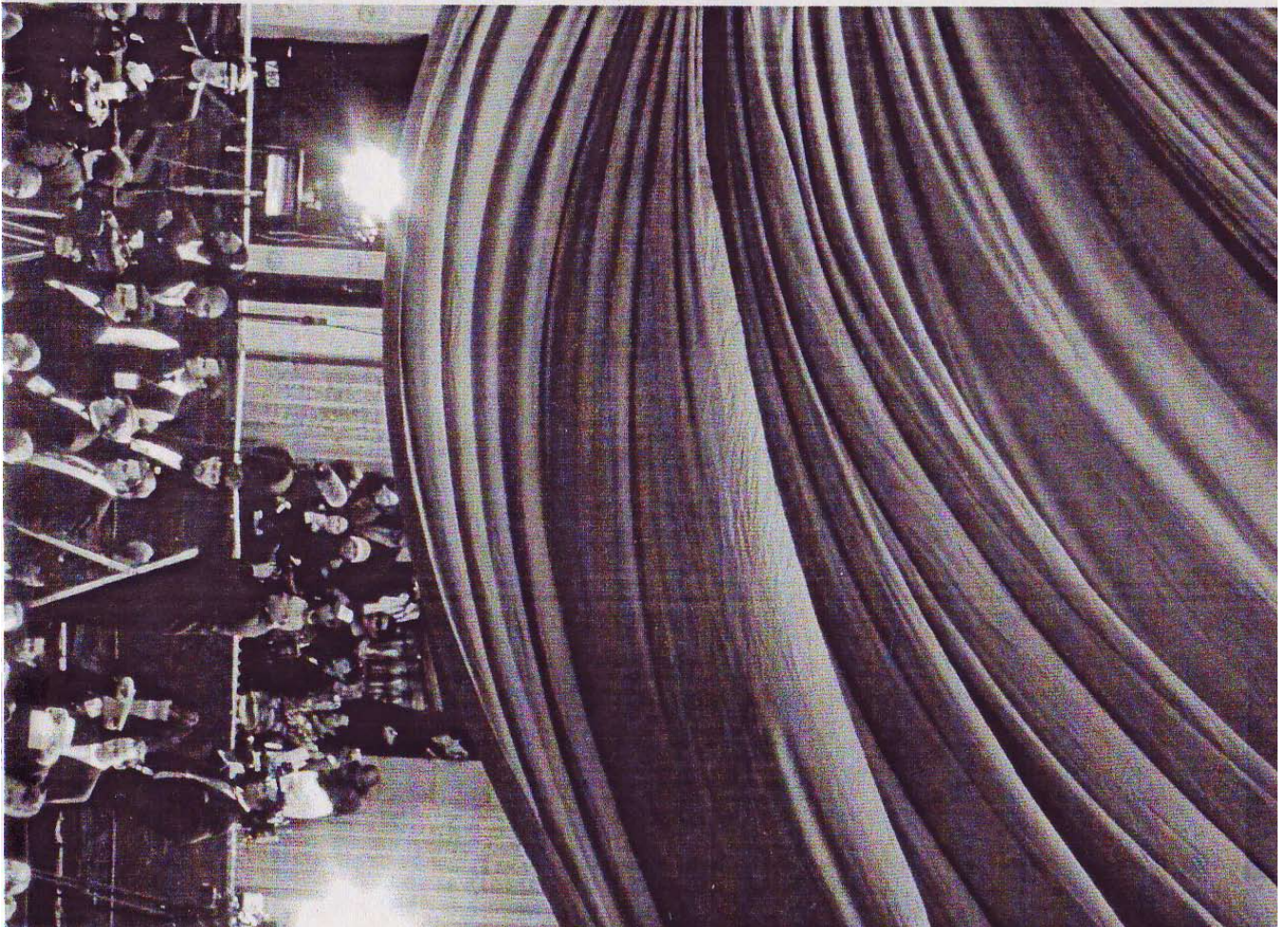


Hollywood unveiled

Sarah Morris makes work about power networks and politics in the American metropolis. What better place to go than Los Angeles in pursuit of Hollywood's most wanted, asks **Katy Siegel**



Everyone goes to the movies, and tabloids and TV shows have made the stories behind them a matter of public knowledge: we hear about weekend grosses, upcoming projects and screenplay bidding wars. But what do we really know? And how does the audience make the transition from outsider to expert?

When Sarah Morris makes a film, she picks a time of year that's key to the location. *Capital* (2000), for example, was shot in Washington DC during the first week of the legislative session. For *Los Angeles*, a project that consists of a film and several paintings, the Oscars were the grail, the height of a narcissistic season, and she looked for events that fell during that week, such as Doug Liman making *Mr and Mrs Smith*. Her 12 days in LA sound like a dream itinerary with the rich and famous: first night spent courtside at a Lakers game with Jack Nicholson and Matthew Perry, the last night filming the Oscars from the perfect close-up vantage point. In between, though, she hit 200 sites that include the not-so-glamorous aspirational locations of acting workshops, casting sessions and Kinko's copy shops patronized by would-be scriptwriters, as well as the big money offices behind the glamour, all occupying the strange LA no-style, futuristic glass pile.

In *Capital* and *Miami* (2002), Morris investigated places loaded with history, myth and particular visual qualities. In thinking about Los Angeles, she not only wanted to explore the city, but film itself – and there is a new element of self-reflexivity here, the lens looking back at itself. 'Going Hollywood' can make even a mere artist feel like a real filmmaker (conversely, filmmakers often wish they were real artists). For one thing, the technical equipment available outperforms what Morris used in previous projects. Not only are the images clearer (she used the same lenses as Stanley Kubrick), but she was running dailies, just like a big-budget director.

And running a studio, just like a big-budget producer. Direct, produce, act, manage, script: many contemporary artists, including Morris, do all these things – as do many Hollywood figures, from Clint Eastwood to Drew Barrymore. A famous model for this multi-tasking is Warren Beatty, and the artist's pursuit of him as a player in Los Angeles became the project's back story. (One imagines this relationship was not unlike the now-famous tale of Sofia Coppola's pursuit of Bill Murray for *Lost in Translation*, another December muse to a May producer.) The long process of getting access to the powerful people and exclusive locations she wanted was as central to Los Angeles as to any commercial movie.

On her studio wall, instead of the storyboard on which an artist would normally lay out for a film or video, Morris created a flow chart describing the Hollywood ecosystem. Producers, directors, actors, stylists, managers and publicity people are linked in a map of LA power relations: it includes the woman who runs Brad Pitt's production company, various CAA agents, director Brett Ratner, Sony executive Sidney Ganis and PR diva Pat Kingsley. The map splits the difference between a really impressive Rolodex and an Erik Parker painting.

Why did so many of these powerful people agree to let Morris film them. Curiosity? Vanity? The obligatory nod to art? Perhaps also a desire to perform and to participate in the representation of themselves and their world – as in the case of Ratner, a successful commercial director, who wanted to be shot in the back seat of his Bentley. This collaborative aspect of the project implicates the artist in a funny way: once she began working the phones, making and

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using social connections, and asking for (and receiving) favours, she is hardly the stern critic tsk-tsking about low commercial culture from the lofty perch of high art. Sometimes she and her team even felt like they were being produced or controlled themselves, as if they were on someone else's set. Producer Robert Evans mandated that he be filmed shaving; when the film crew showed up at his palatial, shiny black bathroom, there he was, seated in a chair, being barbered by his topless girlfriend.

In Los Angeles, the line between fact and fiction, reality and representation seems thin, or maybe even unimportant. Not only are there scenes that acknowledge the processes of shooting and developing film, we also see women bleaching their teeth, Botoxing their brows and tanning their breasts. There is a shot of a bronze star on Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame celebrating Snow White – a cartoon character, not a real person (perhaps a nod to fellow artist Pierre Huyghe). To complement the science of fiction, the architecture Morris features in the film and the paintings has the look of science fiction. The Bonaventure Hotel (itself a star immortalized by both Clint Eastwood in *In the Line of Fire* and Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) has a space-age-gone-wrong look with its five strange non-connecting towers, people movers shooting up and down its huge atrium, and acres of glass. Although Morris has chosen various Modernist landmarks to film, such as a house by Frank Lloyd Wright protégé John Lautner, the architecture overall has the hideously nondescript look of huge, shiny containers that define false public space and corner offices.

Octagons and polygons pulled from these odd postmodern boxes form the dominant structure of the painting series made as part of the larger *Los Angeles* project. Named for various buildings, the paintings are equally based on Morris's charts of interlocking social systems. Do they have depth of perspective? Maybe, maybe not: like the culture, they are flat, with certain points of entry. The colours key into those of the film and LA details: the hot pink of the 'red' carpet; the blue of the background used for filming; the blue of the Laker girls' uniforms and the Beverly Center neon; the green of indoor jungles; sky filled with smog.

The film has no narrative arc as it ranges across locations and subject matters, but rather accumulates people, places, events that feel loosely connected. Morris never pulls back to the wide-angle shot, but hints at the industry's immensity, tied together by currents of power. Her vision is reminiscent of Seventies conspiracy films like *Network* and *All the President's Men*. In Los Angeles, however, there is no final mystery to be revealed, only an unrelenting system of seduction and representation. In depicting it, Sarah Morris became a part of it – like everyone, audience as well as experts.

Sarah Morris, "Los Angeles", 3 June-10 July, White Cube, London N1 (+44 (0)20 7930 5373, www.whitecube.com)