

Ultimately, it doesn't matter if you're seeing Larry King or Owen Wilson or Joan Collins

While watching Sarah Morris's lushly mesmerizing, oddly odious, intermittently boring 26-minute film *Los Angeles*—as I gazed at close-ups of producer Robert Evans being shaved by a topless blonde, director Brett Ratner dressing in the back of a limo, John Travolta alongside Sandra Bullock, Jack at a Lakers game, Brad on the set, and Uma and

Oprah on the red carpet—it dawned on me that we're entering a new era. Warhol's dictum is being turned inside out. Soon it will simultaneously be "In the future only 15 people will be famous" and "In the future everyone will be famous to 15 people."

Until I saw *Los Angeles*, I thought stars existed for and were performing for us; they want our attention as well as the money and fame that they hope go with it. Now I understand that in America the opposite is true: All of us are actually only cogs in an elaborate service industry dedicated to and revolving around celebrities. It is we who are in their lives, not the other way around. We are their subjects, not vice versa.

Morris is best-known for her flashy superficial geometric paintings that jump off walls at you but never go deep. She's also made four all right films about other American cities. *Los Angeles* is a refracted self-portrait; in it, Morris's superficiality works for her. She savors, sidles up to, and plumbs the depths of L.A.'s shallowness. She makes you understand that Baudrillard was right: Reality is replicating itself without an original. She also goes a step further and gets you to grasp that, as with Keanu Reeves and his crew in *The Matrix*, a stratum of celebrities now exists outside the simulacra. These stars function like termite queens generating order within the system. In a way, the entire hive is organized around their motions. After seeing *Los Angeles* you understand that on some cosmic level Jack is the *only* person in the crowd at the Lakers game. Even though this A-list is obviously evolving, it's also consolidating. You see the same stars over and over. Another possibility Morris offers is that this foundation of queens is growing so large that in the future only a

WE ARE THEIRS

BY JERRY SALTZ



Photograph by Sean Dack/Friedrich Petzel Gallery

minuscule number of people will know who any given star is.

Los Angeles vividly demonstrates that a metaphysics of seeing governs this system. As long as you can see the queens you're in the matrix. The distance you see them from is immaterial; the rest of us are drones. A

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**Star jones: Sarah Morris
contemplating Uma Thurman**

crucial order of drones is those who attend to, point cameras at, or otherwise oversee the production of images of the queens. These images allow queens to spread their pheromones. Without them, the chemical scent would be lost and the hive would be forced to face the return of what these pictures of celebs allow everyone to repress: emptiness and death.

Which brings us to Morris and her mind-boggling, if eyebrow-raising, access to the queens. She's in a car with Dennis Hopper, behind the scenes at the Academy Awards,

SARAH MORRIS
Friedrich Petzel
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observing Botox injections, next to Charlize and Renée. Yet Morris is there and not there. We never see her, only what she and her talented cameraperson see. *Los Angeles* is like a modern-day Chinese landscape painting: The subject matter is readily apparent but the subject is subordinate to methodology, in this case Morris's lyrical camerawork. Like the brushwork of the landscape painting, her process and touch are always on display; you feel her body at all times. *Los Angeles* is a deeply formalist, self-reflexive work. Morris continually delineates a distinct, albeit invisible frame: the ever present membrane that separates celebrities from those who are not celebrities. This ties her more to the "expanded field" of painting and sculpture than to *Us Weekly* or *E!* *Los Angeles* makes clear who's in and outside this frame, but also that this frame has no center; one star is no closer to the middle of the hive than any other. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if you're seeing Larry King or Steve Martin, Owen Wilson or Joan Collins. As long as you're seeing a queen. There is no Queen queen.

Morris captures a fascinating behavior pattern on the part of the queens: When no camera is apparently present they shift into an ingenious energy-saving latent state. They do nothing as they quietly wait for the next camera to get into position. This stillness makes you realize that everything in *Los Angeles* is moving *except* the queens. Like real termite royals, they remain relatively motionless. They stand, and are seen, photographed, and then transported to the next photo op. Morris is completely uncritical of all this. Or rather, her critique—like ours—is ambivalent. Anyway, she's the anti-Andrea Fraser: She doesn't critique institutions; she basks in them. In so doing she makes you realize how optimistic Andy's maxim about fame really was.