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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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A gala celebration for MOCA

The highlight of the 30th anniversary party? A production involving Lady Gaga and Bolshoi dancers.



THINK PINK: Lady Gaga and artist Francesco Vezzoli perform during the celebration. The grand piano, which was sold at the end of the show, was decorated by Damien Hirst (Ann Johansson / For the L.A. Times / November 14, 2009)

By Jessica Gelt

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The most telling image at the Museum of Contemporary Art's 30th anniversary gala wasn't hanging on a wall. It was a vignette that a few early guests might have seen: Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie gazing intently at a Mark Rothko painting during a private tour.

For MOCA, which recently made what Eli Broad called one of the "biggest turnarounds

in the history of the art world," the sight of one of pop culture's most royal couples taking in one of Abstract Expressionism's most influential pioneers was just the kind of image the museum was trying to project at Saturday night's lavish affair.

It was a night that celebrated celebrity and its magnetic power as much as MOCA's breathtaking permanent collection, displayed in the museum's biggest exhibition to date.

"Think about this: People have come here from all over the world to celebrate MOCA's revival," a jovial Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said while walking down the red carpet with girlfriend (and KTLA-TV Channel 5 reporter) Lu Parker on his arm. "And we've all come together to acknowledge that L.A. did not let this great institution fall by the wayside."

The mood was gay, with more than a hint of self-consciousness (this was a museum back from the brink, after all) at the black-tie soiree, which drew more than 1,000 for a reception, sneak preview and a sit-down dinner, raising more than \$3.5 million for MOCA.

MOCA's financial troubles weren't simply recession related. They followed nearly a decade of fundraising shortfalls, during which museum leaders spent down a \$38-million endowment. When the global meltdown hit, MOCA was almost down for the count, until Broad stepped in with a \$30-million bailout. Since then, the museum has received other significant pledges.

The highlight of the evening was a five-minute production created by video artist Francesco Vezzoli called "Ballet Russes Italian Style (The Shortest Musical You Will Never See Again)," which involved pop princess Lady Gaga performing her new song, "Speechless," on a rotating pink grand piano painted with blue butterflies by Damien Hirst.

Gaga sang a soulful and sorrowful love ballad with husky self-assurance while dancers

from the Bolshoi Ballet moved with graceful, sweeping gestures on either side of the stage in the center of the tent.

The performance was designed to be, as co-chair Maria Arena Bell described it, "a living, breathing artwork."

The costumes, including Gaga's Frank Gehry-designed hat and the dancers' Vezzoli and Miuccia Prada-designed outfits, were to be auctioned later online. But the piano sold for \$450,000 at the end of the show while the "Price Is Right" theme played.

It was a fitting crowning event for an evening that began with the who's who of the art world, including Takashi Murakami and John Baldessari mingling with famous faces such as Christina Ricci, Gwen Stefani and James Franco.

The walls were graced with paintings, installations and photos equal in celebrity and stature, if not more so, than the guests they surrounded. Seminal works by Andy Warhol, Diane Arbus, Jackson Pollock, Roy Lichtenstein and Ed Moses were a small sampling of the riches on offer.

"I was chairman [of MOCA] 30 years ago, but then we didn't have a collection," said Broad, very much the man of the hour. "Now we have a great collection. Tonight is about 'MOCA New,' " he added, addressing the evening by its heavily branded title.

MOCA New, yes, but there were a number of guests who harbored a soft spot for MOCA old, including 75-year-old Billy Al Bengston and his wife, Wendy Al. Wearing a beret and a bow tie, Bengston, who has two pieces in the exhibition, sat at a table in the far corner of the tent with Al, who was also in a suit and wearing a pink felt bow tie.

The two were happy to see MOCA raising funds and glad to reconnect with old friends, but they were sentimental for a time when there was, as Bengston explained, "A place

for intellectuals. At least it seemed when I was young there was a certain degree of integrity."

These days, Bengston said, "if you have a painting on the wall, people just want to talk about how much it cost. When it gets like that, people don't see the painting anymore. But that's the way things change."

But what hasn't changed? Some of the artists themselves. "Frank and Berta Gehry, and Hockney in his dirty suit -- he's got so many food stains -- those were the good old days. And Moses, he's everywhere tonight," Al said just before Ed Ruscha approached the couple to say hello.

"Is Frank here tonight?" he asked Bengston.

"He's in the middle, where Lady GooGa is," joked Bengston, clearly relishing his mispronunciation of Lady Gaga's name.

Gaga and Vezzoli may have been successful at helping hoist MOCA into the post-postmodernist ether of the 21st century, but the job of keeping it there will fall to the museum's new board of trustees and, of course, to Angelenos themselves.

As Norman Lear put it while walking through the exhibition, "If our tormented world is to be saved, it will be saved by the arts."

So, what saved MOCA? Lear paused and cracked a smile. "Eli Broad."

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