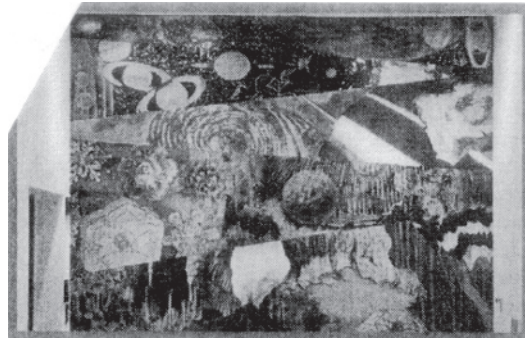


Aaron Morse at the Hammer Museum

By Katherine Satorius
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detail of *Timeline*, 2008, acrylic on printed vinyl wallpaper

Installed on the Hammer Museum's lobby walls, *Timeline*, is a mural in three parts: The first, on the back wall, shows a primordial world of developing planets and organisms; the second, on the large central wall, depicts a history of the animal kingdom; and the third, on the front wall, is dedicated to human progress. The title is a misnomer, since the piece is hardly linear—it's more like a time explosion, with representatives of diverse eras crowding into frame and overlaying one another. On one level, the tone of the project, with its absurd premise of encapsulating the entire history of the universe, is tongue-in-cheek, poking fun at the whole conception time as a neat x-axis. The mural (actually an enlarged collage digitally printed on vinyl wallpaper then selectively hand-painted) also riffs on the spirit of those ubiquitous community murals, seen all over Los Angeles, in which the evolution of a neighborhood, or city, or the whole world, unfolds in didactic morphing landscapes, or—as in the 101 Freeway mural of Greek columns hurtling through outer space—incongruous images collide to bizarre effect. Morse's mural, in a similar vein, has a puppy overlapping JFK's shoulder, a glam-rocker peeking out from behind Rosalyn Carter and a mushroom cloud erupting behind an office tower.

But while the mural has a humorous side, it also gets at something more profound—namely, the compulsion to organize and understand the world on one hand, and the futility of that project on the other. By digitally solarizing the images in his collage, which range from historic photos and engravings to pictures from the Web, then hand-coloring parts of them in keyed-up hues (lime green, bright pink, yellow, blue), Morse reminds us that we're looking through his distorted personal lens, and that any attempt to stitch together a comprehensive narrative of the past must contain some element of fiction. After all, of all the tools we have for reconstructing past events—photographs and artworks, memories, first-person accounts, documents—none are wholly reliable. Every living person probably holds a slightly different conception of what our collective past looks like, built from fragments of texts, images from TV or film, stories, museum exhibits and other diverse sources. History, as postmodern theory likes to hammer home, is, while based on real happenings, largely a shifting human construction.

In an artist's talk accompanying the exhibition, Morse mentioned his fascination with impossible perspectives, "God's-eye" views that reveal cross-sections of things that can't be cut open, or images of inaccessible times and places. A timeline, too, is a God's-eye view—not only because it takes an all-knowing entity to account for and make sense of everything that's happened at every instant since time began, but because we're always trapped in the present moment and so can never see, in a literal sense, any larger picture. There's a romantic quality to such imagined perspectives, fantasizing as they do about expanding our powers to see and comprehend the world. Romance, in fact, is a strain that runs through much of Morse's world, sometime subverted, sometime embraced. Romanticized or mythologized pasts—the Wild West, events in Genesis, which avoid assuming the sentimental nature of their subject matter by virtue of their strangeness. (Sentimentality leans on familiarity, so disassociation is a good antidote.) Of course most myths are themselves profoundly strange, bounding in a paradoxical effort to explain some aspect of the real world. Like much of Morse's work, *Timeline* finely and intelligently explores this and intelligently explores this charged gray area, this push and pull between the real and the unreal, fiction and fact, chaotic soup sensible narrative.