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FRANCOPHRENIA

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James Franco

Last week, James Franco—the actor, artist, poet, and, starting in the fall, Ph.D. candidate in the English department at Yale—staged a piece of performance art at the Pacific Design Center, in Los Angeles, a huge blue-and-green compound on Melrose Avenue. “Soap at MOCA,” it was called—“MOCA” because the Museum of Contemporary Art was hosting it, and “soap” because it was a live taping of “General Hospital,” the show on which Franco has been appearing intermittently since November, playing a deranged performance artist called “Franco.”

Franco—rather, “Franco”—has come to Los Angeles, according to the script, in the hope that the object of his fascination, a Mafia hit man whose murder skills he admires, will follow him. *Pay attention to me!* “Franco” is saying. With the help of Jeffrey Deitch—the real-life new director of MOCA, who makes a cameo in the episode—“Franco” arranges a show called “Francophrenia” in a large outdoor plaza at the Pacific Design Center. In it, he re-creates, among other things, the scenes of his previous art installations: his gallery in Port Charles, the fictional New York town where “General Hospital” takes place; and his studio, where he once imprisoned a woman in a Lucite box and threatened to kill her in the name of art.

There was no one who was not confused. The suspiciously handsome men wearing tool belts and white gloves and T-shirts that said “Museum Staff” who were hanging abstract paintings on the Port Charles sets: actors. Two “General Hospital” publicists stood by. “Is this art Franco art or ‘G.H.’ art?” one asked the other.

“Franco” was the reply. “Wait—do you mean *James Franco*? I believe it’s the character’s.” An onlooker explained that, two nights earlier, a show of performance and installation art by “James Franco, the human being” had opened at the Clocktower Gallery in New York.

Across the plaza, three “General Hospital” staffers walked by another installation—an old-timey gas station, with a robin’s-egg-blue Thunderbird parked out front—and asked, “Is this part of MOCA?” No, it wasn’t. It was a piece of “Franco”’s art that “he” had made especially for the exhibition. The climax of his show, the TV show, and Franco’s show would take place in a scene in which a stuntman—call him “ ‘Franco’ ”—would fall from a balcony three stories above the gas station and die. Or not.

Several hours before taping began, Franco, in a neatly pressed tuxedo, with slicked-back hair, a dull pancake-makeup glow, and a glaze of coffee on his teeth, sat in a director’s chair, trying to explain. Asked about the layers of performance, he said, “It’s kind of hard to tease ’em all out.” He took a sip of coffee, and said it all began with “Erased James Franco,” a conceptual film piece he’d made, two years ago, with an artist called Carter, in which Franco had re-created performances from his feature films. He and Carter talked about making another movie, in which he would play a character who is an actor on a soap opera. “I said, ‘What if I really did that? Wouldn’t that be interesting?’ ” Franco said. “My manager represents Steve Burton”—the Mafia hit man on “General Hospital”—“and we called them and said I’d like to be on the show. They were very happy. They said, ‘You can do anything—what kind of part would you like to play?’ I wanted their full treatment, so all I said was that I wanted to be an artist and I wanted my character to be crazy.” He took another swig of coffee and shifted about elegantly in his chair. “They asked if they could call the character Franco—that was their idea. It was a beautiful idea.”

The museum had invited a slew of art-world types to watch Franco perform. They assembled on the balcony three stories above the plaza and drank champagne. The designer Jeremy Scott gazed down at the scene. “I’m also playing myself on a soap,” he said. “I’ll be on ‘The Young and the Restless’ on July 13th. It’s the No. 1 soap, of course.”

Downstairs on the plaza, Maria Bell, a MOCA trustee and the head writer and co-executive producer of “The Young and the Restless,” had arrived. “I’ve had many art-world people on my show,” she said. “There’s a rich billionaire who falls in love with a young curator. When the curator is killed, the billionaire smashes Damien Hirst’s shark tank—Damien, who’s a friend, gave us permission to reproduce it—but he doesn’t die of formaldehyde poisoning, as you would in real life. That’s the magic of soap!”

A crowd gathered around the gas-station set, as someone who resembled James Franco stood on the balcony. A hush descended. “Take 119, and *action!*” an assistant director said. The man in the tuxedo backed up toward the railing yelling, “Don’t kill me! I know where the baby is!”

Among the assembled spectators was another man in a tuxedo, who looked an awful lot like James Franco. Was he the stuntman, who would be jumping from the balcony? “I’m the other double,” he said. “I’m going to be lying on the ground, being bloody. Different unions, apparently.” He nodded toward the figure on the balcony. “That’s the real James.” ♦