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### Museums

## Incognito at Santa Monica Museum Hides Which Artists Did Which Paintings. But a Few People Can Tell...

By Catherine Wagley Tue., Mar. 20 2012 at 9:00 AM  
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Santa Monica Museum of Art

The VIP group rushes into the gallery at the Santa Monica Museum of Art's eighth annual Incognito

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### TODAY'S DEAL



In *Incognito*, a 1997 romance that posed as a thriller, the Jason Patric who once ran off with Julia Roberts stars as an art forger. The forger naturally has to be "incognito" because he's a wanted man (he's forged a Rembrandt, which is never a good idea). He discovers he's been dating an "incognito" art expert, and the plot unwinds until every "incognito" character has been revealed and all suspicions confirmed in one way or another. None of these reveals is at all shocking, but without them there would be no movie.

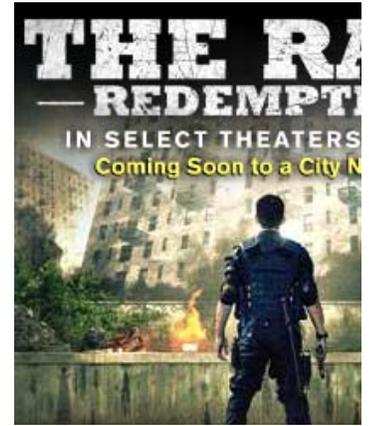
"Incognito" means something similar at [Santa Monica Museum of Art's](#) annual Incognito benefit. The museum held its eighth such benefit Saturday and, as always, the artists' names were concealed. This way, as museum director Elsa Longhauser has said since she began the event in 2004, buyers can "trust their instincts" and not be bowled over by an artist's fame -- or potential resale value.



Santa Monica Museum of Art

Perrey Reeves and Edoardo Ponti first in line

Five hundred artists contributed, some of them among SoCal art's staple stars, like Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari and Judy Chicago, and others well known but not yet legendary,



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like Elliot Hundley or Mark Bradford. Then, of course, there are the artists you've only heard of if you're a dedicated insider who goes to all the openings and remembers names. Each work, donated and made especially for this event, costs \$350 and is approximately 8" x 10". You "buy" your piece by taking a numbered tag off a nail below it. You won't know who made it until it's presented to you wrapped in brown paper. Then you can unwrap and check the signature.

Because the VIP buyers and the benefactors have spent \$1,000 or \$2,000 for tickets and, this year for the first time, have previewed the work at a Thursday night gala (dubbed Precognito), they've already decided what they want most. Some have drawn maps for themselves, so they can remember exactly where to find their favorites, or the ones by artists they think they've identified. These people enter first at "7 SHARP" -- the museum uses all caps for "SHARP" in its press materials, and there's actually a countdown to 7 p.m. That's why pictures published after the event always show people making a mad dash into the gallery. These people know what to run toward.



Santa Monica Museum of Art

Santa Monica Museum of Art director Elsa Longhauser and curator Lisa Melandri

Quinn Tivey, who works at John Wells' production company, must have run back and forth across the gallery the fastest. He had been tasked with finding art that his boss would like and, at the Thursday gala, took note of what looked best. Then he went home and researched the artist roster. On the map he filled in for himself, he had artists' names jotted next to works he'd highlighted, including the name of assemblage savant John Outterbridge.

Artist Richard Carter, who came in after the VIP buyers had gotten first pick, went right for a work he was sure was by Betye Saar, iconic for her political and mystical installations. It was indeed by her, he found out at the night's end. What gave it away? "I sat next to her at the gala," he said. "I pointed to my work, and said, 'Betye, where's yours?'" She'd pointed in its general direction.

When Marlene Picard found she'd snagged a drawing by Raymond Pettibon, L.A.'s scruffy, witty, high-brow surfer artist, she naturally responded with excitement. But of course, she'd known what work was his. She had met Pettibon at Regen Projects a few years earlier. He signed a book for her ("I couldn't believe he was so sweet," she said), so she recognized his distinctive hand. She was surprised no one else had beaten her to the piece, a drawing of a devious-looking dog.

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Gallerist Thomas Solomon once staged a show called "Anonymous" to encourage better-known artists to experiment and make the work they hadn't made for fear of scaring off their collectors and fans. There, the point really was to give artists back the freedom that comes from being unknown and unestablished. At SMMoA's benefit, the point is to raise money. The thrill of the reveal fuels excitement, even if you don't expect to get art by someone particularly famous. (The "art pick-up table" has a box of artists bios, so you can read up if you don't know the artist whose work you have acquired.)

My favorite work of the night, by Mickalene Thomas (I guessed right, though she made guessing easy), was a scaled-down print of one of her signature portraits. It had wood paneling in the background, and drapery over a sofa. But the figure, usually a woman savvy and sultry enough to co-star in *Foxy Brown*, had been blotted out in black. I liked this approach: just enough disguise to make it clear you're "incognito" but not too much to make you unrecognizable to those who already know you.

When MOCA holds its *Fresh* benefit auction next weekend, it will *not* be incognito. Artist names, some the same as those in SMMoA's benefit, images of the work and estimated prices are already online. It probably won't be anywhere near as fun as Santa Monica's game of intrigue.

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