

Paul McCarthy's Freaky-Deaky '50s Nostalgia Trip

by [Ben Davis](#)

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Paul McCarthy, "WS," 2013 (film still) / Courtesy the Artist and Hauser & Wirth;
Photo: Joshua White

At present, L.A.-based gross-out king [Paul McCarthy](#) is [dominating the imagination of NYC's art scenesters](#) — and [drawing the ire of its conservative pundits](#) — in an

almost unprecedented way. And this conjunction is actually quite an opportunity: The side-by-side comparison of the artist's [“WS” spectacular at the Park Avenue Armory](#) and his similarly ambitious [“Rebel Dabble Babble” show at super-gallery Hauser & Wirth's Chelsea space](#) makes it possible to see vividly the basic, repetitive pattern beneath his diverse obsessions. Because in key ways, these two shows are actually the same work.

Some of the similarities are superficial, true. Both center on vast, stage-set-like environments. Both surround these with giant screens that assault you with simultaneous loops of footage showing the various, fragmentary scenarios that McCarthy has acted out with his performers on them, shrieking vignettes involving sexual humiliation, psychological trauma, and — often — food fights. You wander among the half-formed environments without any clear reference, putting together fragments of an underlying narrative, not quite sure where you dare rest your gaze.

But the connection goes deeper than this. In [an interview](#) with curator Tom Eccles at Hauser & Wirth, McCarthy explained that he considered “Rebel Dabble Babble” a “prequel” to “WS.” The latter centers on a debauched version of the Snow White myth, channeled through its Disney version (there’s a gift shop where you can buy crappy, second-hand Disney stuff); the former, co-credited to his son, [Damon McCarthy](#), is a nasty, pornographic fantasy about the making of “Rebel Without a Cause.” The parallels between the two narratives are obvious: Snow White is Natalie Wood (the actress Elyse Poppers, also the object of [his “Life Cast” show at Hauser & Wirth uptown](#), plays both); Prince Charming is James Dean (played here by both James Franco, Hollywood star and wannabe artist, and James Deen, the porn star of [“Farrah Abraham: Backdoor Teen Mom” fame](#)). In both, McCarthy casts himself. “WS” has him star as “Walt Paul,” a fusion of himself and [Walt Disney](#), while in “Rebel Dabble Babble,” he plays a pervy version of “Rebel Without a Cause” director Nicholas Ray.

What do the two shows offer? For “WS,” a full-scale, theme-park-like enchanted forest set fills the Armory’s drill hall (supposedly it took 80-plus semi trucks to bring in all the material). Embedded in the center is a recreation of McCarthy’s own childhood house; peering through the windows you can see the remains of a party, with two life-like dummies, a man and a woman, sprawled out nude, apparently dead in pools of their own filth. On drive-in movie-sized screens above the vast hall,

frenzied footage of a psychotic celebration taking place in the same house swarms at you. There's a comely lass dressed as Disney's princess (sometimes splitting, dream-like, into multiple princesses, played by multiple actresses), McCarthy's "Walt Paul" in a tux, and a gaggle of gibbering, bearded dwarves. After a relatively tame start following the basics of the fairy tale — Snow White discovering the house, etc. — the whole thing degenerates inexorably into shrieking incoherence. The images you will be left with are of dwarves masturbating joylessly and humping chairs, or Snow White peeing into a gravy boat. The hall echoes with overlapping sobs, shrieks, and panicked laughter. There are seven hours of this, leading up to the nightmare conclusion whose aftermath is suggested by the moribund pair of dummies in the house.

For "Rebel Dabble Babble," the sets are suburban homes, inspired by its source material, "Rebel Without a Cause." Gazing through the windows of one of these, you see a room where a projection shows James Deen, playing "James Dean," and "Natalie Wood," engaged in some hardcore action — and I do mean *hardcore* action! — while McCarthy's leering director eggs them on. Other projections around on the gallery walls depict psychosexual encounters between the various characters: Ray and Wood slapping each other over and over again in a Sisyphean domestic spat; James Franco, also as "James Dean," languishing in bed with Wood; the demented Ray character slashing holes in the wall of the house with power tools to make peep holes; and, most memorably, Wood and McCarthy/Ray, nude together in a bathtub, hosing each other down with a fecal gravy substance. At one point, the naked McCarthy stands over Wood, holding a big bag of the liquid between his legs. In close up, you see his scrotum gleaming with the unholy ooze as he squirts it from the bag over the actress's face and breasts.

In each of these film-installations, McCarthy casts himself as a character who is both part of the narrative, and the puppet-master, pulling the strings of the fantasy; Disney or Ray. That flourish is key. As with elsewhere in this artist's work, the ultimate idea involves exploring the concealed perverted side of cultural authority. A motif in both shows is *reversal*: one prop in "Rebel Dabble Babble" is a giant glowing Hollywood sign, flipped backwards; the title of the Armory show, "WS," stands for "White Snow" — "Snow White" reversed. The message is clear: We are meant to go through the looking glass in McCarthy's twisted fairy tales, arriving at the grotesque world beneath the slick surface of these fantasies, getting our face shoved in all the

curdled stuff that they repress. That's the idea — and I'd argue that it's actually a pretty simplistic one.

For all McCarthy's outwardly amoral nihilism, the subtext of his work is quite moralistic when you unpack it. He talks about exposing how "hygeine is the religion of fascism," and famously characterizes his art as a "program of resistance" against the culture industry. But what culture industry? His image of authority is avowedly a personal one, derived from the figure of the clean-cut, moralizing, half-religious, half-capitalist Mormon patriarch that dominated McCarthy's childhood environment in Salt Lake City in the 1950s — hence the importance of the fact that a replica of his own home is the setting for the nightmare antics of "WS." In both "WS" and "Rebel Dabble Babble," the thing being subverted is a quintessentially old school bit of pop culture: Disney's sanitized spin on the Brothers Grimm (from 1937!) or Nicholas Ray's hormonal teen fable (1955). (Up next for the artist: a massive set outside L.A. where he will make perverted Westerns — another quintessentially '50s obsession, with no particular hold on the present-day imagination.)

The upshot is that the uncanny power that McCarthy invests in transgression is, for the most part, nostalgic — which may, in fact, be part of its charm for a jaded audience that doesn't believe in the possibility of any meaningful counterculture. In our present world — the world where "50 Shades of Grey" and "Human Centipede" are *mainstream* obsessions — I'm not sure that this kind of thing adds up to a meaningful "program of resistance" against ideas of normality in the way that McCarthy wants. Would anyone say that you need to unmask the sadistic kinks lurking beneath the surface of *Odd Future* or "Game of Thrones?" Of course not — but these are among the trendiest phenomena in all of pop culture today.

"Maybe in America, and certainly in the past, artists are seen as just one step above criminals," [McCarthy has said](#). But that "in the past" qualification is important to reckon with. He has talked about how it was James Franco who actually initiated the "Rebel" collaboration, then proceeded to kind of flake out, forcing him to rework the idea. If you unpack that anecdote, what does it mean? That a quirky but nevertheless basically mainstream movie star, a guy who [once upon a time co-hosted that most middle-of-the-road of Hollywood celebrations, the Academy Awards](#), might want to be involved with this kind of art project, but *not even bother to commit to it that much*. The moral: Transgression doesn't today really have a "shake up the

foundations of the mind” criminal kick to it; it’s something you can wander into and out of dilettantishly.

Can you redeem these spectacles from the specter of their own redundancy? Well, of course, we haven't exactly closed the book on repression; there's still plenty of that to go around. For someone, somewhere, perhaps wandering into the Park Avenue Armory or Hauser & Wirth will have the intended effect of forcing him (and it would definitely be a him — McCarthy's are distinctly macho obsessions) to own the twisted wreckage of his repressed desires. For the rest of us, these works will only tell a half story. The perverse and the transgressive are not, as far as I can tell, secrets that are necessarily hidden away by the masters of our contemporary cultural landscape; they are quantities measured in a cold rational way for their profit potential.

In this light, the quality that is worth emphasizing in both “WS” and “Rebel Dabble Babble” is how *joyless* they seem; they are, ultimately, about characters who exist in a world where dark obsessions have no liberating edge, where transgression has become a kind of compulsion, a routine. It's these characters' default setting. But viewed in this way, [Paul McCarthy](#)’s work is not a “program of resistance” against culture; it is the supersized embodiment of the mainstream culture that is to be resisted.

“WS” is on view at the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, New York, through August 4; “Rebel Dabble Babble” is on view at Hauser & Wirth, 511 West 18th Street, New York, through July 26