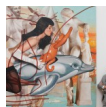
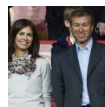


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Baz Luhrmann's Christmas Nightmare at Barneys

Ben Davis, Friday, December 19, 2014

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Robotic owl by Chris Cole as part of the "Truth" display for Barneys
Photo: Courtesy Barneys

With only a few shopping days left until Christmas, forget MoMA; if you really want to drink deep of the waters of culture, walk over to see the city's always-extravagant Christmas department store windows: Bergdorf Goodman's storefront ode to The Arts (each window celebrates a different one, including an awe-inspiring monstrosity dedicated to "Painting"), or Bloomingdale's more future-forward window, where you can upload a selfie to the display. For my taste, the season's finest is to be found at Barneys, where hyper-driven Australian film auteur Baz Luhrmann and his costume designer wife Catharine Martin have delivered a blockbuster, much-touted four-window feat of Installation Art for the People, an unintentionally self-deconstructing consumer come-on that truly lives up to the grandiosity and mild awkwardness of its title, "Baz Dazzled."

If you're the kind of adult who needs an excuse to be lured in to spend \$800 on a custom "Champagne saber" (from Barneys' "Baz Dazzled" collection), then this is the Christmas display for you! Then again, ever since Victorian England first invented the bombastic Christmas window to kickstart the holiday buying season, moralists have been clucking

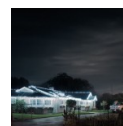
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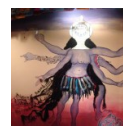
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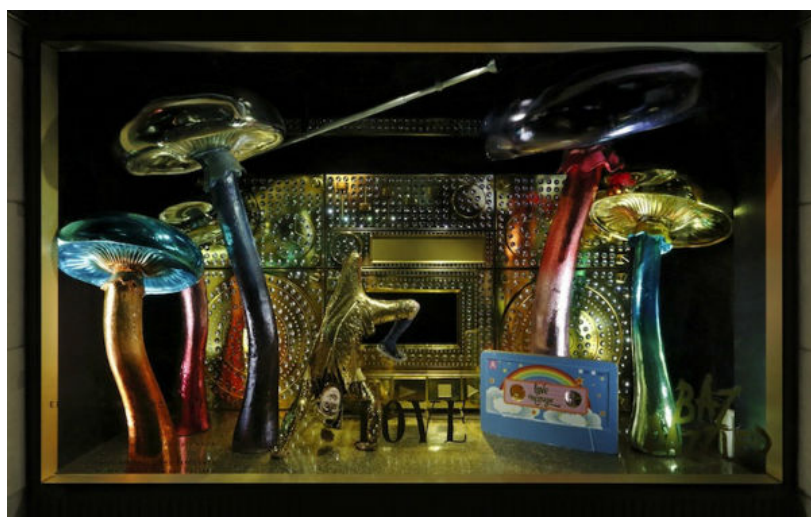
their tongues about crassness and commercialism, with little effect. This is *Baz Fucking Luhrmann*, the guy who somehow rendered *The Great Gatsby*, a novel about the moral decay of *nouveau riche* excess, in a form that had people unironically throwing "Gatsby Parties." What did you expect? And there's a frickin' giant mechanical owl! That talks!

What is "Baz Dazzled?" As you approach the luxury retailer's hulking flagship along Madison Avenue, what you first see is a scaffolding laden with gold elves and nymphs, framing the four windows that flank the main entrance. Each proclaims itself to be about one of four themes: "Love," "Beauty," "Truth," and "Freedom." *Finally*: Someone willing to speak up for Love, Beauty, Truth, and Freedom.



Barneys facade decorated for "Baz Dazzled"
Photo: Courtesy Barneys

As you draw closer, however, you are likely to become a bit baz-wildered (or baz-fuddled?) trying to figure out what exactly these evilly gleaming tableaux have to do with their designated subject matter. Why, for instance, is "Love" incarnated by a ginormous, gem-encrusted boom box in a thicket of giant, iridescent mushrooms, between which, every so often, an elf comes out to breakdance? It's less like a romantic fantasy and more like a bad dream I had once when I ate too many Sour Patch Kids.



The "Love" window in "Baz Dazzled"
Photo: Courtesy Barneys

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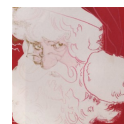
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"The big shift we've made is that there is a live performance element," Luhrmann told cooing supermodel Gisele Bundchen in a truly embarrassing interview about the Barneys project that nevertheless proves that performance art has once and for all shaken its rep as being something embarrassing people do in basements to become something embarrassing Gisele Bundchen can't get enough of.

Thus, the display's "Freedom" window, on the far right, is represented by a tiled grotto meant to evoke an ice cave. Twice hourly a skater emerges, her Valkyrie costume and slightly panicky choreography giving the spectacle a tone of low-level Wagner-on-ice satire. She performs on a loop for the Christmas hoards, longing to be free, but of course never escaping her fantasy dungeon.



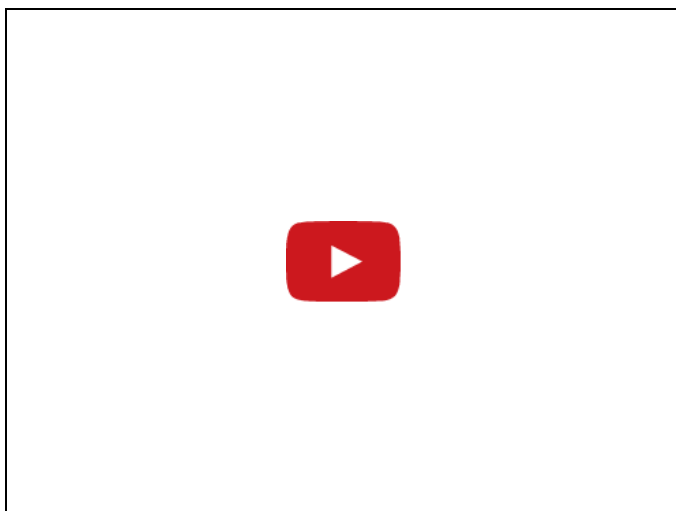
Performer in the "Truth" window of Baz Luhrmann's "Baz Dazzled" display for Barneys
Photo: Courtesy Barneys

Then there is "Beauty," center left, depicted by a grove of groovy kinetic sculptures, robot fireworks endlessly opening and closing (the work of sculptor Anthony Howe). They suggest an evil hypnotist's wheel, and need only a voice whispering, "You are getting sleepy, very sleepy..." to make totally explicit the subtext about surrendering your consciousness to Barneys.



Sculptures by Anthony Howe as part of the "Truth" display for "Baz Dazzled"
Photo: Courtesy Barneys

Speaking of which... let's talk about that owl. This is the "Truth" window, with Truth pictured here as a tractor-sized robot bird with car headlights for eyes (the contraption is actually the creation of Chris Cole), perched in what appears to be a menacing robot forest. This monstrous creature speaks in a blissed-out monotone that sounds like he's falling into a cough syrup sleep, intoning the words to Madonna's *Holiday*, over and over: "Holiday... It would be so nice... If we could get away...."



"Truth" looks like an attraction you would see at a steampunk theme park, and I think your kids are going to love it. I say "*I think*"—because this also might be one of those cases where kids, not being burdened with some idea of "what kids like," actually see it plain and remember it as having been kind of scary.

And that, actually, is what is great about this whole "Baz Dazzled" initiative: Luhrmann knows what he is doing for Barneys, and he does it so well that, if you really contemplate it, it magically yields a moment of unintended truth and makes the whole Christmas consumer onslaught look like exactly what it is: kind of a nightmare.

So there is Truth here after all.

Enjoy, and happy holidays!

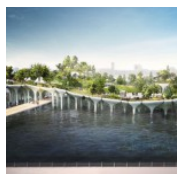
"Baz Dazzled" is on view at Barneys, 660 Madison Ave, New York, through December 31, 2014.

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