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Into the Woods... With Giuseppe Penone

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To be completely honest, the main reason for my attending last week's performance by Garth Fagan Dance Company at the Nate Holden Performing Arts Center was the fact that well-known Los Angeles artist Alison Saar -- whose career I have been following for years -- was responsible for the ambitious set design. But the pleasure turned out to be multifold. Monumental sculptural forms by the artist graced the stage, providing a dramatic background to dancers whose age varied from early 20's to mid 60's. All of them simply exceptional in their virtuosity; the young with their exuberance, the older with their wisdom.



Garth Fagan Dance. *Lighthouse / Lightning Rod*. Set design by Alison Saar. Photograph by Ernest Gregory.

You might recall another **Art Talk** from early this year where I was salivating about another captivating dance performance here in the city, with high profile LA based artist Barbara Kruger providing the eye-bursting set design for a performance by Los Angeles Dance Project. One hopes that this happy marriage between visual art and theater performance will continue to flourish in LA.



Garth Fagan Dance. *Lighthouse / Lightning Rod*. Set design by Alison Saar. Photograph by Ernest Gregory.

Over the weekend, the Hammer Museum delivered a few more cultural punches -- punches that few other LA museums can compete with. First of all, its permanent collection was reinstalled in the smartly redesigned galleries, with lighter colors for the walls and a better lighting system. As a result, many masterpieces look as if they were recently restored.



Hammer Museum. Permanent Collection. Photograph by Edward Goldman.

And then, there are two temporary exhibitions, with art that can surprise, challenge and even provoke the viewer. The exhibition of New York based artist, Jim Hodges, with its 75 artworks as varied as photography, drawings, sculptures and room-sized installations, traces 25 years of his career. Walking through the exhibition, I felt as if I were backstage in a theater. Here was a suspended curtain made out of a thousand flowers, there was an intricate metal spiderweb, -- and all that multiplied, shimmering in numerous wall-bound sculptures made out of shards of shattered mirrors.



Jim Hodges. *Give More Than You Take*. Exhibition at the Hammer Museum. Photograph by Edward Goldman

The survey exhibition of Robert Heinecken (1931 - 2006), Object Matter, is a great way for the public to discover -- or rediscover -- this major figure in the postwar Los Angeles art scene. Primarily known for his groundbreaking photo-based works, Heinecken rarely used a camera. Instead, he pulled the images from television screens and various periodicals, including pornographic magazines. All that and more, is stirred up into artistic collages and assemblages, with kitsch and sex, body and gender, playing equally important roles. You definitely want to see this exhibition, but bringing along in-laws or young children might not be a good idea.



Robert Heinecken. *Object Matter*. Exhibition at the Hammer Museum. Photograph by Edward Goldman.

Tree trunks, for the Italian artist Giuseppe Penone, are what naked human bodies used to be for many artists in the history of art. Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills presents the first major exhibition of Penone's works on the West Coast. At the entrance are two gigantic tree trunks. One is real, with its center cut out so you can see its still-alive inner organs. At least that is the impression I got. Another tree trunk, upon close inspection, turns out to be a bronze sculpture of a tree trunk with a gilded interior, visible through the few holes in the trunk's bronze skin.



Giuseppe Penone. *Branches of Thought*. Exhibition at Gagosian Gallery, BH. Photograph by Edward Goldman.

There are a number of marble works in the exhibition, including one gigantic 23-ton sculpture. All of them are rather impressive, but somehow lacking the magic of Penone's trademark stories of trees, with which he has been charming audiences for decades. So, here's a chance for us to go into the woods... with Giusepppe Penone as our guide.



Giuseppe Penone. *Branches of Thought*. Exhibition at Gagosian Gallery, BH. Photograph by Douglas M. Parker Studio.

Edward Goldman is an art critic and the host of *Art Talk*, a program on art and culture for NPR affiliate KCRW 89.9 FM. To listen to the complete show and hear Edward's charming Russian accent, visit <http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/art-talk/into-the-woods-with-giuseppe-penone>.