

JP Munro at International Art Objects and Gustave Moreau at the Hammer Museum

By **Andrew Berardini**

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Ancient dreams and antique corruptions have been haunting a couple of L.A. galleries. The paintings of **JP Munro** at International Art Objects and **Gustave Moreau** at the Hammer Museum possess a mischievous magic, creating scenes that look as if they're from a lost Hollywood masterpiece, set in epic ruins, undulating sexual power, layered with so much symbolic representation and forgotten metaphorical accoutrement, encrusted in jewels only known to be worn by Eastern emperors in the dreams of Western painters.

Munro's grand paintings of arcane rituals and naked choreography look like vivid landscapes from another age. He draws not only from art history but also from grand historical subjects, as a handful of the paintings are named after a famous battle between **Alexander the Great** and Darius III of **Persia** at Issus (though the paintings themselves do not exactly illustrate this).

In *Dionysus in India* (2012), Munro luridly coalesces Eastern and Western mythologies. Bronzed muscular nudes herald the coming of a haloed Dionysus riding a Bengal tiger past blue-skinned Krishnas and Vishnus. A crouched lion appears to be gnawing on a fleshy, human leg. Carved into the mountain are elephants flanking an altar of a winged idol above flowered knolls. These are merely small scenes embedded into a single painting that is Byzantine in its detail.

While the exhibit also includes plein air landscapes from around L.A. and a meta-painting depicting a scene of Munro's studio and other paintings in the show, these only serve, in their tameness, to underline the intense, compelling perversity of Munro's lapis and ochre phantasmagorias.

Munro's work is a nod to Renaissance and post-Renaissance history painters from Raphael to Géricault, yet his work shows that he's been informed by images unknown to them. Munro draws heavily from heavy-metal record art and the covers of some of the more sultry sword-and-sorcery pulp novels. The zenith of a stoned high schooler's doodle, Munro's stiff, muscular bodies and imaginary amalgam of ancient civilizations place his paintings closer to a fictional mythology, like Conan the Barbarian's Hyborean Age, than to any particularly real historical moment.

His scenes are downright decadent, a word that derives literally from decay, a decline but that also came to mean luxurious self-indulgence and moral lassitude, mostly at the hands of a gang of French poets and writers at the end of the 19th century. One writer of the period, [Joris-Karl Huysmans](#), in his 1884 novel *Against Nature*, lavishly praises through the eyes of his most lavishly dissolute character, des Esseintes, one painter in particular: Gustave Moreau. Des Esseintes buys a couple of Moreaus to admire in his sensual retreat, one of which happens to be owned by the Hammer Museum here in Los Angeles, which, with the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris, has organized an exhibition on the painter with the painting *Salome Dancing Before Herod* (1874-76) at its center.

A few years back, the Getty did a survey of Moreau's older contemporary [Jean-Léon Gérôme](#), who often used history (or some vague ethnographic version of history) as his subject. For all his virtuosic, technical devotion to naturalism, Gérôme's paintings come off as grandiose cinedramas, brightly lit and vaguely distasteful in their near kitschy commercial slickness.

Moreau is subversively occult in comparison. His masterpiece at the center of the Hammer's exhibition is every Eastern fantasy collapsed into a single

frame: the lapidary figures, the fine filigree of paint that whorls on every surface and, in its main character, the power of a young girl who easily understands the sway she holds in the surge and swell of her body. The graying Herod might as well be one of the statues that stand behind him when compared with the lively, delicately detailed Salome.

As des Esseintes hopes to exhaust all his senses in Huysmans' novel, Moreau almost manages to exhaust ours visually. The elaborate detail is nearly too elaborate, oppressive almost. The same could be said of Munro, even though his figures have a primal crudity, in comparison with the hyper refinement of Moreau's graceful figures. Both can, if you're not careful, give you something like an alchemical cavity, all the sugary ornamentation referencing too much at once. Yet both offer ripe and lusty literary possibilities in a moment of art too often defined by picture planes and political pieties, third-string conceptualism and hyper-cynical pop.

Their mythopoetics aren't entirely untainted. Some scholars of Orientalism rightly claim that we use the East (even this term is Eurocentric, of course) as a blank screen to project our own fantasies. The mysteries of indecipherable glyphs along with the names of destroyed cities and forgotten kings hold a kind of magic to us, the same as looking at a map and reciting the names of cities like incantations of all that is possible, the words only a pure sonorous poetry.

Our impressions of history often offer conservatives a trove of false memories used for diabolical ends, from [Mussolini's](#) spurious lineage with Imperial Rome to our Republican Party's visions of an Eisenhower-esque Utopian age that resembles a [Thomas Kinkade](#) painting. But history also can open curious possibilities, its legends and ruins ingredients for dreams of otherworldly alternatives. Using history as a set of amorphous references, instead of sticking to pure facts, can allow artists' imaginations to move freely and without limitations.

Munro and Moreau are hardly a solution for this generation's misgivings about the present, but Munro at least has found for himself one awfully strange and often interesting path, a new manner of indulgence for our current decadent age.

JP MUNRO | International Art Objects | 6086 Comey Ave., Culver City |
Through Oct. 20 | international.la