

Summer of Love Experience: Art, Fashion, and Rock & Roll

IN THE SUMMER of 1967, San Francisco found itself at the epicenter of a rising countercultural movement that challenged existing socio-political norms. Today, the city vibrates with echoes of that same fervor through celebrations surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the “Summer of Love”. Psychedelic light projections illuminate the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park, gift shops are stocked with commemorative tchotchkes, and even the bartenders at the famous Buena Vista have traded their bow ties for tie-dyed shirts. Similarly, both the de Young Museum and the California Historical Society have produced two temporary exhibitions commemorating the Summer of Love.

The de Young’s *Summer of Love Experience: Art, Fashion, and Rock & Roll* is a massive installation that occupies the entirety of museum’s the lower level galleries. The exhibition places a heavy emphasis on music and the visual, and offers an overpowering sensory experience that leaves one feeling excitingly dazed. Pop culture aficionados will swoon over the dozens of rock music posters featuring the likes of the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and The Charlatans. Meanwhile, a multitude of avant-garde art, photographs, projections, and mannequins in hippie couture transport visitors into that dizzying summer of ‘67. *Summer of Love* aims to overwhelm the senses, arguably much in mirror of the psychedelic and transformative nature of the movement itself. The de Young channels this energy into a museum experience that is extensive, immersive, and, at times, overwhelming.

One of the exhibition’s showstoppers is *Kinetic Light Painting*, a liquid light art installation created for the de Young by artist Bill Ham. Entering through paneled curtains into an enclosed gallery, visitors are immediately enveloped in kaleidoscopic projections of moving light synchronized to rock music. Basking in the immersive illuminations from the comfort of the provided beanbag chairs, the space is enchantingly peaceful.

CHS’s *On the Road to the Summer of Love* exhibition is much more humble than the de Young’s installation, though no less powerful. *On the Road* consists of six galleries that trace

the origins and evolution of the Summer of Love and the creation of, as guest curator Dennis McNally argues, “a genuinely new consciousness.” Unlike the de Young, the psychedelic aspects of the movement are far more subdued. Instead, *On the Road* offers a more intimate retrospective of the Summer of Love by emphasizing the roles of community and activism through rare, candid photographs and ephemera. Listening stations accompany each of the galleries, comprised of pseudo-telephone receivers that nostalgically mimic the landlines of yesteryear. Visitors can listen to Mario Savio’s famous Berkeley speech, Allen Ginsberg recite “Howl”, and Paul Kantner reflect on the influence of Jefferson Airplane. The effect is that one feels to be carrying on a private phone conversation, which lends the exhibition a certain air of intimacy.

However, while the de Young offers a visually stunning exhibition, its strength lies in the aesthetic, and lacks an objective and academic analysis of the Summer of Love. The substance of the movement - that of the struggle for equality, freedom of expression, and widespread social unrest - seems to exist only in the periphery of the installation. In fact, civil rights and activism seem to be an afterthought. The final gallery of the exhibition, *What are We Fighting For?*, offers a hasty overview of the widespread efforts toward enacting political and social change, lumping together the fights for civil, women’s, and environmental rights. Without separate and meaningful consideration, the gallery cheapens the significance of these individual struggles.

Furthermore, the de Young frustratingly glosses over the movement’s appropriation of Eastern and Native American iconography. Rather, the installation suggests that the movement’s contemporaries were merely “inspired” by these societies, and neglects the wholesale reduction of these cultures for aesthetic purposes. Throughout the exhibition, numerous mannequins sport intricate beading and leather fringe garments, echoing the traditional adornments of Native American communities, and dozens of rock posters, newspapers, and pamphlets portray native peoples and Hindu deities. While brief discussion hinting at these cultural appropriations are found in a handful of small case labels, the absence of forthright examination makes the exhibition feel more aesthetically gratuitous than objectively analytical. In fact, only one label in the *Feed Your Head* gallery even attempts to address the subject of appropriation, but disappointingly concludes that “the cultural appropriation of indigenous cultures was, for many, a genuine show of solidarity and admiration for non-Western traditions.”

Though *On the Road* does not directly address this appropriation either, it does attempt to examine how philosopher Alan Watts’ study of Eastern theologies in the 1950s encouraged the “Zen Boom” that would influence the subsequent generation. Furthermore, the exhibition only displays a handful of said controversial objects. Three editions of *The Oracle* newspaper show bold, front-page illustrations of Eastern religious iconography, and photographs depict Hare Krishnas dancing at the “Human Be-In” at Golden Gate Park. Though these displayed items are few, the exhibition could certainly benefit from a more focused discussion of how many Eastern religious symbols and mantras were ironically associated with the erotic and mind-altering tenements of the “hippie” subculture.

Regardless, the historic lessons highlighted in both Summer of Love exhibitions are particularly poignant in the wake of current social unrest and political fractionalism. It is a gentle reminder that the issues this generation championed—gender and racial equality, environmentalism, free love, and free speech—remain at the nexus of contemporary debates.