

LA WEEKLY

Photographer Matthew Rolston Takes a Closer Look at One of L.A.'s Weirdest Traditions

By Gwynedd Stuart



View of Matthew Rolston's *Art People: The Pageant Portraits* in the Ralph Pucci showroom.

Every summer, dozens of Southern Californians volunteer to be turned into living, breathing works of art. In 2016, a man was painted from head to toe in metallic silver paint to become one half of the frolicsome duo in Harriet Whitney Frishmuth's sculpture *The Dancers*. A woman in a pastel pink robe and makeup meticulously done to mimic brushstrokes became a character in David Hockney's painting *American Collectors*.

For nearly 85 years, Laguna Beach's Pageant of the Masters has brought to life notable works of art but last year, world-renowned portrait photographer Matthew Rolston was there to document the transformations. The Pageant's tableaux vivant are intended to be viewed from a distance of at least 50 feet. But in the series of photos he calls "Art People: The Pageant Portraits," which goes on display at Ralph Pucci gallery beginning Friday, Oct. 27, Rolston takes a closer look at the people who comprise the beating heart of the event.

"I call the project 'Art People,' and it's a little bit of a joke," Rolston explains. "That's what people in the art world are called — curators, collectors. These are not those art people, these are people who are portraying works of art. I don't think that official art people are aware of the Pageant."

Rolston, who grew up in L.A.'s Hancock Park neighborhood and was later discovered by Andy Warhol and tapped to take photos for Interview magazine, attended the Pageant a handful of times with his family as a child. "Going to see that at age 6 or 7 was one of the formative experiences of my life," he recalls. "I was taken with the beauty of it."

Rolston returned to the Pageant as an adult with his partner and another couple, and rather than viewing it from a distance, he was compelled to take a closer look. "I took not just my opera glasses but my Nikon field glasses — I wanted to look up close at those faces," he says. "When you look at it really closely, the imperfection of it and the realness was so moving to me."

Thanks to an incredibly successful career in portraiture, Rolston has recently had the opportunity to expand his repertoire to include what he calls "dedicated fine art projects." In the first project, Rolston shot detailed, sympathetic photos of ventriloquist dummies to examine the way we project our own humanity onto simulacra. The second project was a series of portraits of mummies in a Capuchin monastery, an effort to explore the human curse of death awareness; we create religious mythologies to cope

with our own death awareness, and those mythologies become so important that certain of us are willing to die for them. ("Religious wars still happen every day," Rolston reminds.)

The Pageant portraits represent the third of these personal projects. In this one, he "uses his distinct grasp of photography to trace a densely referential lineage of protagonists, connecting aspects of his own portraiture to the fragile boundaries between reality, artifice, the animate and inanimate," show literature explains.

Ultimately, no matter how it's expressed, this project and his others (as well as his magazine work) are all part of a single obsession. "I'm fascinated by faces and humans," Rolston says. "They're the greatest subject in the entire world of art and have been for centuries."