

Los Angeles Times

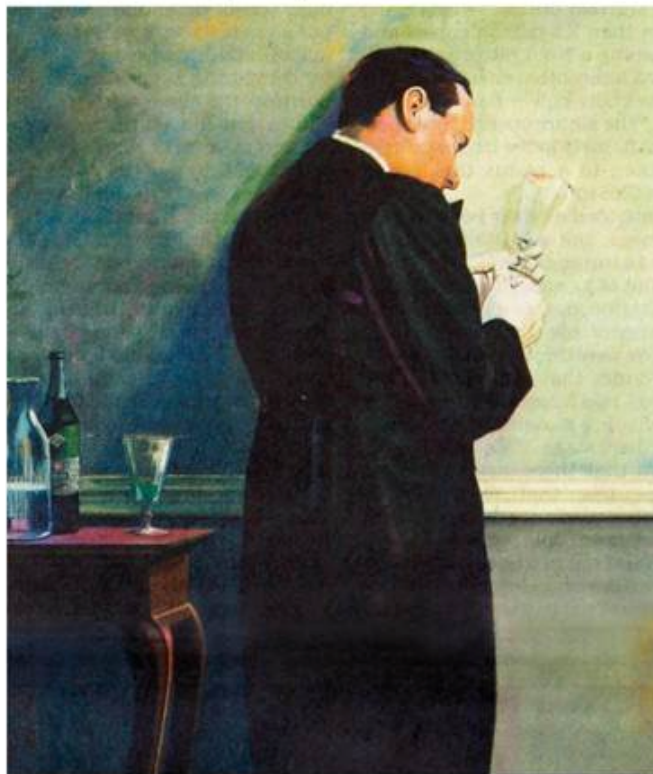
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ARTS&BOOKS

By Robert W. Welkos

Mark Stock's 'Hollywood: Uncovered' paintings hint at mysteries

Painter Mark Stock's show at Lora Schlesinger Gallery includes works featuring a longtime obsession — the Hollywood sign.



Phil Cohen Collection of Bix Restaurant
"THE BUTLER'S IN LOVE" is part of a series. The longing servant holds a glass stained by his employer's lipstick.

As a creator of narrative art, Mark Stock says nothing is more fun than staging a photo shoot for a painting he has yet to make.

So when Stock decided to revisit one of his more popular subjects — interpreting the artistic, historical and personal significance of the famed Hollywood sign — he asked a model to pose for a photo shoot at a spot in the El Cerrito Hills near Oakland that looks like the site of the sign.

"I said, 'Look, do you have a cocktail dress? Bring a couple.... I [then] got the lights. I got the extension cord. I got a shovel, and I got gloves. She shows up. She's cute. I say, 'I want this dress.' She goes in and puts the dress on. [By now,] the sun is setting. I say, 'Listen, I want you to sit down with your dress between your legs. One foot is going to be in the hole. The other foot is going to be outside the hole. Having already dug the hole, you're pulling this mystery box out.'"

The result is a 64-by-55-inch oil-on-canvas that suggests a Hitchcock mystery. Titled "The Box," the painting depicts an attractive young woman in a red cocktail dress, big boots and garden gloves shining a flashlight on a filthy metal box she has just unearthed near the Hollywood sign. She has been guided to this spot by a map dated 1951 on Chateau Marmont letterhead she found while going through her great-aunt's belongings.

The painting compels the viewer to ask questions: Who is this young woman? Why is she digging for a box dressed for a party? What's in the box? Why was it buried near the Hollywood sign? Could its contents affect her future?

The Lora Schlesinger Gallery in Santa Monica is showing an exhibition of Stock's works titled "Hollywood: Uncovered." The exhibition, which runs through Dec. 31, is the artist's first to be held locally in a decade and features a metal box prominently displayed on a pedestal to enhance the mystery.

Inside the letters of the Hollywood sign, he has painted images of movie legends from Charlie Chaplin to Marilyn Monroe with a mixture of oil paint and wax, which gives the images a translucent quality. Also included in the letters are symbols of Hollywood's underbelly like the "Black Dahlia" Elizabeth Short and 24-year-old movie actress Peg Entwistle, who jumped to

her death from the 50-foot-high letter H in 1932.

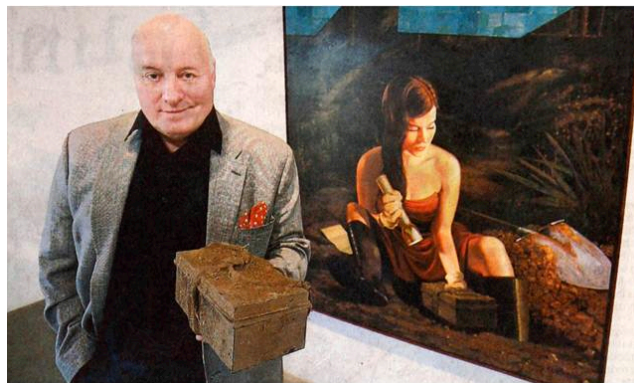
"He is so connected to film and film noir that he belongs down here and should be seen here," Schlesinger says. "He's a showman in everything he does."

Why his fascination with the Hollywood sign? "It's the monument itself. The famousness of it," Stock explains. "When I first arrived in L.A., the first thing I looked for was the Hollywood sign. I jumped out of my car — I remember it was on Franklin [Avenue] and a guy was coming out of a market and I screamed, 'Hey, is that the Hollywood sign?' I was obsessed."

That was 1976 when, fresh out of art school at the University of South Florida in Tampa, he landed a job at the famed artists' workshop Gemini G.E.L. in L.A. as a printer for Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, David Hockney, Robert Rauschenberg and others.

Today, Stock's works can be seen in the permanent collections of the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the National Gallery and Library of Congress. A number of Hollywood actors, directors and producers have bought his work, and his paintings appear in the films "Sneakers," "Class Action," "Final Analysis," "What Women Want" and "The Human Contract" as well as TV's "Just Shoot Me!"

The 62-year-old artist is best known for his "Butler in Love" series of paintings, which depict a lovelorn servant (many are self-portraits). In some of them, the butler is holding an empty, lipstick-stained martini glass in his white-gloved hand, despondent in the knowledge that he can never have the woman he most desires — the lady who employs him.



MARK STOCK holds a dirtied box in front of his painting "The Box," part of "Hollywood: Uncovered" at Lora Schlesinger Gallery

Many of Stock's works deal with obsession, unrequited love, murder and suicide. They include scenes of dead golfers, spooky zeppelins, people standing on mountain ledges staring into the abyss, a woman sitting next to a body wrapped in a carpet, and jealous voyeurs in white dinner jackets peeking through window curtains, doorways or even from tree branches at ... who? We aren't sure.

Stock doesn't mind varying interpretations of his works. "I love when people tell me their version of it," he says.

As Stock's biographer, Barnaby Conrad III, puts it: "The paintings veer from Pinteresque darkness to the television glow of soap opera." Conrad's "Mark Stock: Paintings" was published in 2000.

In 2003, Los Angeles Times critic Christopher Knight wrote, "Stylistically, Stock marries the shadowy look of 1940s Hollywood melodrama with its closest visual cousin in the European canon — the candlelighted inscrutability of 17th century followers of Caravaggio, such as Georges de La Tour."

Stock's fascination with the macabre stems from a family history that includes a great-great-grandmother brutally murdered by ax-wielding robbers, both

grandfathers shooting themselves in unrelated suicides, and an aunt who hanged herself in a closet. As the child of an alcoholic parent who witnessed domestic violence, he watched his mother sleepwalk and his older brother die at 47 in a traffic accident.

"I never went to a psychiatrist," he notes. "I painted. That was my psychiatrist. I painted my sadness or loneliness or tragedy in my family."

Tall, sturdily built and balding, Stock is an engaging storyteller who, during his spare time, plays drums for a Bay Area jazz trio, excels at golf and likes to perform magic and card tricks. In his younger years, he studied modern dance and ballet and designed sets for the Los Angeles Chamber Ballet. He left L.A. for Oakland to be closer to art dealer Martin Muller and his Modernism Gallery in San Francisco.

He found inspiration for his painting in Chaplin's *The Little Tramp*. "I was him. I was this lonely fellow looking for love and I realized that is why Charlie was so popular. Everyone saw themselves in this little tramp trying to get ahead and getting beaten down."

With Hollywood always in need of ideas, could Stock's paintings provide plots? Producer Victor A. Schiro ("Hunter"), a landscape artist who is a former head curator at Gemini, is developing a treatment for a TV drama series along the lines of "Twilight Zone" or "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" using Stock's paintings to introduce each episode. He and Stock plan to pitch the project in the months ahead.

"I could do 10 stories off one of his paintings," Schiro says. "I'd like a quirky, off-center story like Hitchcock did, which always had humor along with murder." He sees Stock directing and hosting the show.

Stock certainly doesn't lack for inventiveness. In 1979, he surprised a woman from out of town who had captured his heart by taking her on an evening hike to the Hollywood sign. He had persuaded a friend to dress as a butler and be waiting there to serve them champagne and a shrimp appetizer.

"She sits down and I sit down and the guy comes over and here we are looking over the city with sparkling lights at night," Stock recalls. He was more enthralled than the woman he was trying to impress. "... My mouth went mush. I go, 'Oh, my God, this is good.'"



SAM SARGENT Lora Schlesinger Gallery
"H" is among the paintings involving the Hollywood sign — a longtime obsession for Mark Stock — in "Hollywood: Uncovered."