ART/ICLES
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ELEPHANT

How the Light Gets In

Off a residential street in Hollywood, Terence Koh is tending to a garden. What lies beyond the dirt-encrusted door of Make Room is worth a visit. Words by Meka Boyle

Photography by Driely Vieira

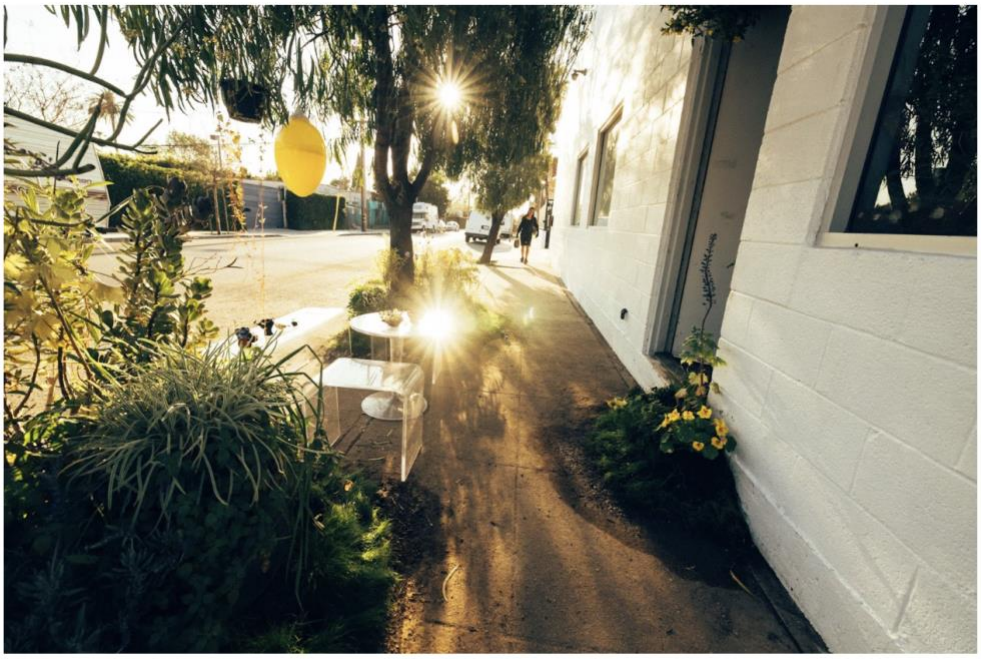
Spring in Los Angeles is unpredictable, a brief and welcome reprieve from the hot, monotonous summer days that follow. We wake up every day expecting rain. On a Friday afternoon in March, the sky waxes and wanes in Hollywood. The cold wind laps against the willow trees, sends shivers up their branches, and casts shadows against the white brick wall of Make Room Los Angeles.

On the side of the gallery, a door hangs ajar. It is nondescript save for the mound of grass-covered dirt that seeps out of it. Upon closer look a lone window is partly obscured by a thick layer of mossy soil with numerous watches and a single smashed iPhone burrowed inside. The view both beckons and evades passersby, depending on if and when they look up.

On the sidewalk, Terence Koh is tending to his garden: a mix of bee-friendly and native plants, including chamomile, lavender, African blue basil, clover, nasturtium, sour grass, and spurge.

Dressed in all black, Koh pauses to rest on a clear, acrylic bench bathed in a burst of sunshine. He wears a tattered sweatshirt—inside-out, the neck partly torn, hood slouched to expose a sliver of his collarbone—cut-off shorts that graze his knees, beat-up slippers, and vintage leather opera gloves from Paris. A yellow orb with a flickering light hangs from a branch above the flowerbed; it hovers, vibrating heart-level with him as he stands up to greet me.

Photography by Driely Vieira



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In a calm, lilting voice with a faint, indistinguishable accent, he asks me if I would like to come in and have some coffee. As I wasn't expecting to stumble across his world of dirt, and as I quickly surmise that nothing here is as it seems, I say yes and wonder what he could possibly mean.

I follow Koh into the gallery's sideroom, which has been entirely transformed into a "coffee shop" of sorts. We enter a dim, musky cave, and my black Prada kitten heels sink into the ground. I graze my hand against the ferns that jut out from the wall to find my balance. As my eyes adjust, I make out a single red light-bulb hanging down in the back. Next, a fallen olive tree materialises in the centre. The sky is beginning to clear again; sunlight slices through and scatters across the bough as if it is on fire.

"My dream is to build my own home, to have my own land. Maybe that's why I do all these things as well, because they are my own homes for now."

We continue further inside, duck under a geodesic dome, and sit across from each other in a peaceful silence (occasionally punctuated by a car whirring past outside). Koh perches on the ground; I occupy a small black stool. A campfire rests between us. Koh lights a flame and uses his gloved hand to hold a pot over it. Every movement seems to echo in the room. He procures indiscernible herbs from one of the many eel-like holes in the wall and adds a handful. A few minutes more and the concoction reaches a boil and is ready to serve.

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Back on the sidewalk, we share tiny cups of what can loosely be called “coffee.” I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth as I mull over the various flavours. There is a heavy note of sesame oil, burnt sage, a vague and slightly bitter plant-taste, and dirt.

A few days later—after telling everyone who will listen about the artist who built an earthy labyrinth in an art gallery in Hollywood—I am back on the translucent bench waiting for Koh to finish another coffee ceremony. I am slightly buzzing from a spliff we smoked together before he was called to his station where a nice-looking middle aged woman was eagerly waiting to enter.

“Some people think maybe it’s artisanal coffee or that we have prices. I don’t even know how to make coffee; I’m just winging it.”

As I wait I gingerly pick up the various, metallic-black ceramic cups strewn across the table. Each appears as if a tiny creature has bored holes into it; some are flecked with soft green moss. A coffee stain pools out from underneath one. “They’re really fun because they’re different faces when you look at them from different angles,” Koh says, returning from the cave. I hold one up to my eye and peer out at him through its ragged cavity; its parameters glisten and form a black halo around his head. He is incredibly kind and easy to talk to, and speaks with a humble conviction and ease. At one point he tells me “Anything is possible if you believe in all the possibilities of existence,” and I believe him.

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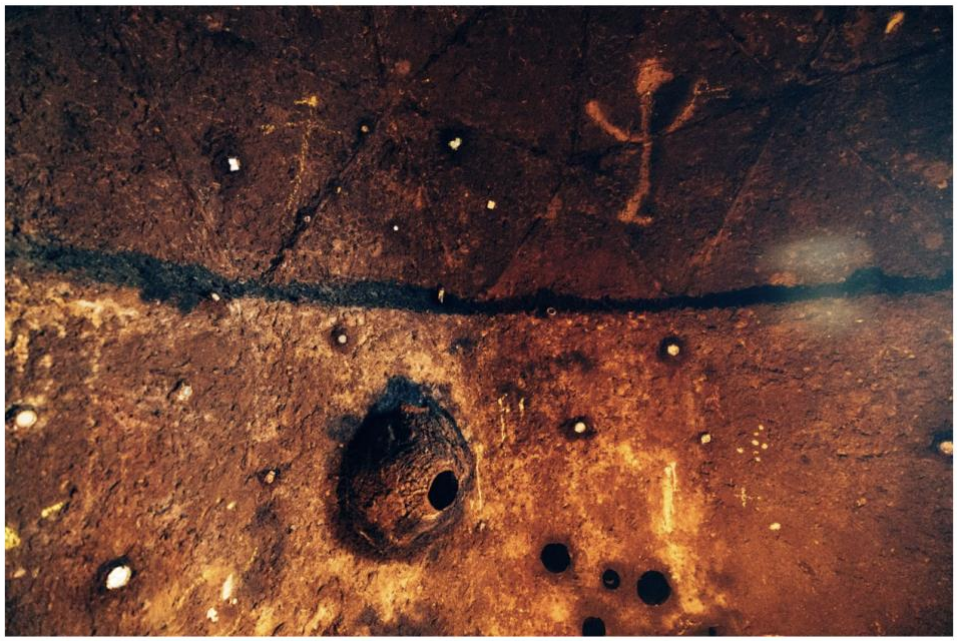
For Koh, the light doesn't just come from the sun, but also from the energy of the visitors who enter the room. "It's this living moment of sharing coffee," he says. And the coffee is not even the important part, I offer. "It's one part of the show," he agrees with a smile. "Some people think maybe it's artisanal coffee or that we have prices. I don't even know how to make coffee; I'm just winging it."

He sees the space as an ever-evolving canvas. "It took so many people, so many late nights to make this project happen," he says, recalling install days with surfer friends, moulding cow dung to the interior and blasting music until the early morning. "It could be a speakeasy," he suggests of its sonic quality. Sounds naturally are amplified within the dome. "I would love to invite a musician." His friends Jónsi of Sigur Rós or Jack Donoghue of Salem would be good fits, we decide.

“LA is made up of a bunch of villages. You can be as introverted and extroverted as you want because it’s your little cocoon.”

I ask Koh if he has any unrealized projects. “My dream is to build my own home, to have my own land. Maybe that’s why I do all these things as well, because they are my own homes for now,” he muses. One day Koh’s home will be by the ocean, maybe in Malibu, facing west, he tells me. It will have a minimal, brutalist concrete architecture and an apple tree planted in the middle underneath a skylight.

The resourcefulness to create a home from anything makes sense for an artist whose foundation has always been moving. Grounded in the present, his many past lives circle our conversation. Koh was born in Beijing, China in 1977, lived in Singapore, was raised in a Toronto suburb, went to college in Vancouver, moved to London in 2001 as an assistant to the late architect Zaha Hadid, and came into his own as an artist in New York City before heading west to start anew.



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"It was like a dance," he says of his formative time under Hadid—where he would transform her loose sketches into architectural, black-and-white line drawings. "She was such a force of nature, in all ways," he reflects. "She was a powerful woman, individual and voracious… I remember that she hated tomatoes. Once she bit into a sandwich that had a tomato in it, and she flung the sandwich like a flying saucer," he laughs. "And she would stomp on models that people took months to make. It was all part of her intensity."

For Koh, the greatest art is alive. It is pulsating, blood-boiling, throwing-a-tomato-against-the-wall intense or it is the inverse: the gentle, metronome-like whirr of honey bees. At its best, it is both. His site-specific installations vibrate with a primordial frequency. They decompose, burn, and regenerate. They have consisted of everything under the sun—salt, chocolate, honey bees, penises, campfires, dirt, semen, blood, salvaged junk—and require waivers for collectors to sign acknowledging the impermanence of the materials.

"You could do anything. Anything is possible," he tells me, "if you believe in all the possibilities of existence."

The artist has always maintained a childlike sense of wonder. When he was 3 years old, he made his first artwork, a drawing of an upside-down cat, and signed it. As a young man, he studied graphic design in Vancouver and soon unlocked a portal to be everywhere and nowhere all at once: books. Surrounded by a creative community and various modes of art-making, he synthesised what he saw into a website and magazine under the moniker asianpunkboy and sent it out into the world. It wasn't long before the world started looking back.

In the late '90s, when collector Phil Aarons bought a copy of his zine, Koh also convinced him to commission the house the text lived in: a mirrored, coffin lined with fake fur with over 100 miniature boxes inside. The $8,000 price tag was enough to bring Koh and his longtime partner Garrick Gott, a graphic designer, to New York.

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The artist burst onto the scene in the early aughts with a force that can only be described as generational. In 2003 his first show at Peres Projects in Los Angeles featured a basement floor covered in flour, two albino parakeets, shelves with various white-coated assemblages, and a DJ set by Ryan McGinley. The next year, he presented work at the Whitney Biennial, which officially put him onto the international art world's radar. Soon he was notorious, drawing comparisons to Damien Hirst and Andy Warhol. He dressed in all-white outfits, including a "monkey fur" jacket, and took up a studio with the same monochrome treatment.

In 2007, his installation at the Whitney marked his first solo museum show in the US. Blinding rays radiated from sparse white light, *Untitled*, placed on a tripod in the middle of the otherwise empty, ground-floor room. That same year, Koh coated what he claimed was his own shit in gold and sold it for $500,000 at Art Basel. He also ran an art gallery out of his apartment and named it Asia Song Society (ass).

Koh was anointed an art world star, his trajectory described as "rising," and everyone was taking bets on if he would crash. "If I fail, I fail spectacularly in front of the whole art world. That in a way relieves the pressure, because either way, the splatter will be beautiful," he said in an interview leading up to his Whitney exhibition. The aforementioned show only propelled him further. He interviewed the likes of Hans Ulrich Obrist, Ai Wei Wei, and Marina Abramovic for his Youtube series. He sat front row next to Michele Lamy at fashion shows and collaborated with Lady Gaga on pearl-encrusted performances. "I remember fashion designers, rock stars, random friends, poets; there was just the whole intermix, everybody just intertwined," he reflects.

For his 2011 performance "nothingtoodoo" at Mary Boone, his theatrics were more stringent, meditative and sparse. He built a giant pyramid out of salt and ceremoniously circled its parameters on his knees eight hours a day for the duration of the show. "Here he may have 'othered' himself right out of the art world into a larger sphere of symbolic action," Roberta Smith deftly wrote in her review for *The New York Times*.

Koh had carved out an island for himself, and he almost became marooned on it in the middle of the city. Then in 2014, he set adrift, in search of a quiet place to think and make art. He cut ties with his galleries and moved to Wildrose, New York, carrying the book *Living the Good Life: Helen and Scott Nearing's Sixty Years of Self-Sufficient Living* with him.

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Up in the Catskills, away from the cacophony of the city, a voice came to him and told him to build a bee chapel. The result: an oval, human-sized dome with a mesh tunnel for honey bees to circulate. It eventually landed in Andrew Edlin Gallery in the Lower East Side in 2016 amidst an installation where ambient sounds were recorded from mics placed by everything from an apple tree, the bees, two burning candles, and a livestream from space. Later, the chapel travelled to Morán Morán in Los Angeles, where Koh lived with the bees on the gallery's roof for five weeks.

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The next year, he and Gott sold their property and uprooted to San Francisco's Sunset district, shrouded in fog near Ocean Beach. Dismayed by the high cost of living and the ghost of a once-thriving artist community, they moved further up the coast to Sonoma, where the brisk, salty air of Muir Beach trickled into the mountains, caught the morning light, and illuminated the vastness. They remained, relatively isolated, for two years until one day, Gott turned to the artist and said: "Terence, do you want to look at the ocean or swim in the ocean?" With that they headed south, where the water was warmer and the PCH winds from the city to Malibu.

Today, Koh dips into the Pacific ocean and can see the Hollywood sign from the garden in his home in the Silver Lake hills, where he lives with Gott and their white Devon Rex, Skeleton. Next-door is the former home of Ed Ruscha; Anaïs Nin's is three doors down. "LA is made up of a bunch of villages. You can be as introverted and extroverted as you want because it's your little cocoon," he says.

"Can I show you something?" he asks before he takes my hand and leads me around the corner. "There it is," he points to the Hollywood sign. There is something magical about the sign, we both agree. A ready-made sculpture, so obvious and inescapable and beautiful. It offers something grounding in a city that seems, maybe partly due to the hills, to have its head perpetually in the clouds.

Photography by Driely Vieira

Despite all the art world notoriety that Koh has amassed, he is firmly rooted in the moment—not an easy feat in a world where human connection is mediated through screens and third spaces are mostly relegated to the digital. (He swore off social media years ago, doesn't use a smartphone, and prefers sending photos of handwritten notes in lieu of texts.)

During our afternoon, we see a range of visitors. A group of young creative-types, including Michael Hall, a writer from *Office*, come and sit with us. They want to know about the lighting, the design, and, of course, the artist. Near the end of the day, after Koh pops back into the cave to do another ceremony, two very muscular men covered in tattoos peer around the doorway and ask me about the work. When night comes, the street will be softly illuminated by a light affixed to the building (spray-painted black so that it omits specks of galaxy-like rays as opposed to a harsh neon brightness), Koh tells me. Locals, by now familiar with the installation, will pass by to examine the day's developments.

“Surprising connections are one of the things missing in LA versus New York,” he says as we prepare to part ways. “In New York, you meet people all the time and have conversations like this, but in LA, you don’t really meet people in the same way. Just sitting here, talking to people, it’s such a great way for human connection to come together,” he says. “Maybe that’s part of what the show is supposed to be as well.”

Written by Meka Boyle