# Is This Art Space Backed by ‘Game of Thrones’ Author George R. R. Martin a Force of Good or Evil?

The 'House of the Eternal Return' is on the vanguard of a new trend: Big Fun Art.

**Ben Davis**, July 14, 2016

I have seen the future of art. That future has a name, and it is an unlikely one: Meow Wolf.

On a Wednesday afternoon in blistering hot Santa Fe, I found myself at the *House of the Eternal Return*, the elaborate art installation that opened to spectacular fanfare in March. Meow Wolf—a local art collective formed in 2008 that describes itself as an “immersive art experience production company”—has been given a 10-year lease on a

30,000-square-foot space (formerly the Silva Lanes bowling alley), purchased with a lavish $3.5 million investment from *Game of Thrones* author George R.R. Martin.


Facade of Meow Wolf complex. Image: Ben Davis.

Meow Wolf's ambition is formidable, offering a stand-alone education outreach program (called Chimera), a performance space boasting a hip event program, a cafe, an orbiting crew of food trucks, and a maker space, among other things. But the heart of the endeavor is *House of the Eternal Return*, an environment that represents the combined efforts of some 135 artists.

How to describe this installation? It's something like *Sleep No More* meets the Winchester Mystery House meets *Welcome to Night Vale*, with a dash of Disney World and a bit of Burning Man thrown in there too.


Welcome mat at the *House of the Eternal Return*. Image: Ben Davis.

After buying a ticket ($18 for out-of-staters; $15 for residents of New Mexico) and entering, you first come upon an entire Victorian-style mansion, seemingly transplanted whole into the cavernous space. At the threshold a welcome mat greets you, “Beyond Here There Be Dragons”—a reference to the caption that marked unknown areas on the maps of European explorers (and possibly the one and only *Game of Thrones* nod here).

The interior appears to be a conventional (if very crowded) domestic space. But as you explore its recesses, you quickly start to notice odd details: ghostly holograms haunting the mirrors; a pantry stocked with products with oddball labels like “Sunscreen Mayonnaise” or “Electro Energy Jump Start Fluid,” suggesting a resident mad scientist.

The refrigerator as a gateway to another world. Image: Ben Davis.

And then, very quickly, as you actually start to explore the house, portals to other realities open. Crack the refrigerator door, and a glowing tunnel beckons you into a science-fiction labyrinth. Peer down into the toilet in an upstairs bathroom, and deep at the bottom you see a tiny figure trapped, flailing helplessly.

Looking for the secret of the toilet. Image: Ben Davis.

https://news.artnet.com/art-world/george-r-r-martin-backed-art-collective-556880

Duck through the fireplace, and suddenly you are in a soaring cave. Embedded in the rocks are the ribcage of glowing, molten pink dinosaur bones. Grab a set of drumsticks lying on the ground, tap the ribs, and you can play them like an electric marimba.

A musical mammoth skeleton. Image: Ben Davis.

From there you will quickly get lost in interlocking chambers that seem to shuttle between different realities. There’s an area that’s like a space station, with a sculpture of a towering furry creature whose animated eyes wink at you.

A mysterious beast. Image: Ben Davis.

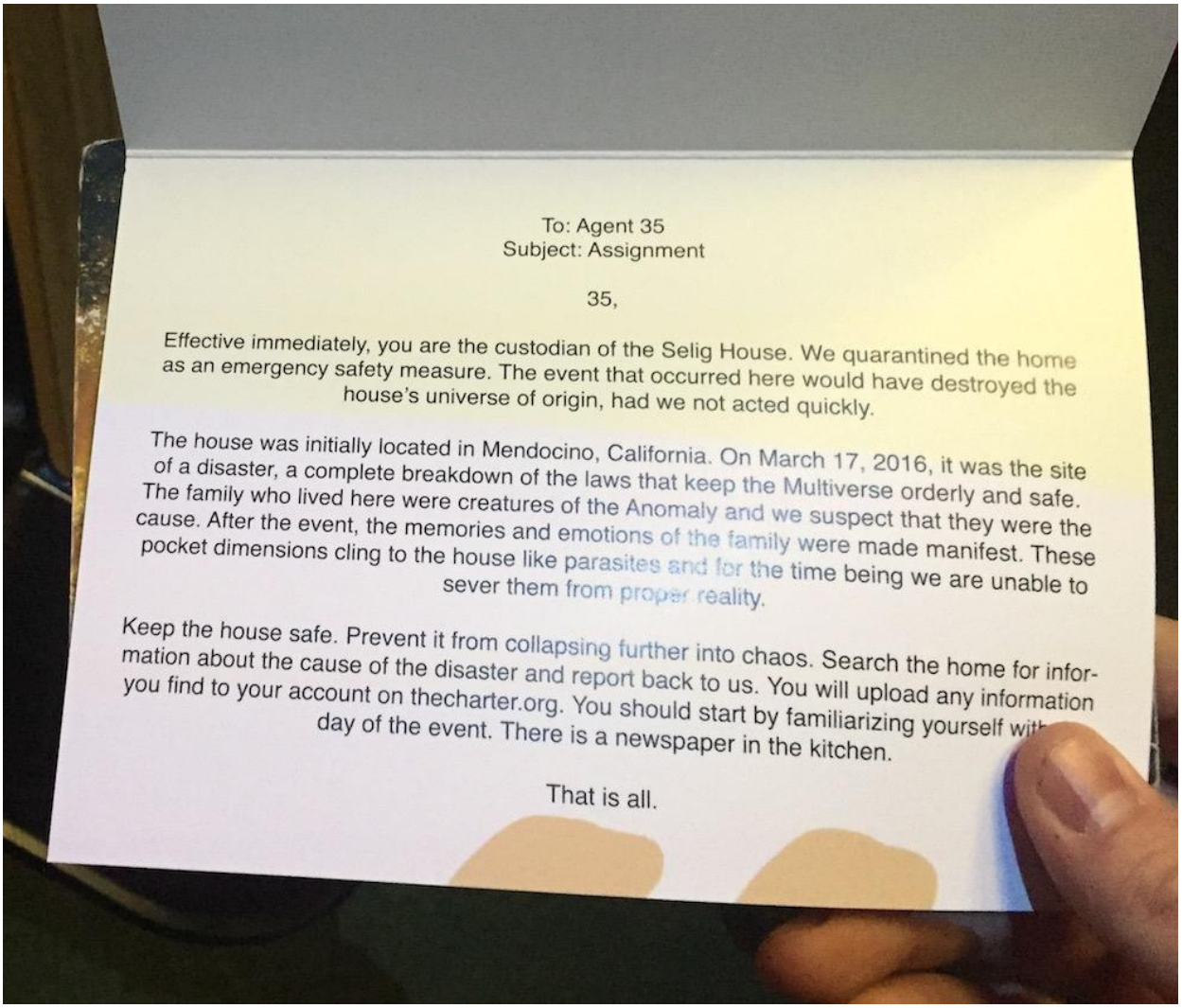
Take another turn, and suddenly you are in a dark chamber lit by strobing lights. At the center is a sculpture representing some type of otherworldly musical instrument. Red lasers divide the space like harp strings—and indeed, when you sweep your hands through them, musical notes ring out chaotically.

The rave room. Image: Ben Davis.

https://news.artnet.com/art-world/george-r-r-martin-backed-art-collective-556880

I could tell you about so much more: haunted tree houses, sinister robots, and spooky, mutant forests. It goes on and on. Supposedly there are more than 70 individual spaces, and more than 100 hours of “experiences” to absorb.

An underlying narrative unspools as you inspect the paraphernalia studding the domestic spaces and their connected alternate worlds: Upon entering, in a mailbox on your right, you discover a letter addressed to the “custodian” of Selig House, a Mendocino, California home quarantined as an emergency measure to prevent an event that would have destroyed the “house’s universe of origin.” The Selig family come from a special magical bloodline, and after the “event,” their house has become unstuck from time and space, and interpenetrated with other dimensions. And you’re free to explore all of its odd reality.




A letter. Image: Ben Davis.

This *Tales to Astonish*-style backstory is a nice scaffolding to build this immersive wonderland around—though to be honest, from what I can tell, it strikes me as drawing on fairly stock sci-fi/fantasy tropes. For all its spooky psychedelia, the imagery of the *House of Eternal Return* is comfortingly familiar. The real-world backstory may be far more interesting.

Santa Fe is a city that is graying fast, with more than half the population over 55. Civic supporters talked up the Meow Wolf initiative as a way to "diversify the economy, revitalize an economically distressed neighborhood and provide a unique entertainment option for Santa Fe." The *House of Eternal Return* emerges from the group's participation in Santa Fe's Creative Startups business accelerator, and a general push to amplify the city's "creative class" clout.

The *House of Eternal Return* is very consciously pioneering a new, aggressively for-profit model of culture. As such, the installation is carefully conceived and calibrated to maximize ticket sales. Vince Kadlubek, one of Meow Wolf's founders, points to Albuquerque's Explora museum, the Pacific Science Center in Seattle, and the City Museum of St. Louis as role models for the group.

"What we did was focus on kids, because the admissions-based market is driven by kids," Kadlubek told *Albuquerque Business First*. "We also didn't want to alienate adults and teenagers so we still stayed true with very mature themes inside our exhibit."

The landscape of the *House of the Eternal Return*. Image: Ben Davis.

https://news.artnet.com/art-world/george-r-r-martin-backed-art-collective-556880

Since the big opening in March, the installation's success has been astounding. Meow Wolf's business model is based on getting 150,000 visitors a year; it got 100,000 in its first two months. The gift shop's success has been the subject of its own media coverage. My guess is that the group will either have to open more space soon or institute timed ticketing, because even on a Wednesday afternoon, it is almost too crowded to enjoy.

With that success comes power. Kadlubek supported Mayor Javier Gonzales's 2014 run, which involved promising to attract youth to the city; he has now been appointed to the city Planning Commission. The collective has also spun off a political action committee, WolfPAC, to push an agenda of "young adult issues." Kadlubek has a TED Talk.

The group's ambitions don't stop in Santa Fe. Meow Wolf is looking to replicate the success of the *House of Eternal Return* in other cities. "It will open in Santa Fe, but eventually we'll take it to other markets as well," Kadlubek has said. Reports claim the collective is already fielding interest from places as far away as Singapore and the Dominican Republic.


"A gateway to the multiverse." Image: Ben Davis.

That's a testament to how accessible and fun it all is. It's also a testament to how harmlessly translatable its fantasy themes are, on the same wavelength as, say, *The Guardians of the Galaxy* or Pokémon.

Of course, there's no truly universal culture. Erin Joyce, a Flagstaff, Arizona–based curator who specializes in Native American culture, pointed out to me that the groovy fantasy of the *House of Eternal Return* has a potentially unseemly subtext in the context of local battles over place and culture in a city defined by Native American and Hispanic influences but increasingly unaffordable: It is literally the story of a wealthy California household transplanted whole to New Mexico. (On its opening weekend, the *House* was greeted with a hand-painted, sarcastic billboard, "Welcome, Gentrifiers. Keep pushing us out! Consequence: we lose space, you lose culture.")

Indeed, it may be worth noting that the kinds of pulpy mythology of aliens and hauntings that the *House* draws on have often been read as allegories of cozy suburban "normal America"'s anxieties about sexual and racial Others of all kinds. In his recent *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*, Renée Bergland argues that tales of ghostly visitation have often been cyphers for "white American men's anxiety and guilt over their complicity in American hierarchies of race, class, and gender."

A magical forrest. Image: Ben Davis.

Laying such psychoanalyzing aside, what does the Meow Wolf style mean? In its deep structure, this for-profit art environment shares a lot withteamLab, the Japanese group whose wildly popular, ticketed extravaganza of interactive light environments, "Living Digital Space and Future Parks," I reviewed recently. It's part of a trend.

Like teamLab, the sheer scale of the Meow Wolf effort crosses the line from art collective to art corporation, with the efforts of hundreds of artists melding together into one Gesamtkunstwerk. And like teamLab, the corollary of this upscaling is a self-conscious cultural regression to tactile wonderment. The same could be said of Random International's endlessly Instagrammed Rain Room.

As an aesthetic, this kind of work is only going to become more and more visible. Because of its lovable DIY roots and genuine success in raking in money for its team, the Meow Wolf model is being proffered, and accepted, as a template for struggling contemporary artists. Almost by nature, art that styles itself as a for-profit entertainment company *has* to grow, since it is competing in a *Game of Thrones*-style war of all-against-all for profit and investment and attention.

And so, this kind of art's influence is likely going to spread quickly from the margins, putting pressures on museums to embrace it or define themselves against it. You'll hear its MBA-style aesthetic rhetoric more and more.


A sign. Image: Ben Davis.

So we need a name for it. As a style, it's poppy and media-savvy, but it's not Pop or New Media art. I'm going to propose calling it what it is: Big Fun Art.

Big Fun Art is what you get when art self-consciously models itself off of start-up culture, with its rhetoric of scalable growth. It's what you get when visitor numbers come to dominate how success for art institutions is viewed. It's what you get after a decade or so of culture justifying itself primarily for its economic benefits. It's what you get when the landscape of patronage and funding makes the idea of sustaining an individual practice look more and more like a pipe dream, a kind of luxuriant lifestyle not available to the majority of creative people.

Don't get me wrong: Big Fun Art really is fun, and apparently great for the "admissions-based market." But it also represents a gateway that has been opened to another dimension of artistic values (which is why it deserves its own name). The consequences of its arrival are bound to be much more unsettling than anything you find in the *House of Eternal Return*.

*Follow artnet News on Facebook.*