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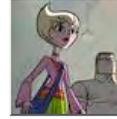
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Pranks and Beans

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By **Doug Harvey** Wednesday, May 24 2000

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"Death Got You Down? At Last an Alternative!" read a small ad in a March 1999 edition of the *L.A. Weekly*. Those curious enough to investigate the accompanying URL (www.finalcurtain.com) arrived at the home page of Final Curtain, a.k.a. **Investors Real Estate Development**, a company proposing a chain of memorial parks where the grave markers were pre-designed by the occupants as "both tomb and eternal exhibit of their most personally meaningful work." The deceased-to-be were encouraged to be creative, to design interactive kinetic displays in the spirit of a theme park. Final Curtain even offered a time-share option, where the remains and their monument would be shipped around the globe, from one Final Curtain park to another, in perpetuity.

The Web site also announced a Monument Design Scholarship Program for artists. Dozens of entries were posted, ranging from **Kim Markegard's** 10-by-10-foot dance floor and jukebox ("an outlet for enemies and adversaries to express their feelings for me . . . for my loved ones, to allow them to celebrate my escape from this world") to the Ruschaesque simplicity of Nick Gaetano's blue neon "Nick Is Dead" signage. Other artists proposed live video feeds of their decomposing corpse, giant Etch-a-Sketches or Ant Farms filled with cremation ashes, or scrolling computer screens of the loved one's collected writings that would gradually slow down and collapse as people stopped visiting the grave. Artists whose memorials were not selected for company sponsorship retained the option of selling "futures" to subsidize their projects. The prototypical Final Curtain theme park is explicated in detail — shaped like an artist's palette and riddled with gift shops, theme restaurants (including Dante's Grill, where one can dine on Cajun and Southern American cuisine while watching wax figures of art critics roast in a simulacral inferno) and restrooms, each equipped with "a perpetually flowing drinking fountain of nondenominational holy water."

Fueled by more ads and a flurry of press releases, the story was picked up and faithfully repeated by newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations, and the Internet. Pundits from *Mother Jones*, the *New York Daily News*, the *Boston Herald*, *The Village Voice*, the Scripps wire service, *Landscape Architecture* magazine, *Yahoo!*, *NPR*, Fox-TV and even the *L.A. Times* seized on the story for its obvious entertainment value and built-in critique of the American Way of Death. The Web site received tens of thousands of hits. Venture capitalists called looking to get in on the ground floor. Death-care professionals made contact, anxious about jeopardizing the status quo, but excited about the fresh idea.

On Mother's Day, 2000, over a year after the initial press releases were mailed, Final Curtain was

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revealed to be the latest hoax by [Joey Skaggs](#), inveterate media prank artist. Skaggs, who has been staging increasingly elaborate hoaxes for more than 30 years, enlisted the help of dozens of artists, writers, designers and architects to fabricate a convincing media presence (the Web page, press releases, nationwide advertising, even a dummy “office” and phones manned by [Michael Varley](#), managing director; [Stuart MacLelland](#), marketing director; and [Paul Corey](#), associate marketing director) all played by Skaggs himself. Like a Surrealist guerrilla wing of media watchdog group FAIR, Skaggs’ work amounts to a scathing critique of contemporary mass culture, revealing the often slipshod mechanisms by which much “news” is generated and credited as objective reality.

It’s no surprise that Skaggs has few friends in the mainstream media, or that the revelation of his hoaxes receives less media attention than the original stories themselves. Disgruntled and embarrassed news sources routinely refuse the artist permission to display or reproduce the fruits of his labor. Neither is Skaggs, who started as a painter, taken seriously by the art world from which he emerged. His first “performance” was the crude but effective Easter Sunday parade piece of 1966–1969, in which the artist annually dragged a grisly assemblage crucifix through the streets of New York chased by an angry mob and the police. He gradually refined his techniques of manipulating the media, mastering the art of the press release and conference, fake letterheads, the circumvention of fact-checking safeguards, and the protocols for accessing talk-show and other broadcast forums.

A summary of his prank-works alone could easily fill a feature article (readers interested in full disclosure should visit the “Retro” section of Skaggs’ own Web page at www.joeyskaggs.com), but some of the highlights include the seminal *Hippie Bus Tour to Queens*, which involved a busload of freaks (including [Yayoi Kusama](#)) turning the tables on rubbernecking suburban tourists; *Cathouse for Dogs*, which resulted in an Emmy-nominated, never-retracted news story by ABC and a subpoena from the attorney general; *Windsurfing From Hawaii to California*, Skaggs’ attempt to become the first person to cross the [Pacific Ocean](#) on a sailboard; *Comacocoon*, a medical anesthetic and subliminal-programming alternative to dangerous foreign vacations; and *The Solomon Project*, a distributed computer program designed to eliminate the need for juries and judges from the American jurisprudence system, starting with a much-ballyhooed guilty verdict for [O.J. Simpson](#). All these events generated copious media attention, concern from various levels of state, and close to no coverage in the art press.

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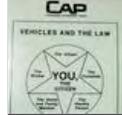
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Part of Skaggs' lack of recognition by the art world is due to the unfashionably uncompromising political underpinnings of his work — actively disrupting the easy flow of numbing infotainment that regulates daily life, pulling the rug out from media-anointed authorities pontificating on supercharged issues, and pressing the question of whether the domain of cutting-edge contemporary art-making lies inside the white cube or on the air. Public credulity as shaped by avant-garde art, advertising and other forms of propaganda has remained largely unacknowledged as the predominant cultural medium for at least 50 years. Skaggs is one of a handful of artists who refuse to participate in the denial that allows the high-art world to keep rolling. At the very least, Skaggs' insistence that we continually question our major sources of sensory input amounts to permission to actually pay attention to our senses, arguably the bottom line of successful art-making.

Several of Skaggs' earlier projects, such as *The Fat Squad* (commandos-for-hire who will enforce your diet) and *Bad Guys Talent Management Agency* (a dummy "creeps only" casting office), took on subsequent real-world lives of their own, and it's not inconceivable that some canny entrepreneur will pick up the ball on *Final Curtain*. Forward-looking funeral-industry companies already offer graveside interactive computer and video programming. Those disappointed by the hoax and impatient for the world to catch up with Joey Skaggs' vision should recall and revisit Los Angeles' own family of Forest Lawn cemeteries.

Home of talking statuary, the multimedia display of the world's largest oil painting, reproductions of Michelangelo's masterworks, elaborate theatrical public educational performances by Montezuma and other historical figures, and perhaps the oddest little museum anywhere (with typewritten labels, cheesy replicas of the British crown jewels, the only stone head removed from *Easter Island*, and a Bougureau painting), *Hubert Eaton's* Glendale Cemetery and Mortuary was undoubtedly the prototype for *Final Curtain*.

Vilified by *Evelyn Waugh* in *The Loved One* (later a brilliant film by *Tony Richardson*, featuring *Paul Williams* as a rocket scientist) and by *Jessica Mitford* in her best-selling *The American Way of Death Revisited* (reissued in an updated paperback version from *Vintage* in January), Forest Lawn has become a symbol of the self-indulgent excesses and abuses of the funeral industry. There is something poignant, though, in the company's steadfast adherence to its original Middle American translation of the therapeutic powers of institutional art. Forest Lawn also displayed a

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strangely prescient “sampling” approach to the experience of art, conceptually connecting with Skaggs through the back door of appropriation, copyright disputes and culture-jamming studies in general. It’s a must-see for out-of-town visitors, and I’m always surprised at the number of Angelenos who’ve never made the trip.

If you missed the March presentation of the special event *A Visit With Michelangelo*, where the public is invited to “travel back to the 15th century to rediscover the greatest artist of the Renaissance: plus a surprise guest appearance by *Leonardo da Vinci*, which incites an intriguing debate on who’s truly the greatest!,” the Glendale facility will host it again on October 5. For details, see www.forestlawn.com. Reservations well in advance are advisable. The gap between the indistinguishably virtual and the inexplicably real is closing rapidly, and there’s only room for so many.

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Note: The first 3-D Tibetan Shi-Tro Mandala to be constructed in the U.S. is in the works at Forest Lawn. Scheduled to be completed in September, the Mandala will measure 8 feet by 6 feet. Workshops open to the public will be held June 3 and 11. Call (323) 340-4738 for info.

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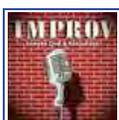
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