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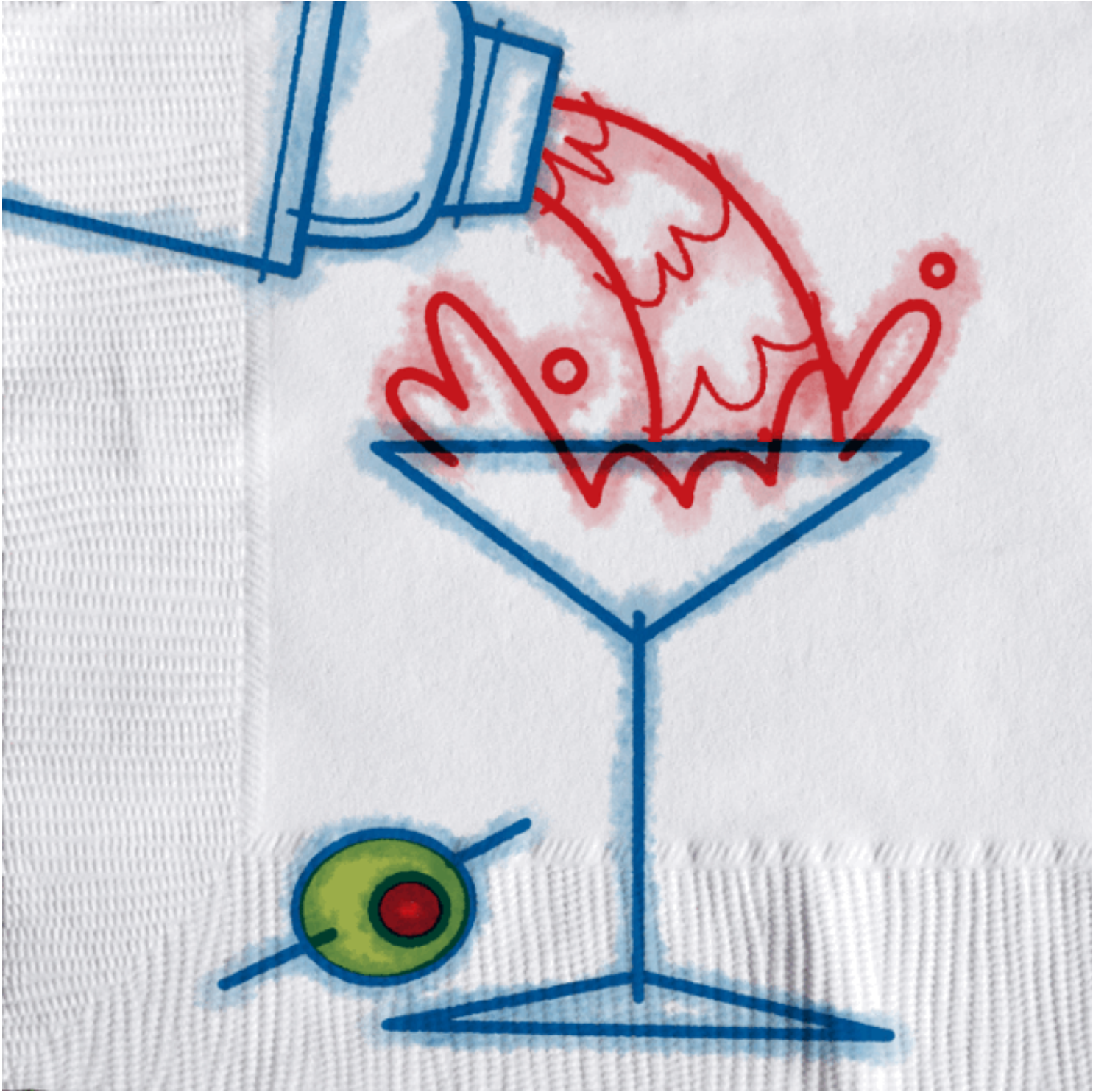
A Sweet, Serendipitous Night at the Whitney



By Katja Vujić, a writer at The Cut covering culture, news, wellness, and style.

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Animation: The Cut

Each year, the Whitney’s Art Party gives the artistic community a chance to do a bit of peacocking and spice up the drab winter weeks while fundraising for the Whitney’s Independent Study Program. This year’s botanical-themed event was especially brightly colored, though my impression by the end of the night was that the theme felt more Aesop (one of the event’s sponsors) than anything else. As a devoted fan of fancy hand soap with exfoliating beads in it, I’m not complaining. We’d had a warmer couple of days in New York,

but the sky started shedding large wet flakes just in time for the party and continued throughout the night.

A short, snowy walk brought me to the entrance of the Whitney concurrent with someone rocking a full magenta suit and matching cowboy hat hinting at the brightness inside. Upon entering, I was given a warm scented towel for my chilled hands and guided to a lotion station. Appropriately moisturized, I stepped into the festivities. Below, the elements of the evening, rated on a scale of 1 to 5 sipping tequilas (the signature drink of the night).

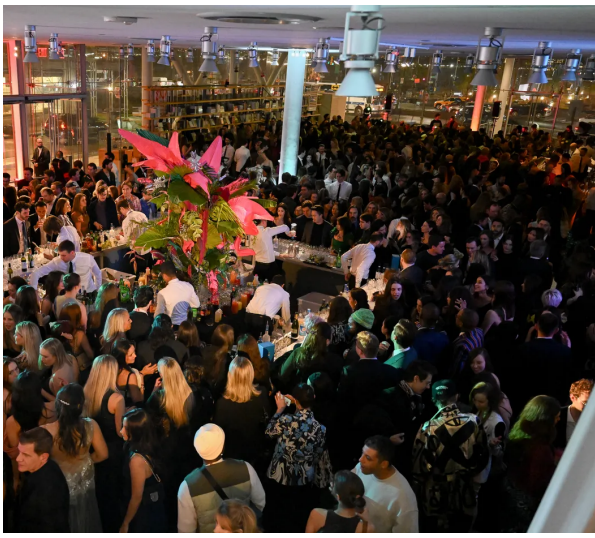


Photo: Madison Voelkel/BFA.com

The looks:

About half the crowd was dressed in bright florals to match the evening's botanical theme. The other half seemed to have instead leaned into the Indie Sleaze revival signified by the evening's DJ set from MGMT, or perhaps just the New York uniform. I spied an abundance of pleather, glittery dresses, and sleek tuxedos in the smattering of all-black outfits.

The space itself was only mildly decorated — the big flower arrangement of the night burst from the center of the bar, where early arrivals ordered drinks, and displays of Casa Dragones sipping tequila could be found on nearly every surface. **4 out of 5 sipping tequilas**



Madison Voelkel/BFA.com; Photo: Madison Voelkel/BFA.com.

The smells:

After taking in the room, I headed upstairs to the third floor, where there was another Aesop-sponsored spread. I was instructed by an aproned Aesop employee to sniff huge white nose-busts that were placed on gray tables throughout the gallery. They were scented with — what else? — Aesop fragrances and were apparently cast from the real noses of Aesop's Parisian staff. It was all a bit ... well ... on the nose. I stopped to take a look at some photographs by Barbara Hammer, and behind me, someone chattered on about a “*really amazing*” Audrey Hepburn exhibit they'd recently seen. Just as I was about to head upstairs and see the exhibits, I turned to see a newly familiar face: Spurge Carter, a DJ and the former editor-in-chief of Hii magazine, whom I'd met just a few days before at a poetry circle, and his friend Noah Prebish, also a DJ and an illustrator. They told me they were there as guests of a friend who's DJ-ing — I assumed they meant the evening's opener, Samantha Urbani — and we agreed to find one another later. **3 out of 5 sipping tequilas**



Photo: Madison Voelkel/BFA.com

The art:

I made my way to the eighth floor, where a preview of “Harold Cohen: AARON,” an exhibition of works created by the painter’s artificial-intelligence program for art-making, created in the 1970s, was up. Equally fascinated and freaked out, I watched the AARON machine in action, tracing shapes with a Sharpie. Near the entrance, I spotted Ephraim Asili, whose film *The Inheritance* was on display downstairs and had served as inspiration for that exhibit, titled “Inheritance.” Asili is on the host committee and said he came “mostly out of curiosity.” He was excited to see the earliest examples of AI art. “The first place I’ve been since having a drink is this floor,” he said.



Madison Voelkel/BFA.com; Photo: Madison Voelkel/BFA.com.

In front of a 1991 AARON figural work called *Stephanie & Friend*, a particularly fashionable group congregated. Jack James Busa and Daniel Walters, also known as DJ duo the Muses, both appeared wearing chic tuxedos with platform boots. Busa wore a metallic headpiece that added a sort of emo forehead swoop to the look, while Walters had slicked-back hair and smoky eyeshadow. “It’s nice to come to the Whitney when it’s a little more secluded and you can really get into things,” Busa told me. “We’ve both liked MGMT for a very long time. It’s cool to see them come on — ‘Electric Feel’ was my Myspace song. It’s great to grow up and get to see them, and they’re still killing it.”



Photo: Madison Voelkel/BFA.com

After passing through the seventh floor, where the permanent collection resides, I noticed several attendees posing for photos in front of the artworks in one of the galleries. The most Instagrammable seemed to be Lee Krasner’s *The Seasons*, and I chatted with the latest subject and his partner, who had just photographed him in front of it. They introduced themselves as Salman Toor, a painter who had a stunning solo show at the Whitney in 2020 — “during lockdown, so I had, like, five of my friends come to the opening,” he said — and Ali Sethi, a musician who mixes classical Indian singing with contemporary beats. “I’m trying to Shazam everything,” he said. “but it seems like it’s live and so it’s not Shazaming. I wanna know the name of the band!”

I quickly headed down to “Inheritance” on the sixth floor (the exhibition closes next week). In front of Sadie Barnette’s installation *Family Tree II*, I spoke with artist Jonathan Gardenhire, styled in head-to-toe Luar, as well as his partner, Bohdi, and friends Erica and Audrey. “The Whitney Art Party, a.k.a. WAP,” he joked, before taking on a more serious tone. “I’m here because of shows like this one, by amazing curators like Rujeko Hockley, a collection show that feels so contemporary. That’s what makes the Whitney so special, and the Whitney deserves to have shows like this more often.” With that, I took in a few more pieces, conscious of how

strange it felt to consider generational trauma and the ways colonialist violence weaves its way through history, all while I was wearing a fancy dress and enjoying a night on the town. It was just a more extreme iteration of how daily life has felt lately, the mundanity of a privileged western existence suffused with the unbearable violence we're witnessing on our phones. **5 out of 5 sipping tequilas**



Madison Voelkel/BFA.com; Photo: Madison Voelkel/BFA.com.

The food:

Downstairs, I emerged into the much more lively party. MGMT's anticipated set had begun (maybe the crowd was still riding the *Saltburn* high?), and the passed apps circulated with zeal. They included near-regular-size chicken sandwiches, cheese quesadillas cut into triangles, and my personal star of the show, the most delectable mini crab cakes served hot and crispy with a dollop of spicy mayo on top. I ate three within ten minutes. Later, dessert: Rice Krispies sticks dipped in chocolate, espresso macarons, and pear tarts. **5 out of 5 sipping tequilas**

The friends:

After feasting on crab cakes, I passed by a group of what I can only imagine must have been influencers conducting a photo shoot in front of the bar with a portable LED light. Next, I bumped into Spurge and Noah, and Noah clarified that the DJs they were the guests of were actually MGMT. Casual! "We've both been in New York for like ten years, and we constantly are the friends that know way too many people," said Spurge, recounting other friends they had spotted.

We walked into the single exhibit on the ground floor, "Natalie Ball: bilwi naats Ga'niipci" (which translates to "we smell like the outside"). It's a more peaceful space, and the plywood featured prominently in the show made it feel as though we were in a warm, hand-built tree house away from the chaos. Later, we headed onto the dance floor, where the energy of MGMT's set had intensified. Spurge quickly started Shazaming, pulling up a song called "Lizard Eyes," which prompted Noah to tell me his dad is a lizard scientist. We finished the evening nestled behind the DJ booth, comfortably swaying and watching the crowd absolutely freak it for MGMT. Each time they tried to wrap up the set, they were begged for more music — or, as one loudly shouted request went, specifically "MORE VINYL!" Instead, they gave an extremely slowed-down a cappella cover of "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger" and stuck around

to chat with excited fans after the set, saying hello to me, Noah, and Spurge before being whisked away by their team. By this point, the space was nearly disassembled, and we headed for the exit, where guests haggled for extra Aesop gift bags. When I opened mine, I understood why: It held a full-size bottle of perfume. **5 out of 5 sipping tequilas**



Photo: Madison Voelkel/BFA.com

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