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In a "Life in Hell" cartoon back in 1984, Matt Groening sketched a performance artist haunted by the question "Why am I standing here onstage slapping meat on my head?" That's the era and aesthetic celebrated in "Ablutions of a Nefarious Nature," a retrospective gallery show and performance series by Johanna Went at Track 16 in Santa Monica's Bergamot Station complex. Went was a '70s-'80s avatar, bridging the most aggressive, provocative elements of the art and punk-rock worlds, figuratively spewing her audiences with images of brutality and vulgarity — and literally with a variety of substances.

Times have changed, right? Well, patrons at her show Saturday (the second of three weekly events) were greeted with a warning that they "might get splattered." And sure enough, halfway through the 45-minute piece, Went (in one of dozens of elaborate costumes, tactile sculptures heavy on doll parts and toy animals, worn by her and several accomplices) whipped out a pack of frankfurters and, yes, meat-slapping ensued.

The show started like a Teletubbies nightmare. Then it got weird. The players paraded in, gyrated and uttered non-sequiturs, backed by a vibrant surf-psychedelic-tribal recorded score by longtime collaborator Mark Wheaton with contributions by percussionist Z'ev. It was a frenetic, myth-o-matic jumble of kabuki, English pantomime, mystery plays, Noh, the Ramayama, Día de los Muertos pageantry, Buñuel films, Dante, you name it — a Joseph Campbell Frappuccino. It fulfilled the expectations of first-timer Jack Haer, 81, a retired Venice psychologist brought by a friend. Viewing a photo/costume display before the show, he said, "They don't have an unconscious — it's all in the open." But what is weird these days? In the Reagan years this seemed stirring. Today it's hard to out-odd the daily offerings on cable news, and a couple of attempts at topicality (an offhanded reference to Paris Hilton) seemed flat. And where the splatter once was shocking, now it's a "greatest hits" set piece, Went stepping into a kiddie pool and ceremoniously spilling fake blood from a giant monster skull on top of her head to the applause and whoops of fans, as if it were the Stones playing "Satisfaction."

An unplanned moment transcended nostalgia, though, when near the end a chair slipped out from under Went. Unfazed, she improvised a stern warning that soon enough we all would need someone to hold our "toilets, walkers and chairs."

After the show Went dismissed any attempt at analysis, saying blithely, "It doesn't make sense, so don't worry about it. There's no hidden intellectual text." That's meaty enough.

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