

Critic's Choice

Review: McCarthy family's 'Rebel Dabble Babble' blurs fact, fiction

By David Pagel

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Movies aren't what they used to be. Neither are we.

Smart phones and iPads have turned us all into actors, directors and producers, not to mention reporters, critics and gossips. Although Hollywood still churns out idealized dreams, there's more room for homegrown fantasies, DIY illusions and point-and-shoot videos, each packed with the potential to tell the truth about a world that seems a little crazier than it used to.

For more than 40 years, Paul McCarthy has been doing just that: creating comical props, crude performances and demented videos whose raw amateurism strips away slickness to probe, grope and fondle the ugly underbelly of life in the suburbs.

His newest work, "Rebel Dabble Babble," takes his great subject — the emotional anguish of being stuck in a rut — to new heights, fleshing it out with psychological nuance and queasy empathy. Made in collaboration with his son Damon, the loaded show occupies every square inch of the large downtown gallery run by his daughter, Mara. The family values that unfold in "Rebel Dabble Babble" are worlds away from those trotted out by politicians who pretend that America was at its best in the 1950s — and that the clock can be turned back.

"Rebel Dabble Babble" is a dark and noisy labyrinth that covers two floors and spills into the parking lot. In eight rooms and passageways, 11 videos play continuously — and loudly — among props, sets and equipment.

Some of the videos projected on the walls are seat-of-the-pants reenactments of scenes from "Rebel Without a Cause" and "Splendor on the Grass." James Franco plays James Dean playing Jim Stark. Elyse Poppers plays Natalie Wood playing Judy (in "Rebel Without a Cause") and Deanie Loomis (in "Splendor on the Grass"). Suzanne Averitt does double duty as both Jim's and Judy's mother. (The McCarthys also contribute to ["Rebel."](#) the MOCA exhibition organized by Franco that opened this week.)

In other scenes, Paul and Damon McCarthy play fast and loose with Hollywood history. Paul takes the role of Jim's father and that of director Nicholas Ray, whose presence on camera is no more unsettling than any of the other rambunctious nuttiness and bare-naked lunacy that is McCarthy's stock-in-trade. Actors from the adult entertainment industry — James Deen, Jimmy Lifestyles and Heather Vahn — stand in as sex doubles,

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further blurring distinctions between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, dream and nightmare.

In the largest space, a two-story section of a three-quarter-scale house has been tipped on its side, like a Gordon Matta Clark sculpture gone wrong. In the back parking lot stands a similarly scaled version of the Chateau Marmont's Bungalow No. 2, an upside-down Hollywood sign affixed to its front.

To go from room to room (and from room to room-within-a-room) is to feel as if you have fallen into a parallel universe — one that's a lot like the real one, only weirder, both truer than reality and more ludicrous than the movies.

If Lenny Bruce and Richard Wagner had worked together on "The Wizard of Oz," they might have come up with "Rebel Dabble Babble." The golden age of amateurism may be upon us, and the McCarthy family just may be its poets laureate.

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