



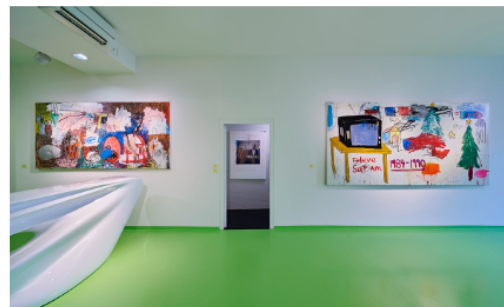
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James Franco – The Artist Behind Hollywood's Myth

A two-time Golden Globe winner – first for his portrayal of James Dean in 2002, and again in 2018 for *The Disaster Artist* – he has starred in over a hundred films, but his latest work takes him further into the realm of the visual, offering a fresh perspective on the city that made him famous.

At Galerie Gmurzynska in Zurich, Franco presents *Hollywood is Hell*, a haunting and complex series of collages that deconstruct the glossy myths of the entertainment industry. The 28 works, which Franco describes as “destroyed posters,” bear the marks of a city stripped bare during the pandemic – empty streets, crumbling images, and the residue of a once-glamorous culture in decline.

In *Hollywood is Hell*, Franco uses his own fragmented identity as a lens through which to examine the decay of a cultural mythology, offering a portrait of masculinity, celebrity, and selfhood. It's a striking and often uncomfortable reckoning with the very industry that made him, but it's also a work of introspection – a reminder that even in the world of bright lights and illusions, there is room for the messy and the real.



Anastasia Yovanovska: Mr. Franco, you describe Hollywood as a dream factory turned wasteland. Do you think any of its magic is worth keeping, or is it mostly about breaking down its myths?

James Franco: I definitely think there's magic worth keeping. What I find in this project, you know, working in an art space – a fine art space – is something I don't necessarily get from the Hollywood space. Let's define those worlds: there's commercial Hollywood, and then there's the art world. I'm still making movies, and that comes with its own structures and expectations. It's about telling stories to engage audiences, whether in cinemas or streaming.

But in the art world, I can take the same material – Hollywood legends, icons, its entire mythology – and put it through a new filter. In that space, it's about breaking things down, looking beneath the surface, or creating new juxtapositions. That's harder to do in the commercial Hollywood space, where the focus is on narrative and mass appeal. So, I'm interested in both worlds, but they allow for very different kinds of exploration.



JAMES FRANCO (b. 1978)
 1984-1990
 Acrylic on canvas
 152.4 x 304.8 cm
 60 x 120 inches



JAMES FRANCO (b.1978)
 (2 Houses, 1 Castle)
 Mixed Media, marker, acrylic on canvas
 121.9 x 243.8 cm
 48 x 96 inches

AY: You act, direct, write, and work in fine art. How do you balance these creative fields? Do they influence one another?

JF: Absolutely, they influence each other. It reminds me of Shel Silverstein, the children's book author behind *The Giving Tree*. He also wrote songs for Johnny Cash and plays with David Mamet. He once said he liked doing different things, as long as they were connected. Storytelling, whether for children, in plays, or in songs, shares a core. For me, it's similar. Once you understand the common threads – like storytelling – you realize the disciplines aren't so disconnected. They can flow into each other. Acting informs my writing. Writing influences my art. They're distinct, but they also overlap in surprising ways.

AY: Many of your works explore identity and transformation. What draws you to those themes, and how do they evolve across mediums?

JF: I think it started with acting. As an actor, my job is to understand a character's inner motivations and outward behaviors. That naturally drew me to themes of identity and transformation.

When I moved into writing, my way in was through character. My fiction was mostly in the first person because it felt like stepping into a role. Similarly, my paintings and drawings are often portraits. Across all these mediums, it's about capturing a person – their essence, their transformation. Acting, writing, painting – they all orbit around those ideas for me.



AY: Do you feel your identity – your "core" has evolved? – stays the same across these explorations, or has it evolved?

JF: It reminds me of something Bryan Cranston said in his book: I'm sane in my life so I can be crazy in my work. That resonates with me. There's a myth about the "tortured artist," but it's not sustainable. Rick Rubin talks about this in his book, too. Artists with inner turmoil might produce great work for a while, but eventually, the chaos catches up with them. Bruce Springsteen put it well: You can't live in the art, but the art lives in you. I've learned to seek balance. Ten years ago, I was a workaholic. I was burning out, even though I thought that was just who I was – a hard worker. Now, I've realized the importance of grounding myself. It's not about sacrificing creativity; it's about sustaining it.



JAMES FRANCO (b. 1978)
Male Triptych 2022
Mixed media on locker
167.6 x 91.4 x 30.5 cm
66 x 36 x 12 inches



JAMES FRANCO (b. 1978)
I&A Liquor
Paint, collage on canvas
91.4 x 121.9 cm
36 x 48 inches

AY: William Burroughs, with his fragmented style, inspired you. How does his work connect to your layered, often fragmented art?

JF: Burroughs was a big influence conceptually. His “cut-ups,” where he’d cut and rearrange text, fascinated me. I don’t use it much in writing – it’s harder to create coherence from fragmented blocks of text. But in visual art, the idea of cutting, juxtaposing, and collaging is incredibly rich. For example, I’ve done projects where I re-edit existing material. I re-edited Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho*. I also inserted myself into a soap opera, *General Hospital*, and turned that experience into a new narrative. These projects are about deconstructing and reimagining Hollywood, which ties back to Burroughs’ ethos of reshaping familiar material.



AY: Burroughs once said, Artists are the real architects of change, not politicians. Do you agree?

JF: I think change is collaborative. Artists, politicians, technologists – we're all contributing in different ways. A filmmaker might portray stories that haven't been told before, pushing cultural boundaries. Politicians may implement change after those cultural shifts. It's all connected.

AY: Many of your projects blur the line between personal and universal themes. How much of your own story do you bring into your work?

JF: It depends on the project. A lot of my art explores Hollywood – its legends, its icons, its narratives – and that comes from a personal place. When I was starting out in the art world, I was inspired by artists like Paul McCarthy and Douglas Gordon, who used Hollywood as subject matter. McCarthy reimagined Disney narratives; Gordon slowed down Hitchcock's Psycho into a 24-hour experience. For me, the resonance is even deeper because I am Hollywood. I've been in movies like Spider-Man that people grew up with. My image is part of the public's memory of those films, almost separate from who I am as a person.



JAMES FRANCO (b. 1978)
He Smelled So Bad – 2022
Collage, mixed media on canvas(es)
111.8 x 233.7 cm
44 x 92 inches



JAMES FRANCO (b. 1978)
One Day At A Time (Batman) – 2022
Collage, mixed media on canvas
121.9 x 91.4 cm
48 x 36 inches

By using Hollywood as a subject in my art, I'm both exploring its universal myths and reclaiming my personal connection to it. It's about taking the image that's become detached from me and making it my own again.

AY: That's fascinating – you're not only using Hollywood as a subject in your art, but also reclaiming your identity within it.

JF: Exactly. It's about finding where the personal and the universal overlap. Through that, I can explore deeper questions about identity, transformation, and the relationship between a person and their public image.

James Franco's works feel both personal and universal – a bold look at identity in an industry built on reinvention. With his mix of introspection and audacity, Franco reclaims his story, transforming Hollywood's glossy image into something deeply human. The result is a powerful reflection on fame, fragility, and the strength of self-expression, showing that even in a world of illusions, authenticity can still shine through.



author ANASTASIA YOVANOVSKA

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