

Poster (photo Velaslavasay Panorama)

THE VELASLAVASAY PANORAMA IN LOS ANGELES

Sara Velas

Anchored by the illustrious history of the grandly immersive panorama paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Velaslavasay Panorama is dedicated to the production and presentation of unusual multi-sensory, immersive experiences and houses the only contemporary 360-degree panorama viewing hall in the United States. Our mission is to bring into public awareness the aesthetic, imaginative and poetic value of art forms and traditions that were precursors to cinema.

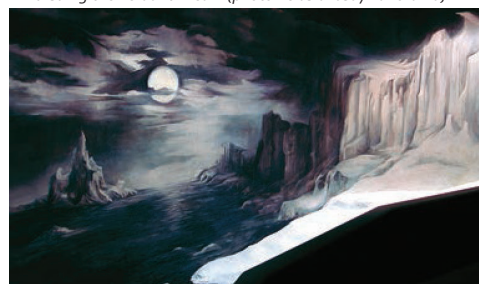
The Panorama is an art form which encircles the spectator with an illusion of continuous space, often in a painted 360-degree format. Patented by Englishman Robert Barker in 1787, this spectacular visual entertainment flourished throughout the nineteenth century, mostly in Europe and the United States. The Panorama, Cyclorama, Diorama, Cosmorama and many other variations on the sensational venue were popular places to spend leisure time and embark upon imagined travels to unfamiliar, unreachable and significant places in space and time.

Housed in the Union Theatre, one of Los Angeles' earliest neighbourhood cinemas, the Velaslavasay Panorama takes visitors on an exploration of seemingly unknown regions through crafted environments featuring minute attention to detail. From the darkened, wooden spiral staircase to the exposed brick wall with decaying frescos original to the theatre, every inch of the Velaslavasay Panorama allows visitors to imagine themselves as part of another reality, as if in a dream or memory.

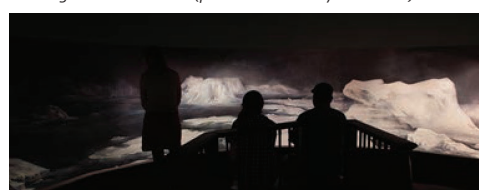
Exhibits, panoramic installations and events are designed to ease visitors into a world of inquiry where landscapes blur the line between reality and artistry. For example, a summer series of ephemeral Chinese opera performances were given permanent commemoration through the creation of *Pavilion of the Verdant Dream*, a garden installation at our site inspired by landmark Chinese opera scenes (Fig. 1).



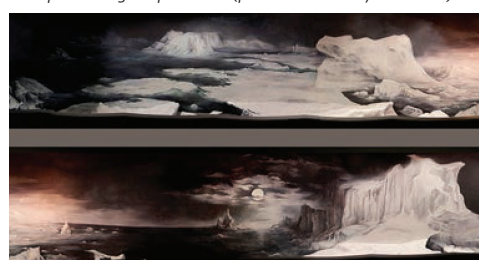
1. Pursuing the Verdant Dream (photo Velaslavasay Panorama)



2. Effulgence of the North (photo Velaslavasay Panorama)



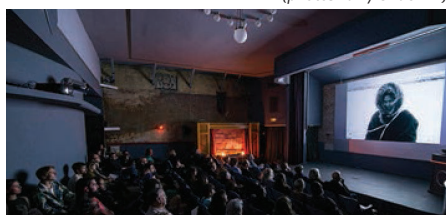
3. People viewing the panorama (photo Velaslavasay Panorama)



4. The Grand Moving Mirror of California (photo Ruby Carlson)



5 & 6. 'Mush! To the movies' Polar Film Club (photos Larry Underhill)



7. 'Nova Tuskhut' (photo Velaslavasay Panorama)



The current 360-degree panorama on view is *Effulgence of the North*, a contemporary adaptation of a classical nineteenth-century panorama depicting an otherworldly vision of the Arctic (Fig 2). The installation utilises surround sound and dynamic lighting to enhance the illusion of Arctic verisimilitude and create a peculiar sense of extraordinary physical presence for the visitor. A meditation on the imagined extremes of the Polar Regions and the fantastical place they hold in literature, *Effulgence of the North* uses sight, sound and sculpture to create an impression of this seemingly unknown region giving the viewer an unexpected encounter with the uncanny in the midst of downtown Los Angeles. On view since the summer of 2007, the exhibit has been seen by over 15,000 visitors and has been the inspiration for numerous special events and programmes.

Our exhibition and event spaces feature rotating programmes, focusing primarily on pre-cinematic traditions to tell little-known stories that add resonance to our central panoramic exhibit. Fig. 4 shows two scenes from *The Grand Moving Mirror of California* – a 270-foot-long moving panorama presented live in the theatre of the Velaslavasay Panorama.

Effulgence of the North spurred the creation of the 'Polar Film Club' – a curated series of films focusing on turn-of-the-century exploration at the North and South Poles (Fig. 5 & 6). Curated in partnership with Arctic historian Dr Russell Potter, our current lobby exhibit centres on actress Nancy Columbia who was actually born at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair 'Esquimaux Village', inhabited by individuals recruited from the Arctic. The accompanying installation 'Nova Tuskhut' – the only Arctic trading post in the lower forty-eight states – puts the visitor into the exhibit, much like the ethnographic exhibits of nineteenth-century world's fairs (Fig. 7). Together, these exhibits explore the sanity and morality of the Polar craze.

The Velaslavasay Panorama was founded in 2000 on Hollywood Boulevard by visual artist and Los Angeles native Sara Velas as a site-specific project to display panoramic paintings, based on research into surviving and reconstructed European examples. The institution relocated to the historic West Adams area of Los Angeles in 2004, where the larger footprint of the 1910 Union Theatre building enabled us to expand the programmes as well as build an extensive garden. The Velaslavasay Panorama partners with a variety of artists, performers and institutions of all means and sizes to host presentations in our theatre, which relate to themes of landscape and storytelling. Our focus on early nineteenth-century entertainments such as the magic lantern and the moving panorama underlines our commitment to re-activating artistic mediums that influenced the birth of cinema.