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Nathan Mabry, Cherry and Martin
Nathan Mabry, Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles,
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Outstanding in the 2005 survey exhibition *Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles* at the Hammer Museum, Nathan Mabry, a 2004 graduate of the MFA programme at the University of California, Los Angeles, is certainly a new heir to the traditions of

irreverence and conceptualism for which the school has become known through the work of artists such as Paul McCarthy and Chris Burden. Though his practice is currently (and visually) rooted in Los Angeles, its roots reach deeper and farther, both in terms of time and geography.

The centrepiece of Mabry's recent exhibition at Cherry and Martin was unarguably the sculpture *A Very Touching Moment (Cunning Linguist)* (2006). This work, the latest in an ongoing series, is a canny amalgamation of an ancient Peruvian figural sculpture perched atop an iconic Minimalist sculpture, in this case, a close approximation of Carl Andre's wood beam works such as *Baucis* of 1981. These two highly discrete traditions are amalgamated literally in that the original objects, rendered separately in their terracotta and wood, are here cast in bronze and presented as one unified object. The transformation does not stop with material as both elements have been slightly – and slyly – modified and 'recreated'. Unlikely bedfellows perhaps, but Mabry's work manages to eliminate the 'otherness' of its component parts in order to comment on such disparate topics as institutional display techniques of art and ethnographic material, the history of the medium of sculpture in the western hemisphere, and



1. Nathan Mabry, *A Very Touching Moment (Cunning Linguist)*, 2006, bronze, 158.8 × 76.2 × 76.8cm. Image Courtesy of Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles (photo: Robert Wedemeyer)

the role of humour in art. Mabry seems to glean more than formal inspiration from Andre, who, like Mabry, was interested in the use of ready-made materials in sculpture and in the use of linguistic equivalents to name and describe art and its processes. But if Andre sought to pare down the vocabulary of twentieth-century sculpture, Mabry intends to expand it once again. In fact, Mabry's work could be described as being quite the opposite of Andre's matter-of-fact un-theatrical presentation. Reverence and sacrilege balance one another to create something that is new, timely, robust, and more than the sum of its parts and puns.

Minimalist sculptors were convinced that it was necessary to dispense with pedestals as the assumed mode of sculpture display. Mabry revisits this question by using Minimal objects as the elevating pedestal for an object type – a Peruvian fertility symbol – never intended for gallery display, at least not in its native context. And, on top of it all, literally on top of this pristine minimalist form, he accentuates the fertility aspect of the figures by including lewd sexual gestures. But Mabry, who is sensitive to the pitfalls of appropriation, is not in the business of defiling and demoting; rather he is intent on enjoying – and sharing – his quick sense of humour. Perhaps the over-the-top title is overkill but, as with all puns, they are hard to resist for both creator and audience. Punning is rarely a viable ploy for a serious artist and so Mabry – an aspirant cunning linguist himself – manages to parlay his ability into his artistic practice and this wordplay is akin to his formal play with different artistic movements, traditions and media. It is not always equal in its success but Mabry cannot be accused of timidity.

Drifting, Drifted, Drifter (2006) is a pale grey stoneware piece that spells the word 'WESTSIDE' in faux driftwood fragments in a style reminiscent of ad hoc signs for rustic children's camps. Installed across the west wall of the gallery, the piece is noteworthy for its subtlety in the context of Mabry's other current work. The fading quality of found wood has been transformed into something more permanent but ironically more fragile. The word, for the artist, refers to the location of the gallery within Los Angeles but the refer-

ence can be expanded and contracted – the west coast, the west wall, etc. And the word will have particular, and often multiple, meanings for each lingering viewer; after all, each city has a westside, sometimes the good part of town and sometimes not. Cultural associations and allegiances, to teams, gangs and so on, might also be brought to mind.

Installed in a smaller rear gallery was *Peace Pipe* (2006), composed of two sculptures, *Sun God* and *Moon God*. Bronze casts of neon light bulbs evoke the chosen material of Dan Flavin and the two sculptures are hung at Flavin's signature angle on facing walls. Each piece was modelled by hand to reflect their respective celestial source. *Sun God's* surface is more molten and dramatic in its peaks and depressions, and as the patinas vary slightly, so *Sun God's* patina is more golden-hued. They are accompanied by carefully chosen dangling items gathered together and hung from the lower end of the bronze 'pipe': feathers, stones, dog tags and charms that make the bronzes seem ceremonial in nature. This aspect of the work might be overdone but it does not detract ultimately from Mabry's successful engagement with concerns related to the display and appropriation of indigenous traditions, both modern and ancient. If ceremonial, what use do they have hung on a wall without the proper user or instructions? If a homage to Minimalism and light-art, rendered in bronze and feathers, how easily does a viewer recognize it as such without hints from the gallery?

Most criticism of Nathan Mabry's recent body of work, which included drawings and photographs, might be characterized as quibbles with an over-achiever and even these can be qualified by the anticipation of seeing what Mabry does next. But, as is the case with other young, ambitious artists who have made a splash with their first body of work, certain effective traits of the artist might need to be avoided in the future less they be diminished and appear trite or prankster-like when there is much more to Mabry's practice. His unguarded yet skilled work is bursting with conceptual layering and double entendres that succeed as captivating, provocative and promising visual works.

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