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Art is . . . in spirit of Duchamp

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Marcel Duchamp is probably the most famous prankster who is also taken seriously as an avant-garde artist. Best known for tipping a urinal on its back to transform it into a modern sculpture, the French expatriate made a name for himself making fun of just about everyone who felt that their understanding of art elevated them above ordinary folks, especially those with a fondness for profane gags and laugh-out-loud silliness.

The spirit of Duchamp (1887-1968) lives on in **Nathan Mabry's** third solo show in Los Angeles. The first thing you see when you walk into Cherry and Martin is the larger-than-life-size backside of a seated nude figure that looks a lot like Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker."

Walking around the 7-foot-tall bronze reveals that the muscular man, modeled on Rodin's portrayal of Dante in an earlier work, is not lost in thought, as his famously introspective chin-on-palm pose suggests, but ready for fun. He wears a mask that makes him look like a maniac, with eyes popping out of their sockets, mouth agape, tongue dangling.

Visitors who think of themselves as purists may be offended by Mabry's mockery of Rodin's icon. But the joke is on them.

If you know "The Thinker"



'MOSAIC SKULL': Mabry brings in Swarovski crystals.

from experience and not merely by reputation, you know that Mabry's figure, titled "Process Art (Dead Men Don't Make Sculpture)," lacks the energy, grace and tension of the real thing.

Mabry has not desecrated an original. He simply purchased a fake on eBay and cast a bronze mask for it. The statue he adapted was so awkward and inaccurate that it was not taken seriously as a forgery. Think of this industrial-strength tchotchke with dopey dunce cap as a pumped-up version of Duchamp's mustache-on-a-Mona-Lisa-postcard — oddly appropriate for an age of outrageous entertainment, when hybrids and sequels are all the rage.

Mabry's other works play even faster and looser with art and its transformation into popular culture. They make a mess of old-fashioned ideas of propriety, good taste and authenticity, not to mention authority, ownership and fair use.

"Taboo-boo" juxtaposes a look-alike of a John McCracken plank and a pair of "primitive"

figures adapted from those made for Ivory Coast tourists. "It Is What It Is (The Old In and Out)" transforms two Donald Judd benches and two antique Peruvian vessels into a piece of international sign language.

In other works, gobs of Swarovski crystals rub shoulders with references to regal Mixtec artifacts and designer dentistry. Enlarged close-ups of the designs on beer cans locate the Zen serenity of John McLaughlin's abstract paintings in mundane sources. And a suite of four drawings makes odd bedfellows of Henri Matisse and John Currin, leveling the differences between unrelated artists by making their works look like something else altogether.

At a time when top-of-the-line art is so expensive that only the super-rich can afford it, it's heartening to see that art's meaning cannot be owned or controlled. Mabry's carefully crafted bastards celebrate that art is most powerful when its meanings move through the world, mutating as they engage new audiences and leave old ones behind.

Cherry and Martin, 12611 Venice Blvd., (310) 398-7404, through April 5. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.cherryandmartin.com.

AROUND THE GALLERIES



NATHAN MABRY: It recalls Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker," but Mabry's "Process Art (Dead Men Don't Make Sculpture)" plays on art and its transformation into popular culture.