

Scarborough, James. "Nathan Mabry at Cherry and Martin," *Art in America*, May 2008.

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LOS ANGELES

Nathan Mabry at Cherry and Martin

The seven pieces that made up Nathan Mabry's funny and sophisticated show (all works 2008) offered a sly message veiled in blustery bravura. With his synthesis of early modernist styles and post-modernist appropriationism, Mabry is an art-historical omnivore who chooses to leave his sources undigested. Picasso and Gauguin could gorge themselves on ethnographic, classical and popular imagery and then create a seamless



Nathan Mabry: *Process Art (Dead Men Don't Make Sculpture)*, 2008, bronze, 87 by 58 by 41 inches; at Cherry and Martin.

result that was as startling and unfamiliar to their contemporary audience as Easter Island totems. Mabry, on the other hand, samples visual and cultural influences and doesn't cover his tracks.

The work can look as though the artist got distracted in mid-process and veered off in another direction. On entering the gallery you encountered the gargantuan (87-inch-high) bronze *Process Art (Dead Men Don't Make Sculpture)*. With the coiled muscles of its hunched-over back, the statue references *The Thinker*. That in itself presents a nice, anachronistic trope: heroic conception, traditional medium, steroidal physique. You commend the artist for paying homage to his predecessors—at least at first glance. Three steps on, however, it's another story. The pensive subject wears an outer-space-alien mask, with bulging eyes and demonic ears. Though the work acknowledges Gino Severini's post World War I *commedia dell'arte* subjects as well as Rodin, Mabry quotes his sources the better to step outside them.

In the back room hung four graphite drawings of nude women titled *Study of a Study of a Standing Nude (Numbers 1-4)*. They were the least mediated works in the show. Though these beautiful drawings show that Mabry's a great draftsman, he so exaggerates the size of the breasts that these top-heavy women violate Leonardo's golden mean and make the viewer wonder if the artist has some other agenda. Mabry explores skull motifs in two bronze sculptures, *Vanitas—She* and *Vanitas—He*, in which he places animal snouts on top of two human skulls, and in a large drawing on Mylar, *Mosaic Skull (O.M.F.G.)*, which features, besides the usual hollowed-out cheeks and empty eye sockets, decaying teeth, a nose ring and a forehead tiled with turquoise shards. Here Mabry undercuts the otherwise ritualistic allusions of the piece by emblazoning in Swarovski crystals on the teeth the initials of the subtitle—shorthand for Oh My Fucking God.

—James Scarborough