

SEANKELLY

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NATHAN MABRY

IT IS WHAT IT ISN'T

Nathan Mabry's work has the kind of cynical swagger that we associate with the media output of the California in which he lives and works: the wisecracking high-information humour of hip television series; the irreverent visual puns of underground comic and skate scenes; the deceptive jack-ass stance of a slacker novel or independent film.

✓ Mabry's work is a kind of visual transliteration – if such a thing were possible – of strands of thinking that we readily recognize from the educated and somewhat ambivalent position of younger generations of American creatives who are too streetwise to buy anything entirely. We see the same raucous energy in a twisted humour that turns its attention to the discipline in which he works. Mabry's wisecracks – the bling teeth decorations embedded within careful renderings of Aztec or Mextec artifacts, for example – involve social content as much as the self-referential issues raised by art's discussion of itself.

✓ We can pick up many of the puns inherent in Mabry's work as referring to the current status quo; in-jokes about live and active debate on the power and participation of California's various ethnic populations. The heritage of Latinos within Mabry's offerings of ancient cultural objects with a contemporary insertion may not be a direct one and may not have a singular and clear political end in mind, but it does, nonetheless, remind us of the complex issues of identity in contemporary California. Hispanic Californians, particularly those of Mexican descent, remain trapped in a series of convoluted con-

structions of identity by those who do see themselves as Mexican, those who all too frequently conceptualize themselves as American citizens opposed to the 'Hispanification' of America or, more reactively, to the threat of a mass invasion of economic immigrants from south of the border.

✓ All too often 'Hispanic' and 'Mexican' form convenient receptacles for reactionary and xenophobic positions that seek to rewrite thousands of years of history in favour of the far more recent enclaves of settlers seeking fortune – and more recently, fame – on the sun-kissed coast of California. Ironically, the same reactionary mouthpieces are often the first to point out that any Mexican claims to descent from the original Native American populations of Latin America as tenuous. However, they seldom point out a comparison with the seemingly endless number of 'white' Americans claiming 'red blood' in their veins. Especially when many such claimants sprang forth from vehemently racist European stock in regions that had been sure to eradicate the native population as quickly as possible. Mexicans are basically Spanish, the argument goes. Mexicans cannot possibly be descended from the Mayans, Mextecs, Aztecs or Incas. Certainly not in relation to any claim of birthright to American soil...

✓ Mabry's work does not really discuss such strange constructions of anthropological history as imbued in a million phone-in radio show tirades or racist websites operating under the guise of freedom of speech. It does not really need to. It can, in effect, become the kind of shorthand or private schoolyard language of adolescent humour in which what is unspoken is where the

communication lies. Mabry's work in which live social issues are referenced obliquely is in no way underdeveloped if it uses similar stances. If anything, it is confident in its understanding that, contrary to the patronizing and dismissive views of academic or bourgeois values, the tropes of humour-as-communication developed by gangs of teenagers, enclaves of skateboarders or, dare one say it, colonies of artists, is highly complex and intelligent. It relies on the audience being a thinking and well-versed entity just as much as any Jacobean literary pun or sixteenth century visual symbol within a painting.

✓ Social content, however, is almost a secondary concern in most of Nathan Mabry's work, except perhaps in the very broadest of senses; in the sense of broader cultural values. He is an artist who seems to be preoccupied above all else with discussing art in his work. More recent works might, on first sight, give the impression that this is an artist who is immediately interested in the anthropological or archaeological, and yet, get past the rapid-fire jokes, and it soon becomes apparent that his work is less concerned with the artifacts of ancient cultures in and of themselves, and far more to do with their acquired cultural meanings, particularly by cultures that may have colonized or eradicated them.

✓ In recent works such as "Process Art (Dead Men Don't Make Sculpture)" (2008) or "It Is What It Is (Tongue In Cheek)" (2007), we find Mabry engaged in various types of chicanery that, ultimately, challenges us to think about the value systems for art in a contemporary world. What at first seems like a relatively staid, arguably even reactionary, form for a contemporary sculpture

/// SUCHSTRANGE CONSTRUCTIONS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL HISTORY
AS IMBUED IN A MILLION PHONE-IN RADIO SHOW TIRADES ///

ART

executed in bronze (that most traditional of the sculptor's materials) soon reveals itself to be something else altogether. In the latter, for example, the immediately recognizable figurative elements alluding to the products of ancient American cultures remain fairly true-to-form, relatively faithful reenactments of the familiar forms of delicate earthenware lifted from some sacred burial ground and proudly displayed in museums in the name of the education and edification of society entirely disconnected from any society that produced them; societies whose cultural output is readily commodified and contextualised according to the ontologies and taxonomies that we now hold to be evidence-based.

✓ Even where Mabry emphasizes the erotic and sexual aspect of such works, the act is effectively less about making a dirty schoolboy joke and perhaps more of a comment on the way in which the realities of sexual cultures in ancient societies have had to be sanitized and academized in order to retain that special status of a portentous cultural artifact of an ancient culture. Mabry, by simultaneously reenacting both the sexual elements often found in such works and the tittering high-school guffaws about this aspect of ancient American art underscores the sanitization that such works must necessarily undergo

Western societies simply refused to acknowledge likely and possible truths about those same ancient societies that clashed with the established social and sexual mores of their own time. We learn of ancient collections of art held strictly under lock and key by the most august of museums. Only the educated experts, it was argued, should have access to various overtly erotic works and texts in collections. Mere civilians might all too easily be corrupted.

✓ And, as one aspect of Mabry's recent works seems to ask, just how much more developed and liberal are our attitudes these days towards the same artifacts? The transgression of endless teenage jokes as kids continue to be schlepped around museums for educational purposes only highlights our continuing social need to actually avoid turning guarded academic texts trying to explain ancient art into an experiential learning process. Any teacher or museum educationalist who addressed a class of hormone-leaking adolescents along the lines of, "okay, so try to imagine that you went to your local church or synagogue, but inside, there was a lot of really horny porn being played on big screens..." would be lucky to avoid prosecution in California these days.

✓ Above all, the notion of the fertility cult, like the concept of sex education, is one in which the full or likely simultaneity of elements that these very terms imply cannot ever be allowed to be accurately or fully explored if the status quo is

by an important artist to the role of plinth has far less to do with attacking the achievements of Judd or any of his contemporaries and far more to do with raising questions about current value systems for art. To some extent, these questions of value systems are far less concerned with the articulated and specialist considerations in operation in the rarified realms of the art world or academia. They have far more to do with their place in the broader society; the value systems for art involving the average person in the street.

✓ This notion is perhaps a little skewed by the works that use minimalist works in their construction which, after all, require an arguably more sophisticated knowledge of art to recognize the works appropriated. But, in works such as "Process Art (Dead Men Don't Make Sculpture)" (2008) it is easy to see that Mabry is not only interested in engaging the art cognoscenti. Using iconic works that the broadest public might reasonably recognize – even if only as a visual icon rather than as a named work – he engages in an elaborate exercise of apparent buffoonery.

✓ A highly-recognizable work by the pioneer of modern sculpture has its head covered with a cheap joke-store latex mask. A cast is made from the new whole and it is recast in bronze. Mabry engages in a form of *le cadavre exquis* in which he already knows what lies beneath the folded paper, subsequently realizing the work as a substantial bronze or as photographs of existing

// A PROVOCATIVE SWIPE AT THE MASTER OR MINIMALISM? //

to remain culturally received as valid artistic and cultural artifacts within contemporary society.

✓ We will never really know if the Mexecs rolled about on the ground with laughter when some master craftsmen produced a pot with a gigantic woody. But we certainly do know that social attitudes arising in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries still pervade western social attitudes towards art works and artifacts produced by various ancient cultures. The erotic and the rude must be explained away in terms that most definitely highlight their difference of place in their originating societies compared with our own. Fertility cults form a fabulous concept by which to sanitize, legitimize and, above all, de-eroticize anything produced by an ancient culture. In much the same way that 'sex education' has to emphasize the education to even be allowed to talk about sex to kids, Mabry's jokes in bronze underscore the way in which, catalogued and commodified for public consumption as museal content, the last thing that western Judeo-Christian cultures seem to want to do with ancient art is to explain the concepts of ancient fertility cults to some of their logical ends.

✓ We frequently encounter evidence of nineteenth century responses to some of the outputs of ancient cultures held up as high-points of earlier civilization in the rush to find ancient peers and role-models for the dominant imperialist mindset of the day. Nineteenth century

to remain intact. Most adults will readily concur that any real sex education they had was inevitably the result of a far more 'hands on' experience that would have resulted in a prison term had it ever occurred at the hands of a teacher. Mabry's work underscores a similar hypocrisy – or at least a certain self-delusion – about how contemporary societies understand and explain the very objects and art works that they afford high social status.

✓ But, of course, the recent works not only highlight some of the complex psychologies underpinning the reception of cultural artifacts from ancient cultures. On the contrary, it soon becomes clear that the apparent plinths on which these revered antiquities are placed are themselves reenactments or reworkings of minimalist art works by the likes of Donald Judd.

✓ A provocative swipe at the Master or Minimalism? Perhaps. Mabry is, after all, from a generation of artists that have frequently demonstrated their boredom with the tyranny of sparseness that the new orthodoxy established in art after Conceptualism advocated to successive waves of art students. He is from a generation with its own role models that demanded a revision of validity for working with chaotic, messy or even decorative aesthetics. Yet, regardless of what we do or do not know about Mabry's personal views on minimalism – or ancient American art for that matter – one gets the feeling that this apparently irreverent consignment of an important work

busts onto which prank masks have been placed. If there is this whiff of the Surrealist's exquisite corpses about the whole thing, then that's hardly the only thing about the body of work that relates to Surrealism. There is, for example, the fairly obvious way in which the works that are strongly evocative of the Duchampian tradition of the readymade. And they deploy a similar assemblage technique to those used by the Surrealists to produce bizarre objects from the stuff of recognizable everyday life. Furthermore, although his generation may, with hindsight, seem far less idealistic or naïve, there is also something of the Surrealist's challenge to established order and ideas about it. Above all, what Mabry shares with the Surrealists is work that indicates a deep suspicion or perhaps even stronger dislike for the way in which the contemporary bourgeoisie develop trite – and ultimately fallacious – views on art. In their day, the Surrealists detested the way in which the bourgeoisie – with their reactionary and unthinking taste – simply assimilated and instrumentalised art to support their own moral, political and social values and were easily outraged by anything that did not comply with this value system.

✓ In Mabry's work, one gets the feeling that we are dealing with a gestalt: it's far less about comment on the position or value of any single borrowed or reworked art work or type of art; and far more about the questions that these new

juxtapositions raise. Works like "It Is What It Is (Tongue-Tied)" (2007) do say a lot about both dominant attitudes towards both Minimalism and ancient American art. And partly what they say is something that signifies the difference between the contemporary situation and that of, for example, the Surrealists upon whose traditions it draws. Separating out the reactionary and the radical, for example, may no longer be as easy as it was when the Dadaists, Surrealists and other twentieth century avant gardes got the establishment hot and bothered. In the context of the contemporary art world, there might be just as many supporters of the once-radical Minimalism who would be annoyed at Mabry's work as lovers of ancient art. The lines between the revolutionary and the conservative are not nearly as static as the textbook of twentieth century art might lead us to believe.

It was once believed that conceptual art could not ever be sold on the art market. Now, the old guard of anti-establishment positions in the 1960's and 1970's are not only members of the art fair elite, but some have grown very comfortable with high earnings from sales to complement the institutional credibility. In a subtle entente

cordiale of artists, gallery owners and curators, anyone who thinks that these previously radical generations are not interested in or capable of asserting their power within the art world is rather naïve. Nathan Mabry, it seems, is not so naïve since his open-ended works offer the possibility that we are never really sure which works, art practices or types of art are being either denigrated or praised.

But, of course, they also elaborate an entirely separate discourse on what they have become; objects of beauty that exist in their own sculptural terms with formal concerns entirely independent of any of the implications and meanings generated by individual component parts.

Notwithstanding the obvious humour, his works sometimes gain a certain autonomous Gothic or even expressionistic sensibility as unified objects in their own right. We can choose to approach them intellectually, to deconstruct the elements of their construction and be amused or consciously contemplate their more theoretical aspects. Or, we can choose to suspend our disbelief and accept them as unified objects in which case they are unexpected and offer an entirely spontaneous emotive quality. Ambivalence,

therefore, is ultimately a too easily ascribed term to fully engage with Mabry's practice. On the contrary, simply because he does not reveal a single stated position, instead constructing carefully formulated questions, we should not assume that Nathan Mabry is simply sitting on the fence. One gets the feeling that he might be rather sensibly taking his time in drawing his own conclusions. X KP

Nathan Mabry lives and works in Los Angeles. His institutional exhibition credits to date include Las Vegas Art Museum, Las Vegas; Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego; I76, London; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; The Rubell Family Collection, Miami and the Aspen Museum of Art, Aspen.

All images courtesy of the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.



X LEFT PAGE / NATHAN MABRY / MOSAIC MASK (PEARLY WHITES), 2008 (DETAIL) / Colored pencil and Swarovski crystals on Mylar / Framed 30 x 24 inches / Photo: Robert Wedemeyer X LEFT / NATHAN MABRY / IT IS WHAT IT IS (TONGUE IN CHEEK), 2007 / Bronze / 75 x 41 x 31 inches / Photo: Robert Wedemeyer X TOP / NATHAN MABRY / IT IS WHAT IT IS (TONGUE-TIED), 2007 / Terracotta and formica covered wood / 44 x 20 x 20 inches / Photo: Robert Wedemeyer X



© KATHRYN HARRIS / MOSAIC MASK 003, 2007 (DETAIL) / Colored pencil and Duponnet crystals on Mylar / Framed, 30 x 22 inches / Photo: Robert Widomeyer x revision/watermark
ART GEAR YOUR HEART OUT. 3 - DETAIL, 2007 / Bronze / 84 x 36 x 24 inches / Photo: Robert Widomeyer x

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