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Nathan Mabry Gets His Pre-Columbian Groove On

By Susan Michals



(Images courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery/Photography by Robert Wedemeyer)

It's hard enough these days to get one great art show going, let alone two, albeit simultaneously. But that's exactly what Los Angeles based Nathan Mabry has managed to pull off. The 35-year-old sculptor, who credits artists such as Sol LeWitt and Carl Andre as influences, opened his inaugural show with [Sean Kelly Gallery](#) in NYC just last month (the show runs through May 13th). At the same time, the busy artist installed works in the garden of [Nasher Sculpture Center](#) in Dallas. Between traipsing across the United States (which is no small feat considering the size of these sculptures) the artist talks about his art, his influences, and the city he calls home.

Why are these series called *Shapeshifter* and *Heavy Handed*, respectively?

The title of the exhibition *Shapeshifter* -- is a reference to the transformative qualities of the works shown as well as a reference to my penchant for navigating within different formal and conceptual visual vocabularies. Also, I thought this title would encompass the idea that as a sculptor, I am moving, carving and altering material form constantly.

The series of sculptures titled *Shapeshift* is comprised of pre-Columbian inspired terracotta heads placed on milled aluminum Donald Judd-esque bases. The heads represent an ancient Peruvian Shaman "shapeshifting" into an animal while on hallucinogenic drugs. Each head is placed in a row on geometric plinths that represent an organized progression. As a group, there is a succession of transformation, each sculpture transforming from the previous while at the same time each individual combination contains physical shifts within the material, shape, volume and surface. Conceptually there are shifts within modes of thinking and historical philosophical debates stemming from the objective to the subjective.

The *Heavy Handed* works are large-scale sculptures made of steel that resemble block-like human hands, making gestures ranging from the benign to the profane. They reference sign language, colloquial symbols and other forms of gestural communication that can be simultaneously illustrative and provocative. These are made out of plate steel—they are literal representations of heavy hands. Beyond the double entendre, this title eludes to the essence of the handmade and other formal and conceptual concerns within each configuration.



(Images courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery/Photography by Robert Wedemeyer)

Why do you live in Los Angeles? Does the city inspire you? Why not New York? We're seeing a lot of artists pick up and leave Manhattan due to the cost of living, among other things.

I always call Los Angeles the "choose your own adventure" city. You can experience all of what humanity and nature have to offer, often in the same day.

Do you think L.A. will get its due as a hub for artistic merit? A lot of people in the art community don't take it very seriously.

As far as I can tell Los Angeles takes itself very seriously. There is a great network of experimental spaces and world class museums. I also think some of the artists here are more willing to take certain risks with their work, challenging the status quo and re-examining assumptions about art history.



(Courtesy of the artist, Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles, and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Photography: Robert Wedemeyer)

Talk a little about your process. From concept to completion, how long does it take you to put a piece together?

I have a practice that explores multiple types of artistic output. I am constantly researching and exploring sociological images and historic objects to work with. I sketch and create mock-ups as I formulate the "game plan". While large scale projects require intensive planning, figuring out what is possible, and the

initial configuration(s) is key -- often original plans get tweaked, changed, and altered throughout the process. For *Shapeshifter* it is hard to say exactly how long concept to completion took. The studio time to make the work was just over six months.