

Freeman, Tommy. "Nathan Mabry at Cherry and Martin," *Artweek*, May 2006.

ARTWEEK

Southern California

Nathan Mabry at Cherry and Martin

In the hands of the wrong artist, visual quotation can often be read as a gimmick or worse, empty pastiche. A common theme throughout the 1980s, quotation in its more aggressive form, appropriation, was associated with the emergence of many artists whose bodies of work were directly dependent upon incorporating imagery from other historic artists or artworks. Sherrie Levine, Mike Bidlo and Jeff Koons, to name just a few, lifted either directly or indirectly from modern masters or even—in Koons's case—from culture at large. These artists, who made use of iconic/canonic material in order to comment on particular conditions or symptoms of the time are the success stories, but countless others, whose names we may or may not remember, attempted to drop into their half-baked installations and canvases empty referents or, nods and winks, to the past in ill-conceived efforts to demonstrate their weak grasp on what they thought was postmodern. Thankfully, the winds of time have a way of separating the wheat from the chaff and the surviving artists have become representative of a time in art history that saw the disintegration of the modernist juggernaut.

The 1990s saw another wave of appropriation artists surface—except in this round the commentary had a bit more cultural bite. Sam Durant, Paul Pfeiffer and Fred Wilson produced work that implemented historic or iconic imagery as tool of institutional and cultural critique. These artists undermined notions of romantic nostalgia associated with seemingly fully defunct cultural revolution of the sixties (Durant), the legiti-

macy of museological practices (Wilson), and the problematic status of race and celebrity (Pfeiffer).

On the current horizon, Nathan Mabry is emerging as one of a new generation of appropriation artists who continues a tradition of sharp witted cultural/institutional appraisal. But, his is a direction that does not so much delineate ideological schisms by using historic iconography as a tool to expose specific liabilities. Instead, Mabry's humorous sculptures, photographs and drawings conflate the sometimes ethnocentric, sometimes elitist, and sometimes arbitrary differences that separate art and artifact. He creates curious juxtapositions of relatively recent art world luminaries as Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt or Donald Judd against the motif of cultural artifacts from the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

For this exhibition, Mabry renamed the backroom at Cherry and Martin gallery the "Eclipse Room" and stationed two of his interrelated wall sculptures, which he calls *Peace Pipes*. On opposite sides of the small room *Peace Pipe (Sun God)* and *Peace Pipe (Moon God)* face off in cosmic duality. Only vaguely resembling Native American peace pipes these objects are actually fashioned after standard 48-inch fluorescent light strips which have been cast in bronze, given a



Nathan Mabry, *A Very Touching Moment (Cunning Linguist)*, 2006, bronze, 62-1/2" x 30" x 30-1/4", at Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. (Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.)

patina, and adorned with feathers, roach clips and gaudy, mirrored dog tags that read "Sun God" and "Moon God" respectively. With the same gesture, Flavin's medium of choice, fluorescent lighting is reduced to a cultural fetish object while the notion of the artifact is elevated from functional object to conceptual art. Calling the room the "Eclipse Room" is important in that by doing so Mabry asserts that both the minimalist hero and anonymous artifact become equal ritualistic players in the tricky game of classify and commodify. He also suggests that both might have served a similar function as cultural fetish objects.

Other work in the gallery's main room echoes Mabry's knack for historical pranksterism. *A Very Touching Moment (Cunning Linguist)* is another clever pairing of minimalist sculpture with pre-Columbian artifact. Here, an oversized Peruvian fertility object (a couple with human bodies and animal-like heads engaged in a sex act) sits atop a Tony Smith(ish) sculpture-turned-pedestal. Although the minimalist's intent was to remove art from its pedestal and bring it into the same realm as the viewer, Mabry doubles this intent back upon itself by turning the sculpture into a pedestal for another object that was never intended to sit upon one.

Mabry's amalgams of deftly altered appropriated imagery are hinged on a unifying theme which suggests that all art, regardless of era, class or culture, always performs similar functions of ritual, fetish and status.

—Tommy Freeman

Nathan Mabry closed in March at Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles.

Tommy Freeman is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.