

SEANKELLY

Irod, George. "Nathan Mabry at Cherry and Martin," *Sculpture*, November 2006.

sculpture

LOS ANGELES

Nathan Mabry

Cherry And Martin

Modernism and primitivism may seem worlds apart, but they blend together powerfully in the work of Nathan Mabry. Only 28, the Colorado-born artist gained attention last year as one of the stars of the acclaimed "Thing: New Sculpture From Los Angeles" at the Hammer Museum and "Rouge Wave" at LA Louver. This past winter and spring, Mabry was the subject of two solo shows—really one interrupted solo show—at Cherry and Martin, a hip new gallery on Venice Boulevard. Though the number of pieces on display was limited, each of Mabry's works tends to carry a lot of weight: metaphorically, formally, and, quite often, literally. Together, they gave ample evidence of Mabry's focus, wit, and craftsmanship.

At the heart of almost all of Mabry's work is a juxtaposition between "primitive" ethnographic sculpture and the sort of bulky geometric Minimalism of the 1960s and '70s epitomized by Donald Judd (or, alternately, by the pseudo-Minimalist design represented by IKEA-type furnishings). In Mabry's worldview, these two very different forms of sculptural expression derive from a similar urge to fetishize accepted cultural values. Thus, in each of his larger works, a figurative sculpture with its own art historical references sits atop a pedestal evoking a specific Minimalist work. In *Conversation Piece (Jackin', Stackin' and Crackin')*, the main work in his first show, Mabry set a large terracotta vessel shaped like a llama head on a glossy base recalling a piece by L.A. Minimalist John McCracken. Rhinestones set in the animal's teeth spelled out "PEACE," giving it a touch of hip hop gangsta flash.

The dominant work in part two, *A Very Touching Moment (Cunning Linguist)*, places a pair of eerie pre-Columbian figures, mounting each other and enacting a sign for cun-



PHOTO: COURTESY MUSEUM OF LATIN AMERICAN ART, LONG BEACH, CA / MABRY: ROBERT WEDERMEYER

ningus, atop a blocky base recalling an early Carl Andre work. That the figures parade their sexuality underlines Mabry's bad-boy styling and adds zest to his calculated methodology. True, the artist's penchant for puns sometimes reads as glib. But even more jarring than his shotgun wedding of old and new is his marriage of big ideas to genuine technical skill. Although his formula may be conscribed, he continues to press it forward in compelling way: as in two small cast bronze sculptures mimicking Flavin light fixtures, which he adorned with feathers, and transformed into Native American fetishes. And Mabry's playful side is charmingly evinced in a series of photographs in which he set rubber monster masks atop classical bronze nude statues to create some very disturbing—if oddly elegant—hybrids.

As iconoclastic as they seem, Mabry's works are quite traditiona-

l harking back to Modernism's discovery of primitive forms and imagery a century ago, as epitomized by Brancusi's *The Kiss* (and his deliberate dialogue of sculpture and pedestal) and Picasso's use of African masks in such works as *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Given Mabry's raunchiness and youth, that's pretty staid company. Behind his own insouciant mask, Mabry is more than just a brash new face, he's a sculptor to be taken seriously.

—George Melrod