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Nathan Mabry



Nathan Mabry, *Mosaic Skull (OMFG)* (2008)

It Is What It Is (The Old In and Out) (2008) consists of two replica Donald Judd tables cast in rich bronze that double as pedestals for two seated sculptures that perch – compact and aloof – atop their respective Minimalist plinths. Derived from Pre-Columbian Moche ceramics, these therianthrope figures, replete with antlers, formal headwear and ceremonial garb, are cheeky and elegant. Further scrutiny reveals that their hands are forming (somewhat surreptitiously) the 'in and out' sign that alludes almost universally to sexual intercourse – a moderately racy anachronism that cuts the reserved, ceremonial character of the bronze figures and dilutes the stoic formalism of the Juddian tables. Completing this web of dissonant references is the lurking knowledge that the subtitle, *The Old In and Out*, refers back to the phrase made famous by the pronouncements and misdeeds of Malcolm McDowell and his band of goons in Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Anthony Burgess' ultraviolent novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962).

It Is What It Is (The Old In and Out), like much of Mabry's work, flirts wilfully with facile humour, infantile puns and poor taste, shrewdly courting the predictable charge that the artist's sculptures and drawings objectify and exploit ethnographic artefacts and in doing so purposefully rouse the petty,

pseudo-political controversies that routinely build and dissipate in the world of contemporary art. One might even suggest that Mabry's propensity for baiting – and perhaps exposing – high-minded liberal politics is a medium in and of itself, providing the infra-logic for his work. In this sense his practice emerges directly from a loosely knit contingent of like-minded LA-based multi-media artists such as Paul McCarthy (Mabry's teacher at UCLA), Mike Kelley and the late Jason Rhoades, who have all demonstrated a healthy investment in pranks, scatological humour and self-conscious political incorrectness, and have an equivalent aptitude for provoking revulsion as well as adventurous, socially grounded critical thought. Although after repeated exposure Mabry's preferred strategy of combining popular culture references, ethnographic imagery, formalist conventions and punning, often sexual, titles becomes rather predictable, the particular juxtapositions he offers are often nuanced and suggestive.

A comprehensive grasp of Mabry's imagery and referents demands considerable time investment on the part of the viewer. In fact, in order to evaluate the consonances and dissonances that play between the elements that compose his work, one must mimic the cultural archaeology undertaken by the artist to

conceive and produce it. Like *It Is What It Is (The Old In and Out)*, *Taboo-boo* (2007) combines a specific reference to canonical Minimalism with a no less overt but calculatingly less specific allusion to so-called ethnographic sculpture. Here the Minimalist tradition is represented by the West Coast sculptor John McCracken, renowned for constructing monolithic fibreglass and plywood armatures coated with 20 to 30 coats of a single colour to yield a highly reflective, lustrous surface that registers even minute changes in the surrounding environment. Mabry apes McCracken's heavily autographic style of object-making, using bronze and glossy black car paint, but he elaborates on this spare composition with two bronze Snafu figures cast from wood originals, placed vertically head to head against the austere, McCracken-like plank. The uncanny compositional harmony achieved in the work implies but, significantly, does not actually establish a deeper relationship between the two traditions that collide in the sculpture. The relationship remains obdurately formal, even superficial, inviting the critically minded viewer to adopt one of two opposite (and obvious) positions: the first is that Mabry's work levels the playing field and argues for the formal integrity of anonymously produced sub-Saharan ritual objects and, concomitantly, undermines the importance we assign to individuality, innovation and autographic expression in the Western tradition; the second is that the implication of mere formal parity robs the Snafu sculptures of their cultural resonance, reducing them to decorative integers in an essentially Western, market-minded strategy. Mabry does not resolve this opposition or even adopt an obvious position; he simply makes this time-honoured dialectic, and the attendant critical discourse surrounding it, the subject and effect of his work.

The most arresting and suggestive work in the show is a drawing executed in coloured pencil on Mylar that side-steps this rather laboured dispute through its sheer physical presence. Entitled *Mosaic Skull (OMFG)* (2008), the work is an imposing 130 x 94 cms and is a precise rendering of a Mexican Mixtec ceremonial skull opulently studded with jade and turquoise tiles. The obligatory popular culture flourish occurs in the form of a 'grill' composed of Swarovski crystals spelling out 'OMFG' ('Oh My Fucking God'). Sacred and irreverently profane, camp and straightforwardly beautiful, *Mosaic Skull ...* is a drawing with sculptural presence that exists as a fastidious record of Mixtec extravagance and as a canny riff on contemporary modes of profligate self-adornment. Unlike much of Mabry's production to date, *Mosaic Skull ...* does not lean on the gaudy formal/conceptual currency of juxtaposing autographic Western Minimalist conventions with anonymous, non-Western ritual sculpture. Instead, this drawing seamlessly integrates the most contemporary of pop cultural motifs with grand Mexican Mixtec imagery to present two divergent expressions of a shared set of socio-cultural values that span many hundreds of years.

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