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### **ART NATHAN MABRY**

by Paul Laster Apr 30, 2013

***Nathan Mabry on his first solo show in New York, as well as mixing ancient shamans with Donald Judd and sports mascots with Rodin.***



Nathan Mabry. Installation view of *Shapeshifter* at Sean Kelly, New York, March 29 – May 4, 2013. All images © Nathan Mabry. Photo by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

A 2004 MFA graduate from UCLA, Nathan Mabry hit the ground running with his inclusion in the Hammer Museum's seminal survey show, *Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles*. Combining irreverence with conceptualism, Mabry introduced a fresh postmodernist style that mashed ethnographic icons up with recognizable Minimalist objects—a way of working that the artist continues to explore in convincingly clever ways.

I first met Mabry in March at the opening reception for his first one-person show at Sean Kelly in New York, and two weeks later had the chance to attend the preview for his first museum solo at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. In our recent conversation, Mabry reflects on the origin of his ideas, the sources for his unusual appropriations and the development of the different bodies of work, while referencing the works on view in his two current shows.

**Paul Laster** Do you remember the moment that you first hit upon the idea of creating cultural mash-ups between ethnographic art and Minimalist sculpture?

**Nathan Mabry** There wasn't really a pure defining moment. Basically, I have always been interested in dualities, dichotomies, and juxtapositions. This had led me to explore aesthetic combinations of visual tropes, sociological values, and diverse cultural material.

I first investigated the "authorized" Minimal object in conversation with the "anonymous" ethnographic

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iconography a few years ago. These objects in unison exemplify the perfect debate involving aesthetics, philosophy, and psychology.



**NM** That sculpture is comprised of an interpreted statuary figure of a Peruvian (Moche) animated corpse playing a pan flute on a Tony Smith inspired plinth.

Each sculpture has its own lessons imbedded in it. There are process/material lessons: Technique, gravity, etc; formal lessons: Surface, volume, shape, etc. And then there are the objective/subjective lessons as well, such as: How is this operating as an object?

With *Tooting My Own Horn* I came to a realization—an acceptance—that this combination for making work was effective.

**PL** Did that show shake things up for you?

**NM** Making sculptures and showing them at the Hammer was a phenomenal experience.

**PL** You followed it with a solo exhibition in 2006 at Cherry and Martin, where you further explored the sexually suggestive *A Touching Moment* series. How has that series evolved?

**NM** There were multiple bodies of work in that show all dealing with ritualistic fonts. I debuted my first bronze sculptures in that show. The largest bronze in the show was *A Very Touching Moment (Cunning Linguist)*. The sexual component to this series was intrinsic to the source material. I would use a pun or slang term in the title with the series to highlight the figure's action and add another layer of complexity to the work—linguistic overlay.

There are a few bodies of work that coincide within this framework. One series, *It Is What It Is*—which is more domestic in scale and reference—LeWitt and Judd furniture, Artschwager end tables—with truer-to-scale pre-Columbian vessels.

**PL** Do you see your juxtaposition of the old and new related to the Modernists being inspired by indigenous art or postmodernist practice related to John Baldessari and Paul McCarthy, with whom you studied?

**NM** Yes, to a certain extent. One of the main reasons I choose to study at UCLA was the faculty, the above mentioned, plus Adrian Saxe, Jim Welling, Charles Ray, Don Suggs, and the other visiting lecturers that would visit. I had arrived in LA as an object-maker with an interest in the “unexpected.”

**PL** I've read that your *Process Art* series, which mixes found statues with space alien and animal masks, grew out of a series of photographs that you made by using public art works. How did you come upon the idea and how difficult was it to take it from photography to larger-than-life bronzes?



**NM** I was reading about and looking at Dada and Surrealism—their political positions and physical output—from Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* to the *Exquisite Corpse* drawings, there was always a desire for transformation and subversion. The photographs came out of a desire to interact with outdoor sculptures in a performative, temporal manner. All new bodies of work have their challenges and difficulties to figure out physically and conceptually. Since I was familiar with bronze casting I had an

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understanding of the capabilities.

**PL** For your first museum solo show, which is on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, you are using sport mascot masks with figures that you made in 2011 after Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*. How do the masks transport the Burghers to contemporary times?

**NM** *The Burghers of Calais* is essentially a monument to loss, sacrifice, and heroics. It is the portrayal of the French bourgeois bringing the keys of the city to England at the end of the Hundred Years War-14th century—a fixed historical narrative. The addition of the mascot masks open this “defined” history back up. *Process Art (B-E-A-G-G-R-E-S-S-I-V-E)*, builds upon that history, treating Rodin's piece as art historical readymade and adding other aspects to the narrative, such as the representation and experience of myth and mass-spectatorship in contemporary society.

**PL** You're also showing a new bronze based on a pre-Columbian Jalisco figure from the Nasher's collection. You altered the figure and put it on a base made from its storage box. How have you toyed with this ancient object to give it renewed life?

**NM** The title, *Two Vessels (Unpacked)*, plays with projected meaning—oscillating between the formal qualities, the inherent physical properties, and the uncanny artifice. At the same time the title is self referential, speaking to art history and popular culture.

The Jalisco figure scaled up becomes a fantastical and distorted monument. With the nature of the source imagery in addition to the hand-sculpted manipulations, this type of figuration aligns itself with the visual history of Maillol, Miro, Moore and *Mad Magazine*.



The plinth is the scaled-up proportion and “textures” (cardboard and tape) of the current carton the object is stored in. This is not just a *trompe l'oeil* approach; instead it has a strong physical presence as a minimalist and/or ambiguous pop object—Smith, Judd, Serra, Warhol.

Situated as recognizable objects, the altered scale and material transformation of the containers offers a unified object that teases and surpasses expectations—a contemporary totem that allows contemplation of past, present and future complexities.

**PL** And, as if that weren't enough, your first New York solo show is concurrently on view at Sean Kelly, where you have six sculptures from the *Shapeshift* and *Heavy Handed* series, and a work on paper from the *Mosaic Mask* series. What was the idea behind putting so few works from such a selection of styles together for your NYC solo debut?

**NM** I knew the bronze aspect of my practice would be represented at the Nasher during the run of my show at SKG. With my New York solo I wanted to highlight a different series of work.

As with all my solo shows, I try to show different bodies of work that are divergent in style but have interconnections and respond to the exhibition spaces.

The upstairs space has the right interior volume for the monolithic *Heavy Handed* series and interesting niches to explore and discover the works—when *Mosaic Mask* is encountered it acts as a mediator between the objects in that gallery and as a bridge to the works in the downstairs gallery. It is important to note

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the way the east wall lets in natural light. The downstairs space at SKG, a sort of rectilinear catacomb, is the ideal space to show the new series *Shapeshift*, a formalized figurative/abstract progression.

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 saw this title to include the idea that, as a sculptor, I am moving, carving and altering material form.

**PL** In the *Shapeshift* series you have the stylized heads of a snake, eagle, and a jaguar, each on a box-like base similar to a Donald Judd sculpture. What are the sources for the heads and what happens in your mind when these two cultural artifacts crash into one another?

**NM** The heads are derived from architectural elements found at a temple in Peru specifically, Chavín de Huántar, an archeological site. They represent a shaman transforming into a supernatural zoomorphic form while on psychotropic drugs. I have changed the scale and stylization. The base is sourced from Donald Judd's late milled aluminum works—the orientation, proportion and surface have been altered.

There is something uncanny that happens when experiencing this mixture of ancient and modern art. As a unified object there is a certain autonomous, convincingly emotive quality. As an installation in the gallery the seriality of the group feels familiar and elicits a sense of “altars” out of context. Each distinct “cultural lens” makes and unmakes itself and is activated as a whole through the crash—aesthetic echoes creating a time/space vertigo.



**PL** Is the *Heavy Handed* series creating a minimalist sculpture from a vernacular gesture? The patina of the steel makes one think of Richard Serra while the blocky forms bring Joel Shapiro to mind. How many of these pieces have you done and how do they vary?

**NM** The *Heavy Handed* series is an anthropomorphized Minimal object. These hard-edged geometric forms don't initially reveal themselves as figurative-human hands. Simultaneously the work is a large abstract metal sculpture, a colloquial gesture and an oversized monument from a distant culture. The Serra read is inescapable, the Shapiro read only happens with certain configurations—I often think of the forms of Eduardo Chillida and early Tony Smith in these works. Each configuration is a different hand symbol/sign, ranging from sign language to slang terms—there are often many different possible interpretations.

**PL** Lastly, not to overlook the *Mosaic Masks*, which are filled with wit and wonder—how do they fit into the scheme of the body of work and how do they get built, from concept to work on the wall?

**NM** Generally, I work from photographs of ancient Mesoamerican masks from museum collections. Once the angle and scale is decided the turquoise, shell, coral, obsidian mosaic tiles of the mask are rendered in color pencil—a meticulousness that references the care taken in making the original. The teeth of the drawing are mosaicked in Swarovski crystal—constructing parallels between ritual objects of power and the supernatural.

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