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FrontRow



Art Review: Mashup Mock-Up: Nathan Mabry at the Nasher Sculpture Center

By ED SCHAD

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Nathan Mabry's studio (near LAX Airport in Los Angeles) occupies a former machinist shop near a significant intersection in Los Angeles. Highway 90 spurs off from the infamous Interstate 405, and one could argue it is one of many points where urban sprawl Los Angeles segues into beach dream Los Angeles. L.A. as a metropolitan area is ripe with such transitions, wealth to poverty, lush gardens into desert, mountains down to what Reyner Banham called the Plains of ID, and it is fitting that Mabry sculpts here, for his work involves grand intersections, historical mash-ups spanning hundreds, if not thousands, of years.



To warm up for an encounter of Mabry's work, one need only imagine Pre-columbian statuary atop Donald Judd Swiss Works and frightening or comical (sometimes both) masks atop historic bronzes: Mabry bought and unauthorized copy of Rodin's *Thinker*, 1902 off the internet, re-casted it, then draped its head in an eyes popping, tongue wagging cartoon mask. Mabry is a part of a generation of young L.A. sculptors like Thomas Houseago, Aaron Curry, and Matt Johnson who play fast and loose with historical forms and modernist masters, radical collage artists who perfectly match the schizophrenic nature of L.A.

A common mistake in viewing Mabry's work is to consider his sculptures simply matters of $1+1=1$ or simply a thing added to a thing to equal another (quite easy) thing. Mabry works at his collages, laboring his frictions of art historical and ethnographic periods. His studio is full of renderings, mock-ups, and working clay models — he is intent on not only thinking through the particular sociological and historical concerns of the periods that he appropriates but also in pushing subtle formal moments in ways that might escape the casual viewer.



Take his new sculpture, *Two Vessels (Unpacked)*, 2013, which one might see initially as a bit of slapstick or a one liner, a Jalisco Sculpture out of the Nasher Collection presumably put on a minimalist base. However, *Two Vessels* is all about the details. The Jalisco figure has been modified a great deal, bringing in sensations and styles of sculpture that Mabry finds in a variety of places. The lean forward into the knees, the arm up, comes from Aristide Maillol's *Night (La Nuit)*, 1902-1909, also in the Nasher Collection. The skirted cloth around the base of Mabry's work comes from Henry Moore's *Harlow Family Group*, 1954-55. The overall blunt presence, the chest forward spirit, less easy to define, comes from Joan Miró's *Moon Bird*, 1946-1949. What is added, what is left out, what is exploited, what is selected to remain underdetermined, function according to Mabry's sculptural sense of what he wants the mash-up to be, what its particular power is going to be. The finished product retains the basic collage "split," but then runs off into observable nuance.

This nuance serves to destabilize the original firmness of the source, a way for Mabry to take ownership of the original meaning by choosing what to highlight and what to remove. What can we really know of the fertility rites of the Jalisco other than that they are fertility rites? What is retained of an enchanted magical world that did not have to make the mental distinction between belief and doubt, where people simply inhabited their world in a way where this statue simply was the physical embodiment, the occupied presence of fertility as a force in the world? And what of minimalism, which often doubted that expression or any sort of human animism should reside in sculpture at all, which believed that reality should not be "represented" but instead shaped as a matter of fundamental facts through which a person could exist using only their

faculties, only their sensations and acts of mind to determine their own reality? Mabry's piece keeps contradictory positions intact but does so by actively intervening in those thoughts, disrupting those entrenched systems by dancing with and through their forms.



Mabry's *Process Art (B-E-A-G-G-R-E-S-S-I-V-E)*, 2013 mashes up the *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, (1889) with the masks of mascots (wherever they may be found). As in Mabry's use of the Thinker, this seems a raw bit of fun. After all, these are statues which represent a horrible historical moment, where, to use Mabry's own words, "The burghers are bringing the keys to the city to the King of England, assuming that they are going to die, so that the rest of the town would be spared." The burghers are heroes in the most poignant way, iconic in the most profound way, immortalized in metal. They are laying their lives down for others. What could possibly be the goal of placing mascot masks atop these men?

From an absurdist point of view, though, this is the perfect time to add these masks, to make these particular dead men into mascots. The Burghers, at the end of their lives, having lived noble, beautiful lives of purpose, are about to return to whence they came, and this is a bitter pill. This is a tough end, Rodin knew, and poured this truth into his sculpture. Mabry's added masks want the opposite. They want history opened back up, forced to speak again. The masks are the masks of Dionysus, the god of chaos, who takes masks and hides the fundamental horror of his basic truth: that creation is a rude, chaotic thing, that man is caught in these forces, spinning his tales and making his gods. It is well known that medieval beheadings and hangings often began with a bit of comic

theater, that minstrels and jugglers entertained the crowd. This was meant to both lighten the mood and increase the spectacle. Ultimately, what Mabry and the masks say is what a brutal comedy life is, how quickly fortunes change, how quickly meaning shifts.

All images: Nathan Mabry, Process Art (B-E-A-G-G-R-E-S-S-I-V-E), 2011. Bronze. Dimensions variable, sculptures each approximately 85 x 30 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles. © Nathan Mabry. Photo credit: Courtesy of Cherry and Martin

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