

Childlike, but Hardly Child's Play

Mark Grotjahn's new work elevates mundane materials.

By JORI FINKEL

LOS ANGELES — It started out as a lark. After long days in the studio making his labor-intensive “Butterfly” paintings about a decade ago, Mark Grotjahn would unwind by taking empty supply boxes or beer cartons and gluing on toilet-paper tubes as noses. Then he would paint crude eyes and mouths.

The cardboard sculptures offered him a chance to “get dirty and messy, to be expressive in a different way,” he said, unlike the densely layered “Butterfly” canvases, which have been compared to Barnett Newman’s “zips” for their focus on a single abstract motif.

He did not intend to exhibit what he called his masks and gave several away as gifts. The bathroom humor was obvious.

But intentions can change; the art world has a soft spot for a certain amount of nose-thumbing irreverence; and these days, even Mr. Grotjahn’s clownish sculptures — now cast in bronze before being painted — are getting serious play.

Early works from the series, introduced at Gagosian Gallery in New York two years ago, were bought by the Guggenheim and Broad museums, among others. Newer and larger examples are now heading to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas for Mr. Grotjahn’s first museum exhibition of sculptural works, opening May 31.

“I think the masks are fascinating objects and also important as painting surfaces that allow for tremendous freedom and experimentation,” said Jeremy Strick, director at the Nasher. “You could see it as a way for Mark to give himself license to do things he wouldn’t ordinarily do, to paint in different ways.”

On May 1, Blum & Poe, his longtime gallery in Los Angeles, opened a space on the Upper East Side of Manhattan with a survey of the “Butterfly” paintings, through June 21.

The May shows represent two extremes of this artist’s work that are not always easy to reconcile. What is a rigorous abstract painter doing making funny faces out of leftover Heineken cases, works that he himself compares to grade-school art projects? Has he lost his way as a painter, or discovered an important second act as a sculptor?

What becomes clear from a recent visit

to his sculpture studio is that Mr. Grotjahn has found a second act in his personal life, having stopped drinking about a year ago. And he has begun giving back to the art world, donating money to the Mike Kelley exhibition now at the Museum of Contemporary Art and joining the board there as its youngest artist-trustee, at 46. The move surprised many who didn’t see him as much of a joiner, and Mr. Grotjahn, who is married to the painter Jennifer Guidi and is the father of two young girls, called it a personal first.

Sitting in his studio, a large space that used to be an embroidery factory, he looked fit and relaxed, with his graying beard neatly trimmed and his pale blue eyes clear. “I was a binge drinker; I drank when I traveled,” he said with a bit of a surfer-dude drawl and some expletives for emphasis. “From what people say, I look a lot better and a lot younger than I did. It’s a completely different way of living your life.”

Mr. Strick, director of the Nasher, said what strikes him about Mr. Grotjahn right now is “his amazing productivity,” as he works on several new paintings and sculptures spread out over two studios.

One room of the sculpture studio is filled with a small army of the boxy, rough-and-tumble figures heading for the Nasher. Many look as if they were attacked with pencils or knives, poked and ripped, before being cast in bronze and painted.

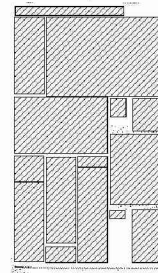
Most are finger paintings, though done with gloved hands for protection.

Of the sculptures’ primitive look, Mr. Grotjahn said: “I think my masks reference artists who reference primitivism. They’re not directly connected to tribal arts. I think they look more like third-grade art projects.”

“There’s obviously a lot of phallic humor and toilet humor,” he added, looking at a tall, skinny bronze mask smeared with red and yellow paint. “But it also comes out of some of the art I was thinking about when I first moved to L.A.: artists interested in the pathetic,” he added, mentioning Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy.

“And just because the masks started out casually or were fun personally doesn’t mean they’re any less serious,” he said.

The masks have been growing more complex, featuring double noses or incorporating some tools used in lost-wax casting into the structures. They are also becoming more painterly, with one mask in a loose, Impressionistic style that makes Mr. Grotjahn think of Monet’s water lilies, he



said. He sees echoes of Cy Twombly and Julian Schnabel in the dense looping scrawls on another. Others recall Jackson Pollock.

Today, Mr. Grotjahn's paintings often surpass the million-dollar mark at auction (with a record \$6.5 million for a work bid up by Mr. Gagosian at a charity auction). And selling one "Butterfly" painting from his own stock enabled him to make a down payment on a house in Los Angeles.

But he was hardly an overnight success. Born in 1968 in Pasadena, Calif., he grew up in Mill Valley, a suburb of San Francisco "that was all hippies back then," he said. "We were dirty kids on dirt bikes."

After getting his bachelor's and master's degrees in art, he settled in Los Angeles in 1996. For a year or so, he ran an art gallery in Hollywood with a friend from the University of California, Berkeley.

He also pursued his own art projects. For one series, he replicated the signs of small businesses in the area and then gave business owners his painted signs in exchange for their real ones. For another, he began drawing or painting perspective lines converging in a way that made the surface itself seem to bulge and recede.

He had his first solo shows with Blum & Poe, then a promising small gallery in Santa Monica, in 1998 and 2000. He remembers selling only one artwork from the second show, pocketing \$1,750.

"Selling only one piece for a year and a half of work was a bit of a whipping," he said, noting wryly that Jeff Poe, one of the gallery's owners, called the show "a critical and financial disappointment." Mr. Grotjahn turned to poker for income, spending the next 10 months playing Texas Hold 'Em in a casino in the nearby city of Commerce. "I played like an addict, maybe 13 or 14 hours a day, seven days a week," he said, picking at a snack of vegetables on a tray. "I wasn't playing to win but to lose myself."

During this period, he began the "Butterfly" paintings, so named because of the way their lines radiate from a central, vertical axis. The first one started as a colorful perspectival painting in which nested V's radiate from the horizon line, like a sunset and streetscape.

But he wasn't happy until he flipped the

canvas 90 degrees: "I found that rotating it took all the landscape out, so it became a nonobjective painting."

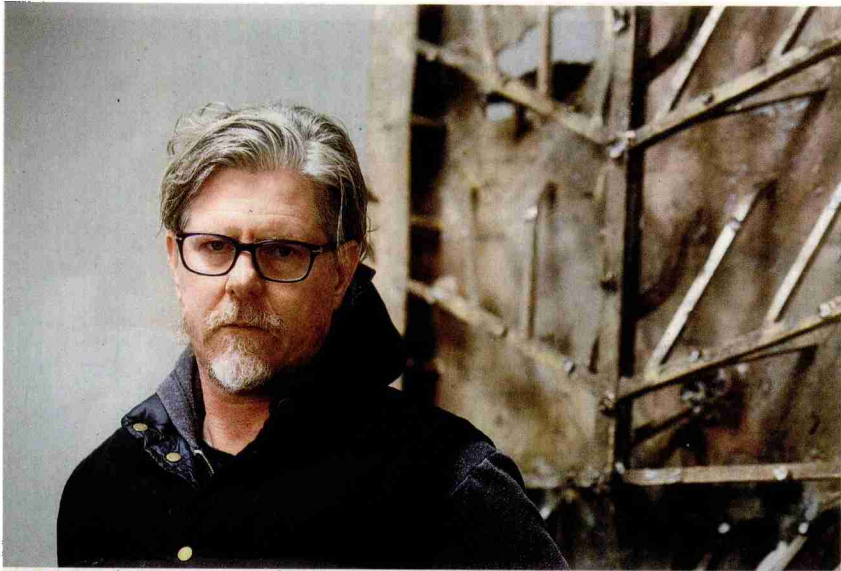
Douglas Fogle, an independent curator who organized the "Butterfly" exhibition for Blum & Poe, calls this series Mr. Grotjahn's breakthrough work. He notes that the artist's off-kilter, hand-painted geometry — unlike the hard-edge look created by applying and peeling off tape — places him in "a tradition that goes back to early abstract painting by Mondrian and Malevich," adding, "I see his ties with Constructivist painting."

Mr. Grotjahn stopped painting the "Butterfly" works in 2008, after tearing his rotator cuff and breaking a shoulder bone in a ski accident. He found he couldn't paint for more than two hours at a time. Since then, he has discovered physical therapy and looser, less intensive ways of painting. One resulting series, the "Face" paintings, feature almond-shaped, Picasso-like eyes peering out from wild skeins of color. When reviewing the work in 2011, New York magazine's art critic, Jerry Saltz, responded to the images' untamed or "shamanic" power, calling it "the best show by a midcareer painter that I've seen in a long time."

Mr. Grotjahn has since turned his attention to the so-called "Circus" paintings, which are close in spirit to the "Faces," though the ropes of paint look even more tangled — almost braided — and the almond eyes have morphed into larger leaf-like structures. These new paintings will be shown starting May 16 at the Kunstverein Freiburg, a swimming pool turned exhibition hall in Germany.

He painted both the "Face" and "Circus" series on cardboard mounted on linen, a clear link to his cardboard sculptures. "It's all connected," he said. "When I started the masks, I left them in my studio where I painted. I looked at them all the time. And now, I'm watching them become more like traditional paintings. I think you'll see them influencing my painting in the future. I'm sure of it."

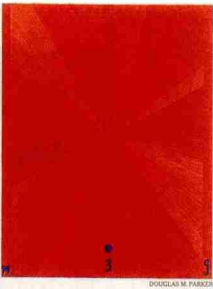
Works began as fun, but that doesn't mean they're not serious.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MONICA ALMEIDA/THE NEW YORK TIMES



Clockwise from above, Mark Grotjahn; an untitled work in his "Circus" series, 2012; an untitled 2014 bronze based on a cardboard box and tubes; an untitled work in his "Butterfly" series, 2003; and works in his studio headed to the Nasher Sculpture Center.



STUDIO/ART BY PABLO

