NEW YORK TIMES
JULY 6, 2012

NO ‘SACRED MONSTER,’ JUST A HIS-WAY ARTIST

by Randy Kennedy

Mark FloodCredit...Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

TO call someone an artists’ artist is often just a craven way of saying, “Sorry about your career.” But over the past two decades the Houston painter and punk propagandist Mark Flood, 54, has fit the bill, beating a fevered pulse beneath the work of many younger artists, who have been inspired by his anarchic humor and disturbing vision of contemporary culture.

During most of those years Mr. Flood — a founder of the underground 1980s band Culturcide — never sold enough work to say goodbye to his day jobs (Texaco office worker, elementary school teacher’s assistant, video clerk, museum assistant at the Menil Collection.) But now he is getting to have the cred and a career too. He has been represented for the past four years in New York by the Zach Feuer Gallery and since 2007 in Europe by Peres Projects, and paintings he has created using lace — a body of work that some have called “spinster abstraction” — have become highly sought. Beginning July 18 he will present a town house full of little-seen work from the ’80s in “The Hateful Years,” at the high-end gallery Luxembourg & Dayan.

In an office on the top floor of the gallery Mr. Flood spoke with Randy Kennedy about his hometown, Houston; his love-hate relationship with New York; and his hate-hate relationship with most art institutions. These are excerpts from their conversation.

Q. You seem to have a horror of interviews. Long before Maurizio Cattelan was doing it, you were ducking your openings and sending people to pretend to be you. Why did you submit to the process today?

A. I've been experimenting with violating my principles for two reasons. One, because of Duchamp's example, the way that he said that he wanted to contradict his own taste. And two, it's because I've known people who I call "sacred monsters," like famous art people and such, who are so uptight about always doing everything the same way. So I'm trying to do things differently.

Q. You've described Houston as an "oil-stained, overdeveloped parking lot, packed with cars, littered with advertising, designed for profit, not people." Why have you stayed there all these years?

A. I don't hear any anger in that description. Merely truth telling, which freaks people out. I've just always liked Houston. I could operate there. I could drive around. I had a pickup truck. And it was a city that fed my work with something — I call it reality. Houston is more real than most places, more real than New York.

Q. When you worked as an assistant at the Menil Collection, you were close with the renowned curator Walter Hopps. How did an art-world job change your view of the art world?

A. It was wonderful for me to be around people who were so obsessed with art. They were very obsessed and very willful — willful rich people. It's why I love this place. [He gestures at the gallery around him.] I hate parasitical art bureaucracies. I hate nonprofit organizations. I love willful rich people who are obsessed with art. The context always determines the meaning of a work of art.

Q. In the late '80s one of your paintings ended up in the custody of the Houston authorities after a narcotics raid. It said, "Eat Human Flesh." You capitalized on this media frenzy by selling ad space on some of your paintings. How did that work?

A. It would be a 5-foot-by-5-foot painting, and there'd be a strip with 1-foot-by-1-foot ads, and you were guaranteed that your ad would be in half the paintings in the show. Even the Menil bought an ad. I was the satanic artist.

Q. One of your best pieces of writing talks about how you visited pre-Columbian sites with your mother as a child, and about your adult realization that in our society every piece of commercial signage is "our version of a stele, covered with our hieroglyphs, delineating the agitated passage of our fifth-wheel souls." What did that idea mean for your work?

A. It was the conviction that everything in the built culture is art or can be treated like art. Art in museums is a special case, but you have to study that, too. Theoretically, all the big ideas are supposed to hit there first, in museum art, but in our society that's no longer true because so many of the great artists now work in advertising and design.

Q. You didn't sell enough work to support yourself for a very long time. What was your 9-to-5 life like?

A. Every job I ever had, you could see it in my art work, because I would take stuff from the office. That was one of my rules. At Texaco, I smoked pot every day and ransacked all their files.

Q. How did that sit with the folks at Texaco?

A. Let's just say they had my picture up at the door, with a message saying, "Don't let this guy back in."

Q. How did those lace paintings change your career?

A. I didn't know that they would be popular, though people sometimes assume that it was some calculated sellout on my part. Because if I could calculate how to sell out, I wanted to wait until 2000. [Laughs.] My life changed dramatically. I no longer needed some art professional standing there saying, "This is good because of Jasper Johns, because of Duchamp," because someone was coming up to me saying: "That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Here's $5,000." And then I quit my job.

Q. I've heard that you don't have a studio now and work in lots of borrowed spaces. Have you always done that?

A. After school, I would always rent decaying mansions. That was my thing. I would drive around and find screwed-up buildings with no "for rent" signs, abandoned buildings, and I'd go down to City Hall and look them up on the tax rolls. And I would call the landlord cold and go, "I'm an artist and I like to live in substandard housing." And they'd say, "Sold." For a few hundred dollars or something like that. There was a whole string of them. I was usually the very last tenant in anywhere that I worked. They'd tear it down after I left.