

THE DIARY OF MARK FLOOD, PART ONE: GONE TO TEXAS

by Mark Flood



Mark Flood. (Courtesy of the artist)

It looks like I'm going to be doing a diary-like thing for ARTnews, promoting my show "Gratest Hits" at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

Good. I like publicity. I like to feel that somebody somewhere is paying attention. I never look too close at who that might be, because it's usually someone unexpected, and somehow disappointing, like a 75-year-old wannabe who does watercolors and wants some feedback, instead of critics, or collectors, or Beyoncé.

But whatever.

They say connoisseurship is going extinct, because the collectors of today are too busy managing their hedge funds to learn anything about art. They just call their consultants and order off the menu. So it might be a good idea to be very famous, so your name is printed in big bold letters on that menu.

I like to sell art, I like to pay the bills. I've never had any creative problems, but I've had just about every money problem.

I'm not too worried about looking like a sellout whore, even though that's arguably what I am, because I've got so many decades of certified poverty on my résumé. Plus my dubious Punk Rock provenance, which continues

somehow to signal Integrity in the art world.

Nobody ever criticizes me like the voices in my head, anyway.

CAMH is my hometown museum, and we have a rich and storied history together, even though I've never had a show there.

I wrote a column that became a book called Clerk Fluid, and I published that book, and it has several passages that trashed the CAMH. I called it the CUM, the Center for Useless Mediocrity. I said the awkward futuristic building was designed to form an image of an awkward futuristic gun, which was to suggest local artists commit suicide. I said it wasn't a museum because all the muses had long since been evicted.

Bill Arning is the current director of CAMH, and the curator of my show at CAMH. Bill Arning and I went to a coffee shop, and he told me later he was surprised I even agreed to meet.

The idea of Mark Flood doing a show at CAMH was so shocking and perverse I couldn't say no.

We negotiated. I wanted no interior walls because I think that's the only way the CAMH's difficult space can work. Also, it says in our agreement that they can't do any publicity that embarrasses me.

I wanted to make sure Bill was respected by the CAMH board, and that the board knew all about me and Clerk Fluid. Otherwise, I was afraid someone with power might suddenly pop up like a jack-in-the-box and tell me "no" about something.

Maybe that's why the head of the board, JB, gave me this great pep talk at a cocktail party at his house. He assured me that everyone was behind the show, and talked about how great the Bill Arning era was.

JB said that what the board wanted from me was the "bleeding cutting edge." That's an expression I'd never heard before, but which I liked.

Bleeding cutting edge. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it was quite a mandate!

I made a BLEEDING CUTTING EDGE painting for the show...It has an arrow that points to the rest of the show.

So things were good with Bill and with the board, and I made another decision to keep things simple. I decided I would only use paintings that I still owned in the show. Usually nobody buys the ones I like anyway. This way, I wouldn't have pesky lenders telling me what I could and couldn't do with my own art.

So Bill and I came up with the concept of “Greatest Hits,” which was a show that was not quite a retrospective, but had work from various periods. It had paintings that had caused some kind of sensation, and also any work that was Great in size, because I think enormous paintings are what look best in that CAMH space.

I also wanted to misspell the title Gratest Hits, because I like to grate on everyone’s nerves.

Bill and I made a tentative list of works, and then we worked out a tentative placement of the works, in a scale model of the CAMH my assistants built, in one of my studios.

Then, in January 2016, I opened a show called “The Future is Ow” at Marlborough Chelsea. I had organized this show and it consisted almost entirely of large printed paintings by myself and several friends.

I’ve always liked bracketing giant paintings together to make walls, partitions, and even rooms. Looking back, I think the idea of this seeped into my mind from prolonged exposure to the work of Richard Jackson, an edgy L.A. artist who had a presence at the Menil Collection in Houston, where I worked for 18 years.

He did a show there in the ’80s where he used small stretched canvases like bricks, and paint like mortar, to build freestanding rooms inside the gallery. I guess I never got over it.

Anyway, in “The Future Is Ow,” I took my room building further than I ever had, building two large rooms out of printed paintings, and furnishing them, and decorating their interiors with drawings and small prints and photos by the artists.

Everyone liked it, especially me.

So when I got back to Houston, I started playing in my CAMH model and soon came up with a plan where almost all the giant paintings were bracketed together. They formed a big zigzagging wall of paintings. The CAMH gallery is a trapezoid, a giant stretched-out diamond, and my wall marched across it from one end to the other, dividing it into two long irregular spaces. When you enter the CAMH you are confronted by this huge colorful wall blocking your path, but there is a central opening through which you can walk into...the other space...

To give everyone some reason to go from A to B, I decided I would put some Flood memorabilia from the ’80s and ’90s all over the back walls, along with a handful of older, smaller paintings. I have this theory that everyone in contemporary audiences really wants to be backstage, and I’m going to let

them. Now they can see giant artworks onstage in my “Gratest Hits” show, and then go behind them, into a mysterious back room of art/museum. And there, they can go just as deep as they want, down a great big rabbit hole of Mark Flood memorabilia.

So that’s the plan now, and it’s almost time to start installation. And I’m going to keep a diary of my innermost thoughts and feelings, like a shy teenage girl. I’m going to write it with precise slanted penmanship, in a tiny pink book with gold trim and a pink ribbon, and it will be intensely private and personal, and if some bully gets ahold of it and starts laughing and reading it out loud to his buddies, I’m going to turn red and start crying, and chase him around, desperately trying to save my secrets. And then I’m gonna go to Daddy’s closet, and take out Daddy’s 45, and shoot that bully.

Because this diary is only for ARTnews...

Saturday, April 16, 2016

1.

I’m not going to the CAMH opening. I don’t usually go to my openings because I hate the situation and all the horrible things people say.

The big one I get these days is, Congratulations! You deserve your success! I feel like replying, I’m so glad I could give your self-absorbed consciousness another opportunity for judging people, in this case, me. Are you sure I deserve it? Have you read my whole file and listened to all the gossip? My comfort zone is being a tormented self-hating loser, so surely I don’t deserve all this! I’m rich, bitch! It’s so fucking wrong!

But I hold my tongue, and smile, and say, Thanks.

Or I just stay away. I use surrogates at openings. I’ve been using them since 1990, all ages and appearances. They don’t have to resemble me or pretend to be me; in fact I prefer surrogates who know little about me, and less about art. They just have to exist in that space, for that time, and somehow we always contrive a way to indicate that they are supposed to be me. I pay them and let them absorb all the creepy twisted energy my audience wants to wipe on Mark Flood.

I use two twin surrogates now, to be me and my brother Clark. These guys have been being me for a long time now, and they know the ropes. I don’t know what they’ve been through, because we rarely talk about it. I’m not curious, and they’re not communicative. But when I need a surrogate, I call them, and I count on their experience.

I woke up this morning and realized it would be fun to put the two surrogates, Mark and Clark Flood, in a cage at the CAMH opening.

I'm sure I can get them to be in the cage, and I think an artist or two in a cage at my opening is quite a statement. I'll let the public fill in the blanks.

I texted my assistant Alex to see if she can find a suitable cage, big enough for them to stand there. I guess it should be aluminum?

I wonder if we should leave it up during the whole exhibition. I wonder how long Mark and Clark will stay in it. I guess they'll have to leave to go to the bathroom.

I guess it will be more like a photo op. Those guys won't tolerate being imprisoned for long. I'll probably have to double or triple their fee to make them be in the cage!

I can't help but remember a night in Miami Beach, when I had those twins share a room. They got into a fistfight in the middle of the night. It woke me up!

I remember saying to them, Goddammit! Why do I have to be Nanny 911 to this Cain-and-Abel bullshit?

I'm unsure how to clearly indicate, at the CAMH opening, that Mark and Clark are me. I'd thought about reproducing the photograph of them from the back of Clerk Fluid on a little stand, announcing their appearance, but that seems sort of contrived.

I thought about having them wear little name tags, but that's even more contrived.

So the cage solves the problem. I'll put a sign on the cage that says Mark and Clark Flood, and the twins can inhabit it as they will. Everyone will get it.

2.

I worked on the Drone War painting.

I enlarged images of the first U.S. airmail stamp, printing the stamp's decorative border but replacing the vintage airplane with images of predator drones, or something drone related.

The assistants stretched seven 14-foot-tall panel drone stamps, and we dragged them all out into the parking lot at Party Tyme studio, and lined them up into a mural.

I used black spray paint to make drone trails and explosions, and I added some captioned images of drone strikes, where the CIA is saying defensive things.

These guys were terrorists, this wasn't a bake sale. These guys were terrorists, this wasn't a men's glee club.

3.

After the assistants left, I had to paint a drumhead. My new band is playing at the exhibition...

Now how did that happen?

On CAMH's Facebook page, it says that next Saturday we're supposed to have a "gallery walk-through." Bill Arning and I will walk through the exhibition and chat about my art and take questions from the audience.

I thought the only personal appearance that I agreed to do was the book signing. I asked Bill why they had published that Facebook item. He said that I said that I might do it.

Did I?

So I thought about it, and decided to get a band together to play a couple of songs, and have a lot of fog. So now there's a band with me, my manager Dan, my ex-assistant Alex G, and one of my current assistants, Alika.

I asked my assistants, What's something that has the word CAMH in it? They said, Camshafts? So the band name is The CAMH Shafts.

Bill will introduce me and start asking me questions, as if we're really going to do a curatorial walk-through. And then I'll say, Thank you, Bill, and start reciting lyrics like they are my answer. Then we'll burst into song, which will surprise no one, since the band, the PA, and all the equipment will be there.

I've considered doing as many as five songs, but after one rehearsal I told the guys, I'm too feeble! If we overdo it, it'll be three songs and an ambulance!

Bill Arning used to play keyboards in bands, and I asked him if he wanted to play keyboards with us. But he said he didn't really remember how.

I considered creating some paintings during the performance. While the band plays some jam I could whip out a spritz bottle full of paint and my assistants could rush up with some stencils and canvases, and I could squirt away, like a teenager in a brothel. To commemorate the presumably magical moment...

But it sounds exhausting. And I can't quite see how to make such paintings somehow special to the CAMH. Should I powder their brochures, or sweep their floor and drop the dust in my paint?

4.

I got a blank drumhead from Alex G. Alex G was one of my first assistants, one of the few that was not an artist, though he is a musician and a writer.

His most memorable assisting moment came one day when he said, The great thing about getting high at work is you don't have to leave work to get stoned!

Another time we were shifting my mountain of old art from one warehouse to another, he read the date on the back of a painting and said, You painted this the day I was born...

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