

ARTNEWS

JULY 15, 2016

THE DIARY OF MARK FLOOD, PART FOUR: OPENING NIGHT

by Mark Flood



Mark Flood. (Courtesy of the artist)

Thursday, April 28, 2016

1.

I heard a rumor. One of the guests who was at my dinner last night, a local, was going to buy a huge lace painting out of my CAMH show.

I said, "I'll believe it when the check clears."

I know better. I've spent my life here and the general rule is, People in Houston don't buy art. There are galleries, and lots of artists, and tons of art. There are people who, if you ask them just right, might say they are collectors. But it's all wishful thinking. There's no art money flowing here. Our scene is like a pretty sex doll. It has all the parts and you can do whatever you want with it. But it's not real. There's no money in it. You bring your own lube, because it doesn't make its own.

2.

My ignorant non-art buddies think having a museum show is some kind of cash shower, like hitting a Vegas jackpot. I gently disillusion them. The show is completely upside down for me financially. Typically, one's galleries step in and pay the costs because museums always act like they're broke. With this show, that's not necessary. My show is relatively cheap, because I own almost all the work. There's no shipping, no couriers. The benefit is that this local museum show might elevate

my erratic career in New York and Europe. It also might signal to other museums that I'm not a rabid beast.

3.

The local paper wants to interview me and photograph me. I said no. I'm sure the staff has all changed by now, but I don't care. I'm holding onto grudges for things that rag wrote about me 30 years ago. Fuck them. I should be big about this, but I'm not. I'm as petty as a prison yard. They molested my career when I was young and vulnerable. Now I'm all grown up, and they want a date. Letting them photograph me would be like inviting a vampire over the threshold.

4.

I had lunch with Will Boone, another Houston escapee. He told me about a dream he had. There was a giant Cornell box and he was inside, under the glass. We both get a lot out of Joseph Cornell. It reminded me how I always wanted to go behind the owl in a Cornell owl box. To go further, deeper into the magical space. Backstage.

5.

I guess we should talk about some of these paintings while we still can...

MIDCAREER LOSER

In 1999, I found out I wasn't going to be able to kill myself, and that put me in the embarrassing situation of having to keep living. I had to go to 12-step meetings, and get sober, and change my lifestyle.

I couldn't kill myself, but I could kill my career. I started committing career suicide every time I picked up a paintbrush.

It didn't seem to matter much since my stillborn career was already dead and always had been.

I lived in a world of fantasy. In that world, my twin brother Clark took the rejected, unstretched lace paintings and wrote terrible truths on them.

Clark was the writer in the family.

ALLEGED ARTISTS, BLIND DEALERS, GUTLESS COLLECTORS, WHORE MUSEUMS...

This is probably the most popular text painting I've ever made. When it was first shown, the installation shot was reposted thousands of times.

I once characterized it as an amusing look at the plight of the artist. Yet for critics with no sense of humor, it's the prime example of my negativity. It's typical of my invective. I'm angry, harshly critical, and I seem to hate everything! I'm lashing out, and most of all, I'm spewing my bile...

Oh God, the spewed bile! It's all over everything, and it doesn't wash out!

For the record, I love museums, collectors, dealers and artists. Where would we be without each other? This work is a portrait of our clubby little community, wherein we can all recognize each other, and ourselves, and chuckle. Who hasn't judged that an artist's work isn't really art at all? Doesn't every artist resent some dealer who didn't appreciate their obvious genius? Doesn't every dealer wince at some collector who sheepishly follows the collector-herd? What museum doesn't have its fundraising fuck-hole front and center, puffy and wiggling for the corporate wad? It's funny. Most people don't take it personally because they always assume I'm talking about somebody else.

"Mexico City"

In the late '90s I hurt my back and couldn't get around for six months. I crawled through my squalid studio like a giant bug, gobbling pain killers. I would look out my second-floor window at the lawn below, wondering if I would ever walk across it again. I was in no shape to whip out lots of paintings, as I usually did. But I had to do something. So I decided to paint some small, labor-intensive paintings that would take weeks or months.

I visited Mexico City a lot as a kid. I made this fantasy memory of it so I could endlessly paint and repaint the architecture with experimental techniques. Mexico City is filled with fantasy architecture. In those days I created a lot of monsters out of silhouettes of human body parts. This orb made of arms was so popular that I had a small silkscreen of it made for printing on T-shirts. I used it to print the monster on this painting.

My ideas about the visual forms of monsters come from the work of René Girard. After a small community has had its values turned upside down by pervasive violence, they scapegoat some individual, and blame him or her for everything. They collectively murder this victim, and everything settles down again into some new social order. The victim is remembered as a monster that almost destroyed the community. I silkscreened my monster up in the sky like a solar disc. Somewhere behind Huitzilopochtli, the sun god worshipped by the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan, there was a human victim.

MILLIONS WILL DIE, BILLIONS WILL DIE, YOU WILL DIE.

Not so long ago, we humans realized that meteor impacts were responsible for killing off the dinosaurs. Furthermore, such impact events have been dramatically shaping Earth for billions of years, and could easily wreck our little civilization. Our intellectual worldview shifted. Now we know we're truly cosmically doomed, and nothing we do matters. I made this triptych to help us think about these things. I love the way it ramps up Millions to Billions, and then unexpectedly climaxes by getting intimate with You.

Critics often opine that my text paintings are dashed out in the simplest, crudest, most careless manner possible. Nothing could be further from the truth. I think these three panels are beautifully painted, and I'd like to see

someone try to dash them out. I particularly like the way the silver paint seeps into the DIE of YOU WILL DIE, like some sinister poison. I love the way cardboard takes acrylic paint. Know-it-all morons say things like, "Paintings on cardboard will turn into dust!" I've been painting on cardboard for 50 years and I know better.

Friday April 29, 2016

1.

Friday night was the opening. My stress beforehand was low because I knew I wasn't going. I spent the day congratulating myself on avoiding the problem. No, I wouldn't be attending the art opening. I wouldn't be performing the wretched role of artist-scapegoat-sacrificial victim. I wouldn't be seeing all those people that I never want to see. I wouldn't have to respond to stupid things said about me and my art. If the herd needed to bleat their reactions, they could do it at the two surrogate Mark Floods, over there in the cage.

I was reminded of skipping the opening of my first show with the New York gallery Zach Feuer. There came the phone call from Zach, asking my preferences for the post-opening party. In his apartment with fewer people, or in the gallery with more people? Part of me wanted to fit in, but the stronger part of me wanted to do it my way. I said, "I guess this is the time to tell you that I'm not attending my opening. I don't attend my openings. I send surrogates. I'm going to send these twins to represent me and soak up the negative energy. Is that a problem?" Then there was a long pause, or what felt to me like a long pause.

It reminded me of the more or less eternal pause in the call to my dad after I told him that I had failed each and every one of my classes at Rice University and had been asked not to return.

I had been majoring in Drugs, and then I switched my major to Punk Rock when I found out about the Sex Pistols. Then I found out I couldn't even sit in my accounting classes anymore. To my surprise, professors called me, and insisted I make up the finals I'd skipped. But I couldn't. I asked them to fail me.

My dad eventually spluttered into the receiver, "Do you have any idea how much money you've wasted?"

Zach said, "The only problem is that the opening is your big night to shine, when everybody pays attention to you...Why would you not want to be there?"

I told him the truth. When I walk down the street, I feel like I'm shining and everybody's paying attention to me. I don't need any further attention.

2.

In the morning, I did a walkthrough of the exhibit with the CAMH staff. One of them asked me if my experience at the CAMH had softened my attitude towards working with institutions. I wasn't aware I had a hard attitude about working with institutions. But I just took it. I asked her if she meant softened like when you soak a callous, before you sand it off. Then I answered the question. I said, "No. If anything, working at CAMH had made my attitude even harder. Bill Arning, the museum's director, was a monster, and the staff was incredibly bitter and hateful."

Everybody had a big laugh.

I reminded them that I had done time in museums and so I understood their suffering. This also got a bit of a laugh. There were a couple of questions about the meaning of the art. I said, "No comment." I explained that I'm weary of art that comes with a bundle of words attached, like an instruction manual. I prefer just putting the art out there naked. Words will inevitably exist, but let's let them exist away from the art, in a magazine or a book, or online, or in a press release. Anywhere except sharing space with the work, distracting you while you're looking at it.

I asked, "Is that so wrong?"

Someone said, "It might be a little difficult if your job is education!"

I also let the CAMH staff know, if they didn't already know, that the curatorial walkthrough Saturday, with Mark Flood and Bill Arning, was actually going to be a concert by me and my band. I didn't share my concerns about how bad we might sound in this giant echoing trapezoid.

3.

I spent the afternoon with the surrogates, Mark and Clark. I was relieved to see they're getting along great. Clark's living in Seattle and he has that look, with a beard and a bun on top of his head. We discussed the cage.

4.

Surrogates...

I remember the first one back in 1990. I had a different name then.

I took lots of pictures of that first surrogate. I recreated the settings of every photograph from my press kit, and reshot them with the surrogate posing where I had been. Today, press kits are forgotten. Back then, it was a stapled stack of Xeroxes of every article ever written about you. You made your press kit available at your exhibits.

I had the surrogate appear at a show featuring my Press Kit Paintings. All my articles were silkscreened on canvas. My articles with the restaged photos of the surrogate!

What a pain it was, and all for an audience of none. However crazy it sounds now, it was much crazier, in 1990, in Houston.

5.

1990. I had a different name then.

John Peters.

How I hate that name. It's a sign of how much spiritual work I've done that I would even write it down.

John Peters.

That's the sound of the IRS contacting me, and my bosses griping at me, and my mom screaming at me.

When I had decided to leave this world in 1999, the one chore I made sure to do was change my name. I wasn't gonna have fucking John Peters on my tombstone!

The judge said, "We don't get many white people in here. Just foreigners who want to change a name you can't pronounce, to some other name you can't pronounce." I'm sure they appreciate your sensitivity, Judge.

That's what I wanted to say, but I was afraid!

6.

For the 1990 Press Kit Paintings exhibit, I also printed 100 glossy 8-x-10 headshot photos. Headshots like actors used to promote themselves. My headshots had the surrogate's face and my name, John Peters. At the exhibit, the surrogate sat at a table, passing out head-shots and autographing them "John Peters."

7.

Whenever I use surrogates, I get a range of reactions, just like with any lie. Some people know all about it, some people know nothing about it. Some people are in-between. In 1990, I briefly considered showing up at that opening, where the surrogate already occupied my place. I was going to put my hand in a cast, so in case anyone wanted me to autograph a headshot I could easily say no.

But I realized it was complicated enough without me. Everything worked better if I stayed away. The paintings, and the headshots, and the surrogate himself, all needed my absence to function properly.

Now I always stay away. I'm not even that curious. I've had openings before. I spare myself the disappointment that occurs when an artist examines his public.

8.

While my opening was getting underway, I was driving down 290 to my favorite theater, Tinseltown. It's cheap, and families come here to watch Hollywood trash. The lobby is garishly decorated. On the way to the seats, there are dim halls with purple carpet on the floor, walls, and ceiling. I watched *Jungle Book*, and ate popcorn, and mostly forgot about CAMH.

Saturday, April 30

1.

I'm in a band again.

Dan on guitar, Alex G on drums, and Alika on keyboards. I haven't been writing about our rehearsals because they've been productive and drama-free. We met up at CAMH and did our sound check at 10 a.m.

I had thoughts about being too old and too fat to be onstage, and worries about having a heart attack. But I did the performance anyway because I had a vision of doing it when I read about my supposed curatorial walkthrough on Facebook.

How do I explain how I'm willing to go onstage one day, when I wouldn't be caught dead going to my opening the day before?

In my mind, openings and gigs are two entirely separate concepts.

2.

Dubstep and trap are my favorite music these days. I like remixes of pop tunes done in those styles. That stuff supersedes every musical idea I ever had. Consequently, the iconoclastic noise I formerly pursued doesn't interest me now. I prefer trying to craft hooky pop tunes. I make a promotional tune and a video for almost every show. I usually come up with lyrics and some chord structure, and then work with Alika and Dan. I like collaborating with others. It gives the music a not-me quality. Not-me is a quality I enjoy.

3.

I parked my car in CAMH's loading zone, pointed at the street for a quick exit. I had to drive on the sidewalk to do it.

I wanted to arrive just a moment before we went on. I didn't want to interact.

We went out and performed our gig. The energy of the crowd was intense.

I fucked up plenty but it didn't make any difference. I enjoyed myself. Five songs went fast. We quit, and I had some of my assistants walk me out of the building.

I drove a long while after that, to the north side, and then I parked under a tree and started looking at texts. I had gotten to one of those sweet spots where I didn't have anything to do.

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