

# SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

## OCTOBER 19, 2019

### SHOULD ART MAKE YOU VOMIT?

by Tony Bravo



"Infiltrate the System" by Mark Flood, 2014, from the artist's "Heath" series.

I love experiencing art that provokes a visceral reaction.

When I saw Fred Schepisi's film "The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith" (or at least the first 40 minutes of it) I shrieked, excused myself, and then vomited. Hatchet murders as art house cinema didn't agree with me. The first time I saw Yoko Ono's toilet in the center of the clear Perspex maze at her San Francisco Museum of Modern Art show, I laughed uncontrollably at the sight.

This brings us to artist Mark Flood's "Paintings from the Postwar Era," on view at Ever Gold gallery at Minnesota Street Project through Saturday, Oct. 26. One of the first pieces in the show, titled "Climb Pervert Mountain," made me gasp, swear at the gallerist, then giggle.

The title alone says a lot. The piece is a photo-printed canvas painted over in places with acrylic. The photo-printed part of it depicts a kind of group bonding experience that Flood added some creative embellishments to with paint.

Other works of Flood's inspired similarly strong reactions.

"Firm Characteristics," a photo-printed work that mashed up explicit, viral images with corporate logos, was difficult to fathom at first — until I squinted and was able to make out just what was going on in the top photo.

Then there's "Triangle With Julia Roberts." The picture on the lower corner of the

piece, another internet-found image, is of Roberts with an orangutan holding firmly onto the Academy Award winner. The look on the actress' face deserves another Oscar.

Both "Firm Characteristics" and "Triangle" are part of Flood's 2014 Heath series, which specifically engage with images from the internet.

"I like taking mass media images and putting them together to make art," Flood told me. "To me there's a tradition of what I call image juggling. It goes back to the Dada collage, that's sort of the dawn of it. Now we have, I don't know if it's a democratic process, it's a weird selection process where things go viral."

In other words, part of what the artist was engaging with in the Heath work were images that already brought with them a strong enough audience reaction that they had been further disseminated. The Heath works show the artist as both image consumer and creator.

Flood doesn't mind strong audience reactions to his work, but he was quick to add he wasn't explicitly trying to generate any. We had to cut our conversation that day short: Flood said he was on the way to see the film "Joker," another work inspiring very polarizing views.

As Mark Flood's Heath paintings, Yoko Ono's toilet and Joaquin Phoenix's "Joker" all juggled in my head like their own Dada collage, I thought about another work that inspired a massive audience reaction: The Igor Stravinsky-composed, Vaslav Nijinsky-choreographed ballet "The Rite of Spring."

The Paris premiere of the 1913 work, now considered one of the most influential musical compositions of the 20th century, is legendary for its audience response.

The word "riot" is tossed around a lot when describing the premiere: There were reported howls of derision and cheers that met the pulsating, dissonant score and jerking, disconnected choreography. Some stories report that the more conservative audience members came to physical blows with the more avant-garde attendees.

What most historians agree on is that the performance did end with ovations for composer and choreographer, but that the applause didn't quite drown out the noise of protesters.

Usually, the strongest reactions I see at performances are grumbling in the lobby, or at worst someone excusing themselves. But how exciting would it be for people to actually break out into fisticuffs?

When I first heard the stories about the alleged "Riot of Spring," I found it romantic. Would I ever feel so strongly about a piece of art that I'd be willing to slug someone? So far, no, but there's always the next show.

In 2019 though, audiences are less inclined to riot. Instead, they report images as offensive to community standards on social media. Tellingly, the only post I've ever had censored by Instagram is a Mark Flood piece: "Spiderman," another found internet photo used by the artist depicting someone in the superhero's costume semi-exposed.

“It’s not just Instagram, it’s Facebook, it’s Google — they all censor people and they all lie about it,” said Flood.

On one hand, Flood felt the sites might be aiming to protect some users from explicit content. On the other, Hollywood movies, including some superhero films, are filled with explicit content.

So where do you draw the line? Are they protecting audiences from strong content or from their own strong reactions?

I’m not saying every piece of art needs to spark a riot as proof that it’s moved an audience. But now and then, isn’t it exciting to see something in a theater, on a movie screen or in a gallery that makes you physically engaged, enraged or even ill? Just think of the memories you’ll carry with you years later when you look back on the work.

What’s more memorable than art you need a barf bag to experience?