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AROUND THE GALLERIES

Art is . . . in spirit of Duchamp

Nathan Mabry, at Cherry and Martin, plays on masterpieces and meanings.

By David Pagel

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Marcel Duchamp is probably the most famous prankster who is also taken seriously as an avant-garde artist. Best known for tipping a urinal on its back to transform it into a modern sculpture, the French expatriate made a name for himself making fun of just about everyone who felt that their understanding of art elevated them above ordinary folks, especially those with a fondness for profane gags and laugh-out-loud silliness.

The spirit of Duchamp (1887-1968) lives on in **Nathan Mabry's** third solo show in Los Angeles. The first thing you see when you walk into Cherry and Martin is the larger-than-life-size backside of a seated nude figure that looks a lot like Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker."

Walking around the 7-foot-tall bronze reveals that the muscular man, modeled on Rodin's portrayal of Dante in an earlier work, is not lost in thought, as his famously introspective chin-on-palm pose suggests, but ready for fun. He wears a mask that makes him look like a maniac, with eyes popping out of their sockets, mouth agape, tongue dangling.

Visitors who think of themselves as purists may be offended by Mabry's mockery of Rodin's icon. But the joke is on them.

If you know "The Thinker" from experience and not merely by reputation, you know that Mabry's figure, titled "Process Art (Dead Men Don't Make Sculpture)," lacks the energy, grace and tension of the real thing.

Mabry has not desecrated an original. He simply purchased a fake on EBay and cast a bronze mask for it. The statue he adapted was so awkward and inaccurate that it was not taken seriously as a forgery. Think of this industrial-strength tchotchke with dopey dunce cap as a pumped-up version of Duchamp's mustache-on-a-Mona-Lisa-postcard -- oddly appropriate for an age of outrageous entertainment, when hybrids and sequels are all the rage.

Mabry's other works play even faster and looser with art and its transformation into popular culture. They make a mess of old-fashioned ideas of propriety, good taste and authenticity, not to mention authority, ownership and fair use.

"Taboo-boo" juxtaposes a look-alike of a John McCracken plank and a pair of "primitive" figures adapted from those made for Ivory Coast tourists. "It Is What It Is (The Old In and Out)" transforms two Donald Judd benches and two antique Peruvian vessels into a piece of international sign language.

In other works, gobs of Swarovski crystals rub shoulders with references to regal Mixtec artifacts and designer dentistry. Enlarged close-ups of the designs on beer cans locate the Zen serenity of John McLaughlin's abstract paintings in mundane sources. And a suite of four drawings makes odd bedfellows of Henri Matisse and John Currin, leveling the differences between unrelated artists by making their works look like something else altogether.

At a time when top-of-the-line art is so expensive that only the super-rich can afford it, it's heartening to see that art's meaning cannot be owned or controlled. Mabry's carefully crafted bastards celebrate that art is most powerful when its meanings move through the world, mutating as they engage new audiences and leave old ones behind.

Cherry and Martin, 12611 Venice Blvd., (310) 398-7404, through April 5. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.cherryandmartin.com. **Deliberate mishmash**

Pierpaolo Campanini has one foot firmly planted on the solid ground of realistic depiction and the other somewhere else. It's hard to say exactly where.

It's not the realm of unfettered artifice, where anything-goes make-believe runs the show. Nor is it the world of dreamy fantasies, unburdened by pragmatic concerns. And it is not the precinct of formal innovation, where color, shape and texture establish the parameters in which art does its thing.

Although where Campanini stands is impossible to know, it's clear that he has a taste for absurdity, that his art is dedicated to the cultivation of puzzling conundrums and that he is in love with those moments when the dumbest sorts of stuff -- studio castoffs and junk-picked leftovers -- rise above their plainness to make your world a lot more interesting than it was only moments before.

At Blum & Poe, Campanini's first solo show on the West Coast consists of five sofa-size paintings and five intimately scaled copperplate etchings. All strike just the right balance between forlorn abjection and glorious redemption.

Before Campanini applies brush to canvas, he cobbles together odd bunches of ordinary things: scraps of wood, bits of metal, tree branches, table legs, wads of fabric. His scrappy structures are held together by screws, bolts and pushpins as well as strings, straps and tautly buckled belts.

Campanini assembles these things like a tinkerer who has lost his shop and works straight from garbage bins -- on the street, always improvising. Yet he paints like a master, building riveting images slowly, out of subtle shifts in tone and rhythm, touch and sentiment.

His three vertical canvases have the presence of portraits. Loads of dignity emanate from meticulously worked surfaces, which are sometimes sensual (but never indulgent) and sometimes Spartan (but never stingy). Just what they portray is a fascinating matter that -- like beauty -- resides in the eye of the beholder.

Campanini's two horizontal oils are still lifes but strange ones. Each depicts, with impressive attention to shadow, mass and perspective, spindly clusters of objects he has suspended from the ceiling, like clunky, dysfunctional mobiles or crude models for interplanetary space stations.

His etchings are exquisite, combining broody Romanticism and clear-eyed realism. In Campanini's hands, logical contradictions are not problems to be solved but opportunities to get to the good stuff: those magical moments when the world's weirdness is vivid and thrilling.

Blum & Poe, 2754 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 836-2062, through April 5. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.blumandpoe.com. **Videos running through the mind**

"Gravity Art" is a great little show that presents video art at its very best: direct, accessible, unpretentious and user-friendly. Organized by guest curator René Daalder for Telic Arts Exchange, this whip-smart selection of 31 videos made around the world over the last 40 years is also a refreshing departure from the overproduced emptiness of so much contemporary video, which often exploits movie-size projection, pretends to be installation art and lasts way too long.

In contrast, "Gravity Art" is concise, compelling and stripped to the basics. In the center of the darkened gallery stands a set of metal shelves shaped like the letter X. Mid-size monitors play all the videos all the time. Most of these videos are short. Most are black-and-white. And most are so visually engaging that sound is an afterthought. It comes through as a collective hum and consists mostly of objects and bodies making contact. Dialogue is beside the point.

The atmosphere is charged and decidedly social. It's hard not to blurt out to strangers, "Come see this!"

Nearly all the videos make you want to watch them more than once, particularly the six delightfully down-to-earth examples from the early 1970s by **Bas Jan Ader** (1942-75) and the loopy exercises in futility by **Vito Acconci**, **Richard Serra**, **Gino de Dominicis** and **Liza May Post**. Works by **Monsieur Moo**, **Jacob Tonski** and **Marco Schuler** mix slapstick and stoicism. And **Pascual Sisto's** "No Strings Attached" uses simple special effects to transform a common chair into a sort of spastic Fred Astaire by way of the Marx Brothers.

The best thing about "Gravity Art" is that it lets its works play off one another -- and invites viewers into the gregarious, every-which-way conversation. It's not to be missed.

Telic Arts Exchange, 975 Chung King Road, (213) 344-6137, through April 26. www.tellic.info. **Wake up and watch the coffee**

"The Coffeehole" could be the name of a hip, hole-in-the-wall coffeehouse. But the minimal installation by **Colin Roberts** is a bit of art gamesmanship that gives thoughtful form to the fleeting rhythms of city life.

At Monte Vista, just off the main drag in Highland Park, Roberts has drilled a silver-dollar-size hole in the gallery's ceiling and another, precisely below it, in the floor. Simple plumbing, hidden in the floor, wall and ceiling, circulates an endless drip, drip, drip of coffee, at about the pace of a fast-flowing intravenous feed.

It's easy to see the drops as they fall from the hole in the whitewashed ceiling. It's more difficult to see them disappear into the floor, partly because they accelerate as they fall and partly because the floor is darkly tinted.

A little patience is all it takes to be able to discern single drops. And with a little practice, you can track a drip's entire life span. But you've got to concentrate. A free cup of instant coffee is available for visitors who need a little pick-me-up.

Roberts' work recalls Charles Ray's 1987 "Ink Line," a similar setup in which a steady stream of ink flowed from ceiling to floor, creating a thin, liquid column of seemingly solid blackness. In contrast to its uninterrupted flow, "The Coffeehole" breaks time into a series of distinct moments, measuring it, almost frugally, like a makeshift clock. You savor each moment, knowing it will be gone in an instant.

The title of Roberts' installation is not exactly accurate, but then "The Coffeeholes" doesn't have much of a ring to it.

Monte Vista, 5442 Monte Vista St., (323) 365-8581, through March 30. Closed Mondays through Fridays. montevistaprojects.com

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