

View of Aaron Curry, "Bank Robber," 2006, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. From left: *Fragments from a Collective Unity (Standing)*, 2006; *Haunt (Thief)*, 2006; *Hobo Head Rig (Bank 5)*, 2006; and *Fragments from a Collective Unity (Reclining)*, 2006.



OPENINGS

Michael Ned Holte on Aaron Curry

AARON CURRY MIGHT BE THE FIRST ARTIST who readily cops to being influenced by Long John Silver's, the fast-food fish-and-chips chain named after *Treasure Island*'s peg-legged pirate. The ropes that thread through and dangle from Curry's biomorphic sculptures pay sly homage to the signature decorative motif of that nautically inflected restaurant, which the artist frequented when he was growing up in San Antonio. In *Fragments from a Collective Unity (Reclining)*, 2006, a network of ropes is drawn through the orifice-like voids in an "abstract" figure. Vaguely human, seemingly hermaphroditic, and nodding quite overtly to the historical avant-garde's partiality to "the primitive," the reclining figure is composed of sinuous, flat plywood shapes painted black, assembled and situated on a pedestal made from a resin-coated poster for Disney's 2006 remake of its 1959 romp *The Shaggy Dog*. At its showing last fall

in Curry's solo debut, at Los Angeles's David Kordansky Gallery, the sculpture looked jerry-built, as if on the verge of collapsing into two dimensions—an eventuality the ropes, one might think, were meant to prevent. Yet scrutiny revealed that the plywood elements were already held in place via strategic joinery. Emphasizing the cord's apparent superfluity, one limply dangling end was punctuated by flat, unpainted plywood beads—or were they counterweights?

Neither entirely decorative nor precisely functional, Curry's ropes nevertheless ensnared the eye, then dragged it around the complex space of the sculpture, tying together its constituent parts and unreconciled signifiers ever so provisionally, as if to avoid the finality of a bow—or slipknot. But if the work's physical components were visibly interconnected, it wasn't immediately clear how its assembly of referents, ranging from seaworthy kitsch to Tim Allen (star of the *Shaggy Dog* remake) to Isamu Noguchi, could be made to fit together. There is, of course, the immediate structural opposition of high and low, that is, of biomorphic abstraction, à la Noguchi, and its pedestal (literally, "base") extracted from popular culture. But Curry eschews hierarchical cultural distinctions and the blunt antinomies they imply. Instead, he creates sneaky chains of association from unexpected formal affinities he locates between objects. For example, a pretzel-like section of the *Reclining* figure looks at once like a pelvis and a huge pair of eyeglasses that, if flipped from one plane to another, would fit the dog (with Allen's eyeballs peering from its furry face) directly below.



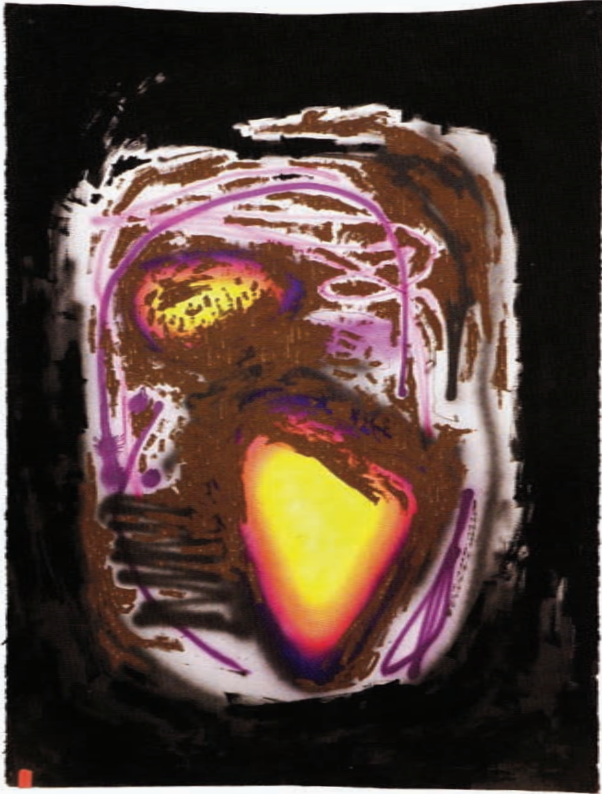
This page, from left: Aaron Curry, *Hobo Head Rig (Bank 1)*, 2006, acrylic, ink, and gouache on paper, 32 1/2 x 24 1/2". Aaron Curry, *Masher (Thief)* (detail), 2006, paint, cardboard, resin, tape, and framed collage, dimensions variable. Aaron Curry, *Masher (Thief)*, 2006, paint, cardboard, resin, tape, and framed collage, dimensions variable. Opposite page, from left: Aaron Curry, *Ostensibly Weightless Configuration Suspended in Space (Wagon Wheel)*, 2005, gouache and Createx on paper, 56 x 42". View of "Red Eye: L.A. Artists from the Rubell Family Collection," 2006-2007, Rubell Family Collection, Miami. From left: Aaron Curry, *Shack #14*, 2006; Aaron Curry, *Shack #13*, 2006.



Such formal relays abounded among the artworks (all dated 2006) in Curry's debut. The colors of the poster—the dog is black and white with a big pink tongue; the lettering is red—determined the refined palette of the entire show, which included another, more emphatically anthropomorphic sculpture, *Fragments from a Collective Unity (Standing)*. Per its title, this figure stood upright, perched on a small pedestal painted gray to match the gallery's ceiling, with an appendage resembling a finger dumbly inserted into an ambiguous orifice; another copy of the poster, mounted on thick plywood, was propped upside down against an adjacent wall. Also on view were five drawings, ranging from modestly scaled to human height, all titled *Hobo Head Rig*. In each, a face unexpectedly emerges from an accumulation of ink splatters, airbrush spurts, and patchy gouache brushstrokes secreting trompe l'oeil sweat beads. Nearby was *Masher (Thief)*, which paired a resin-coated, airbrushed shard of cardboard leaning against a wall with a framed collage that repurposed the exhibition's flyer (itself incorporating the *Shaggy Dog* poster) as a ground for a found picture of a scruffy, gap-toothed rascal in an undersize knit cap—presumably the titular thief. Rounding things out was *Haunt (Thief)*, which comprised another leaning cardboard sculpture as well as two collages. These juxtaposed black-and-white anthropological photos of "cartoonish" New Guinean tribal masks with exuberantly grotesque Basil Wolverton comics, drawn in the underground master's signature "spaghetti and meatballs" style, from the first issue of the 1970s humor magazine *PLOP!* The whole elaborate, involuted referential schema recalled nothing so much as the overdetermined causal chart of art movements that MOMA founder Alfred H. Barr famously composed in 1936. For the cover of the catalogue accompanying his exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art," Barr employed a tangle of swooping arrows—his own brand of "spaghetti and meatballs"—to depict the rapid explosion of overlapping and

occasionally competing avant-gardes (Cubism, Futurism, Neo-Plasticism, etc.) amid floating, misfit categories ("Machine Esthetic," "Near-Eastern Art," "Negro Sculpture," etc.).

The title of Curry's inaugural exhibition, "Bank Robber," is revealing, and its allusion to his investment in "stolen" images might seem to align him with the proliferating crop of young sculptors who are (re-)claiming the appropriationist mantle. Yet the ubiquitous term *appropriation* seems a little too rarefied—too darn classy—given Curry's pointed use of words like *hobo* and *thief*. Rather than elevating singular appropriated images, a tactic that emerged in the rephotography of the 1980s and is now an academic style, Curry tends to focus on the unlikely connections *between* images by teasing out those formal relations in sculptural space. His strategic reclamations of diverse cultural material evoke Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of the *bricoleur*, a figure who constructs myth from a culture's abandoned fragments. (Unlike many of his peers, Curry never uses source material from the Internet, relying instead on images that are also things in the world: pictures in books and magazines; large advertising displays; *objects*.) Curry's bricolage assumes modernity, including the just-past



and the present, as ruinous flotsam and jetsam: He roves among Barr's categories as if they were so many castoffs in a dustbin—which of course, in a sense, they are—while adding pop elements such as Wolverton comics, *Star Trek's* "future primitive" Klingon Worf (in the collage *The Think [Taking Those Motherfuckers Out] #2*), or hip-hop empress Kimora Lee Simmons (in a poster used as the base for another sculpture), and dozens of others.

Like the migratory, hobolike path of the archetypal *bricoleur*, the course of Curry's own career is a study in selective accumulation. As an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he encountered the work of the Hairy Who—the cohort of once-marginalized weirdos now decorously known as the Chicago Imagists—whose members, including Peter Saul, Jim Nutt, Karl Wirsum, and Ed Paschke, draw on Surrealism, funk, and psychedelia. The work of another quasi-outsider and Chicagoan, sailor-cum-sculptor H. C. Westermann, seems equally germane: Curry paid tribute to Westermann with the painting *Ostensibly Weightless Configuration Suspended in Space (Wagon Wheel)*, 2005, which appeared in the exhibition "Untitled (for H. C. Westermann)" at the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, in 2006. Curry continued his accrual of oddball precedents in the MFA program of the Art Center in Pasadena, California, where he arrived in 2003 and where he worked with Mike Kelley, Liz Larner, and Richard Hawkins, among others. He found common cause with Kelley's mining of popular culture and celebration of peripheral art-world figures (including Saul and Nutt); with Larner's ongoing perceptual investigations

of sculptural space; and with Hawkins's deft, thrifty collages and predilection for diverse, often degraded influences. One could look more deeply into Curry's relationship to an older Los Angeles canon; his leaning, surfboardlike airbrushed and resin-coated cardboard planes unexpectedly marry John McCracken and George Herms, while his trompe l'oeil sweat beads recall Ed Ruscha's oozing liquid-text works. But, as with the best bricolage, the whole is finally more compelling than the loose confederation of parts, precisely because the relationships Curry builds are entirely unanticipated and unsettling.

For "Red Eye," a group exhibition of Los Angeles art at Miami's Rubell Family Collection last winter, Curry was allocated an entire gallery, which he used for a delirious arrangement of comical, almost endearing biomorphic figures, leaning pieces, large-scale drawings, and smart, economical collages mixing hip-hop-influenced Japanese advertising images with more pictures of New Guinean masks. All these works shared a startling, rather garish palette of brown, purple, and baby blue, which matched the large promotional posters for the animated movie *Over the Hedge* and the Spanish-language ad for Pantene

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hair products that were also part of the mix. Curry gave each work a number and the same title, *Shack*. He was surely punning, site-specifically, on the nickname of basketball star Shaquille "Shaq" O'Neal (traded by the Los Angeles Lakers to the Miami Heat in 2004). But perhaps Curry was also suggesting that the works should be viewed as humble structures built to house a constellation of already ruined or cleverly salvaged cultural signifiers, carefully collected and imaginatively recombined. What is ultimately being constructed is a provisional mythology of artistic creation, one that begins to shore up a fragmented present. □

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