

art on paper

QUEASILY HUMAN

Aaron Curry remakes the figure

by Sharon Mizota



Infinite Mask/Perpetual Mash-up (Pink) (detail), cardboard, paint, tape, resin and ink, gouache, and acrylic on paper (painting: 32 1/2 x 25 in.), 2008. Both images courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, and Michael Werner Gallery, New York

Although his gangly, biomorphic sculptures may be more eye-catching, Aaron Curry's works on paper are integral to his practice, specifically his exploration of the representation of the human figure in modernist aesthetics. Typically exhibited together, they evoke a wide range of twentieth-century touchstones. For instance, the sculptures—arrangements of flat, intersecting planes of painted wood or aluminum—suggest the influence of Alexander Calder or David Smith, while the works on paper include both brushy, expressionistic abstractions reminiscent of early Pollock and brusque collages of found imagery inflected with surrealism. Curry retraces and layers these familiar styles to suggest new figurative possibilities, even as he questions and lampoons outdated ones.

For example, the series of acrylic and gouache drawings titled *G.O.W. (Bricklayer)* (2008)—on view through February 1 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles—contains a diptych that revisits the traditional figure/ground relationship. Two 24-by-18-inch sheets of paper feature similar abstract images with a central shape—something like a kidney with a nose-like protuberance—surrounded by smaller, sausage-like forms. The main shape has been cut out from the paper on the left and pasted in the center of the image on the right. Yet the smaller collaged shapes in the right-hand image couldn't have been cut from the first drawing, where they are drawn in solid black. By establishing and then upsetting a correlation between the two images, Curry makes a classic modernist move—but he also calls attention to our tendency to look for such a relationship in the first place.

Such esoteric musings are tempered with an irreverent dose of pop culture. Rough brushstrokes are often covered with glistening trompe l'oeil drops of liquid. These studied renderings of drips and splashes poke fun at the gestural immediacy of abstract expressionism, reducing one of its hallmarks—messy, spontaneous action—to an illustrative trope. They also look like comic-book beads of sweat, evoking the bulbous, gloppy figures of Peter Saul or *Mad* magazine's Basil Wolverton. Heroic action painting is rendered cartoonish, sweaty, and queasily human.

Although the grotesque once gave modern art shock value, its rough, inchoate forms were eventually refined into a high art ideal, exemplified by artists such as Henry Moore and Isamu Noguchi. By contaminating this formal elegance with motifs from vernacular culture, Curry echoes modernism's foundational appropriation of another strain of folk art—the so-called primitive arts of Africa. *To Fold and Puncture* (2006) seems to sum up this complex relationship, if not the gist of Curry's overarching project. The piece's three components—a small collage, a drawing, and a resin-coated shard of painted cardboard leaning against the wall—form a colloquy on the modernist figure. In the collage, an upside-down cartoon of an anthropomorphic tree mimics (and partially covers) a black-and-white photograph of a figurative, tribal sculpture. The image short-circuits the traditional separation between the reductive language of cartoons and the roots of modern abstraction. As a counterpoint, the adjacent drawing—a catalog of expressive brushstrokes organized into a rough oval—could be a face (or not). Its contours are extended into three-dimensional space by the curved edge of the cardboard fragment on the floor nearby. Primitivism and pop culture, abstraction and figuration, flatness and depth all rub up against one another in a rich, allusive brew.

Curry situates the human figure amid this tangle, accounting for the many ways in which it has been dissected and remade in the modern era. In doing so, he reveals our persistent anthropomorphic desire to see ourselves in everything, no matter how strange the result. He also raises a vexing question: How does one represent the figure in an historical context in which it has been thoroughly pulled apart? While his work evinces nostalgia for the halcyon days of modernist abstraction, its engagement with the vicissitudes of pop culture brings this idealism into a contemporary orbit. Thus abstraction is not a move away from representation (or a complete anachronism), but one of several mechanisms by which we picture ourselves. Curry's work advances a notion of the self that is inevitably fragmented but somehow manages to remain whole.



Haunt (Thief) (detail), paint, cardboard, resin, collage (collage: 14 1/4 x 10 3/4 in.), 2006