



## Arsenic and Old Lace

by Kelly Klaasmeyer

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Mark Flood is making pretty paintings, and that's okay. The conceptual malcontent, who has sold ad space on his canvases and had his work seized by Houston police as evidence of a satanic cult, is now creating lushly colored canvases of, um, lace -- the parlor tablecloth kind. His smart-ass friends have dubbed this new body of work, on view at Mixture Contemporary Art, "Spinster Abstraction."

Flood's earlier projects poked a sharp stick in the eye of the status quo. His 1989 "Imperatives" series appropriated familiar commands like "Peel back to see if you are a winner." The words "Eat Human Flesh" were paired with a photo of teen-star-turned-Christian-poster-boy Kirk Cameron. It was work from this series that had HPD foaming at the mouth when they found the paintings during the drug raid of a Flood collector. (Remember that 1989 was fraught with media frenzy about alleged cult activity in Matamoros.)

In "Art Management," Flood turned his attention to the art community, creating silk screen blow-ups of artists' résumés and mass Museum of Fine Arts membership mailings from Peter Marzio. Flood's most recent activities involved the GALA Committee (GA for Georgia and LA for Los Angeles), a group of artists that discreetly inserted their art works into the sets of *Melrose Place*. Their output included sheets sporting condom patterns and a "Going Postal" U.S. Mail bag complete with an AK-47 clip.

After the initial visual impact of Flood's lace paintings (which began as backgrounds in other works), viewers try to puzzle out how he did it. The lace ranges from vintage handmade to mass-produced polyester, and it's scavenged from thrift stores, donated by friends or purchased from eBay and fabric stores. Experimenting with different techniques and viscosities of paint, Flood underpaints the canvas and soaks the lace in paint, using it as a combination stamp-stencil. The fabric is stretched and arranged on top of the canvas, and a contrasting coat of paint is applied over the lace. The lace is removed when the paint is almost dry. The paint blends together slightly at the edges of the pattern, and Flood inserts the occasional splotch of additional color. The fields of lace are often snagged and torn, tenuously held together by slender bridges of thread. The process is a one-shot deal. If the lace comes off too soon or too late, the piece is ruined, and the lace itself can cost anywhere from 50 cents to hundreds of dollars. Editing is key to the success of the work, and casualties are high.

*Bullet Holes* has a pale baby-blue background with hot-pink lace blurring to deep magenta and patches of fluorescent orange peeking through. *Magnet* is torn open, the underlying surface seemingly bursting out as the fabric pulls apart in gaps connected by tiny strands of thread.

The paintings capture fragments of frail, billowing material, fabric in the act of slowly ripping apart, deteriorated perfection. The yellowed, dangling fragments of *Dragonseed* seem like they just rotted off Miss Havisham. *Sunset Cloud* has a drape of lavender with orange undertones and a vivid yellow background. A purple thread trails off the end like a cross between an umbilical cord and the unsteady flourish of a palsied signature.

Flood has effectively misused this uselessly decorative material and its genteel domestic associations, mangling it and then ratcheting up the color for powerful visual impact. While the work seems uncharacteristic for Flood, the best thing about being an artist is that you can do whatever the hell you want. Even artists forget that. Sometimes you have a pointed conceptual agenda, and sometimes you want to lose yourself in visual and material pleasure. You shouldn't have to swear allegiance to either camp. And maybe, just maybe, the two sides can hang out together in a middle ground.

Flood is also, inadvertently, a part of "Model Pictures," the Vik Muniz installation at the Menil Collection. Flood has worked at the Menil for 15 years, and over this time, as part of his job, he (along with Doug Laguarda and David Warren) created maquettes of the gallery spaces complete with little to-scale replicas of the works in the collection. While visiting the Menil, Muniz, who has explored issues of optical perception, originality and reproduction in his work, stumbled across the tiny pieces of art and became enamored of them. For this exhibition, he has created a scale model of the gallery and placed it within the gallery, hung with tiny emblematic works from the Menil's collection -- Magritte, Ernst, Giacometti, Léger...In the real gallery, those same works are reproduced at the scale of the original, with the miniature reproduction's slight inaccuracies exaggerated. So the one-inch Picasso replica is now the size of the real Picasso. To further complicate the issue, an even tinier model is located inside the tiny model in the middle of the gallery.

The blown-up works have a purposeful bad color Xerox aesthetic that is unsatisfying. The painstaking facsimiles in the miniature gallery are far more engaging. But, while something of a one-trick pony, the project raises interesting ideas. When I was in the gallery, a woman with a handout moved dutifully from picture to picture, identifying each to her two elderly friends and adding "after the style of Picasso," etc. The threesome scrutinized each image as if they were not reproductions of reproductions but products of some "school of Picasso" creation. Their approach begs several questions: What is the importance of an original? Do you need the real thing, or just something that stylistically approximates it? What is the difference between an original and a good copy other than the viewer's projected "aura" of the authentic touch of the master?

Muniz's work on view at Lawing Gallery is stronger: a series of iconic Monet haystacks via Vik. What appear to be hugely pixelated large-scale reproductions are in fact collages of Pantone color swatches. Squint your eyes and the tiny squares blur into very close approximations of the originals, in the same way that closely laid strokes of color optically melded together in impressionist paintings. What's more, the collages are reproductions made with the raw material of reproduction. The universal Pantone color system is used as a printing standard; Muniz scans images of the original and translates it into the large-scale pixels, and the software identifies the requisite Pantone color.

But the strongest works are Muniz's large- and small-scale versions of Rembrandt's images of beggars. Rembrandt's purposeful marks are copied with small arrangements of straight pins, staples, wire, needles, paper clips and nails that are then photographed and blown up. Where there was crosshatching, Muniz has stacked layers of pins and nails. The optical trickery is witty and satisfying -- the vivacity and strength of Rembrandt's line expressed through banal hardware fragments.

There is something impossibly strange about how images of impoverished people -- dead for almost 400 years now -- became classic images of art history and are now reproduced in bent staples on a gallery wall. It's a bizarre chain of events that started out with a guy trying to get money to eat one day. Something similar could be said for Flood's work: A lace tablecloth somebody's grandma carefully tatted wound up at Value Village when it was too frayed and stained. Now it has risen phoenixlike to mark its elaborate network of threads on a magenta canvas that will wind up in some collector's living room. It's like an art food chain.