

# ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

## Mark Flood

PERES PROJECTS

Mark Flood's works unsettle the viewer as they teeter between seediness and seductiveness. The artist was born in Houston and has worked there as an artist (and, in the 1980s, as a musician) for three decades, but at first glance it would be easy to imagine the producer of such objects as a scavenger of Southern California's flotsam, unearthed along Hollywood Boulevard or at a gas station near a freeway off-ramp. (Living in the epicenter of the entertainment industry, one tends to forget that mass culture isn't just a local phenomenon.) Celebrities, or at least their images, often treated to cruel alterations by an X-Acto knife, have long played a role in Flood's career, though in recent years they've been kept backstage while series involving other, less caustic subjects enjoyed the limelight.

In the artist's recent show, his first at Peres Projects, the mutilated celebrities—this time including Johnny Carson and Lauren Bacall—made a triumphant comeback. In *The Plumber*, 2008, which introduced the show, a canvas screenprinted with the face of infamous silent film actor and probable but nevertheless acquitted murderer Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle has been cut to ribbons and hung limply from a skeletal painting stretcher, a pornographic playing card stapled to the forehead—somewhat recalling Richard Hawkins's earlier, similarly creepy shredded Halloween mask outfitted with clipped images of androgynous rockers.

In *Wild Card*, 2008, Flood has collaged together, in a playing-card pattern, images of Heath Ledger, River Phoenix, and Wallace Reid—three heartthrobs from different eras who died young from overdoses. *Green Box*, 2008, which features an image of Lauren Bacall against a forest green background, her bloodred lips extended down to her chin, courtesy of the artist, suggests a cross between John Stezaker and Ledger's Joker from *The Dark Knight*—black comedy that is unquestionably sadistic, though it seems Flood's target is more the phenomenon of celebrity than any particular star. The celebs mingled here alongside several stunning lace paintings and a number of works with stenciled text, many sprayed atop cheap ads. The lace paintings, which constitute a large portion of Flood's output from the past decade, are made by applying paint-soaked fabrics to canvases and then removing them, leaving thick, ornamental traces. *Rill*, 2007, and *Spring Puddle*, 2008, are as unabashedly lush and pleasing as the disfigurements of Bacall and Carson are acidic and horrifying.

The text paintings are exercises in crudity in every way: In *Commit Suicide/Win Everyday*, 2008, the first phrase of the title has been sprayed in black over a cheery yellow Shell gasoline ad displaying the second; in another work, BE A WHORE has been painted on an orange construction sign warning ROUGH ROAD AHEAD. Such works recall John Carpenter's Reagan-era, Los Angeles-based sci-fi film *They Live*, in which special sunglasses reveal slogans hidden in seemingly innocuous media (and also expose ghoulish aliens in business suits); but as wall-bound objects they flirt with thinness and cliché.

The text works and the violent collages are largely informed by Flood's background in punk and industrial music. In the '80s, he fronted Culturcide, an unclassifiable Houston band that incorporated drum machines and samples of then-current pop songs (e.g., Bruce Springsteen's "Dancing in the Dark") into their live act. But his most obvious artistic precedent is the late Bruce Conner, a gifted collage artist who made as well some spooky, lacy assemblages from everyday debris—work that still unsettles. Flood's best efforts, past and present, manage to do the same, and likewise appear perfectly situated on the West Coast.

—Michael Ned Holte

REVIEWS

Mark Flood, *The Plumber*, 2008, painting and collage on canvas mounted on wood frame, 48 x 36".

