

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Behind the Mask: Mark Grotjahn Lifts the Veil on His Secret Sculptures

By Michael H. Miller 9/17/12

Mark Grotjahn, an artist best known for his laborious and intricate paintings, is something of a hoarder. Anyone who visits his Los Angeles studio comes back gushing about the strange cardboard masks that litter the space. He started making them 10 years ago, around the time he began the series of abstract paintings that launched his career: his so-called butterfly series, which consist of detailed rays of color bursting from various vanishing points. He would only paint the butterflies in natural light, so he worked in 12-hour bursts, but when the sun went down, he wanted to keep going. He started saving cardboard boxes—including the 12-packs left over from his wedding—and toilet paper rolls, fashioning them into masks with vaguely phallic noses (the toilet paper rolls) and eerily blank, jack-o'-lantern expressions. They are both primal and juvenile; a lot of artists have made masks, Mr. Grotjahn says, but, he hastens to add, so have a lot of kids.

Last week, Mr. Grotjahn, 44, was on the sixth floor of the Gagosian Gallery's labyrinthine Madison Avenue location, presiding over a small army of art handlers that included the artist Dan Colen. The latter was taking a break from installing his own show downstairs—a secret one on the walls of Gagosian director Andy Avini's office, consisting of crookedly hung works on paper that spelled out the word "GOD" ("they'll be straight when I'm finished," Mr. Colen said). The upstairs gallery was filled with painted bronze sculptures that were based on Mr. Grotjahn's masks. They looked like they were smiling at their maker, mockingly. The masks may have been lying around his studio for a while, but the work on display was a new direction for the restless artist, who has been nearly universally praised for his paintings. He looked stressed out. In the last two years, he's sued one of his early champions—a collector and trustee at L.A. MOCA—in a controversial case over resale royalties that was eventually settled out of court; he's passed out drunk on a lawn during an AIDS charity auction in Dallas where one of his paintings sold for \$1 million; he's been the subject of museum and gallery shows in New York, Los

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Angeles, Chicago, Portland and Aspen. But his sculpture has rarely been seen outside of his studio, and the Gagosian solo show, his third with the gallery, would open the next day.

I'd been told earlier that whether or not Mr. Grotjahn would speak to me "depends on how he's feeling." The installation had been going on for the better part of six days, and Mr. Grotjahn was still rearranging his works obsessively, trying out every conceivable display. When I arrived, the masks had been marshaled into two parallel rows, and were staring at the entrance to the gallery in a way that felt more menacing than welcoming. "I can't tell if the frontality is kind of pushing people aside," Mr. Grotjahn announced to no one in particular, and asked for the works to be moved again, then started edging his way toward me.

"This was a way of winding down from how attentive the other work was," he said in a languid, beach-bum drawl. He was wearing a red flannel shirt, jeans and a trucker hat with the word "VENICE" printed on it. "I was trying to let go of the intensity that was involved in the other kind of art making. But I did really like these. In my mind, though, I thought of them as an exercise, as something very personal and not for public consumption."

In another part of the gallery, a group of men in suits—collectors—could be seen inspecting the sculptures, and, sotto voce, talking prices. Facing away

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from them, Mr. Grotjahn described becoming very attached to his cardboard masks “in a way that I don’t necessarily want people to have them.” He gave a few away and traded others, but for the most part kept them for himself. About two years ago, he started casting them in bronze, which he said gave him some distance from the work and made him feel “less exposed.”

Mr. Grotjahn started out as a gallerist. Born in Pasadena, he moved to Los Angeles after graduate school and opened a gallery with his old classmate Brent Peterson called Room 702, on Melrose and Heliotrope. The idea was to only do solo shows so people could “see what the artists could do.” Despite an invitation to move into the 6150 complex on Wilshire—which already housed places like ACME and Marc Foxx and would soon become the backbone of L.A.’s nascent gallery scene—Room 702 closed after less than two years, and Mr. Grotjahn became a full-time artist.

“It was great working with artists because, contrary to stereotype, they love to work,” he said. “They love to talk about their work, and they’ll do anything to see their work through.” The problem was visitors. “I didn’t like when people would come into the gallery and I would have to constantly be on. I hated that. There could be surprises at any moment. But it took care of a lot of my conceptual needs, because I’d been doing a lot of performance work and the gallery made me feel like I was part of a group.”

The so-called “performance work” was the basis of a lot of what was to come. He’d go into a Safeway and take boxes and coffee cans and make sculptures in the aisles of the store, take pictures of people’s responses to the work, and then put everything back where it was. He’d paint exact replicas of storefront signs—mostly liquor and convenience stores—then get the store’s owner to exchange the copy for the real thing. It was a kind of secret that only the artist was in on; people would interact with his work without realizing it. But the precision that went into making those signs would eventually be put to use in the butterfly series, which required a great deal of patience. They were also physically taxing. Since injuring his shoulder a few years ago, Mr. Grotjahn hasn’t been able to make them. This turned out to be less hindrance than liberation: he focused more on his freeform face paintings—the only requirement is that they have eyes and a mouth, and everything that grows out of that is more extemporaneous—and put together an exhibition last year for Anton Kern Gallery, his longtime New York representative, that earned him more than one sincere comparison by critics to another painter, Pablo Picasso.

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The mask sculptures may be cast in bronze, giving them the material oomph that makes them commercial-gallery-ready, but they maintain the casual spirit of the cardboard originals. On these three-dimensional canvases, Mr. Grotjahn seems to be walking through a personal history of painting. In some, he has layered the paint in thick waves, letting its physical texture create its own kind of content, in the manner of Monet circa the Nymphs. Others are a self-conscious nod at abstraction, Jackson Pollock in particular, the paint chipped and cracked and dark, like a cloak concealing something underneath. Some are finger-painted, one with the help of his infant daughter (who took a fork to the original cardboard version, ripping out one of its eyes). He likes getting paint on his hands, working on his knees and just throwing acrylic at a surface and seeing what sticks. Looking at the sculptures, it's clear he had fun while he was making them. Looking at the artist, on that day before his opening, was a different story—he was visibly nervous about how it would all come off. When I asked if there was a lot of anxiety putting the show together, he shook his head solemnly. “Mmhmm. Lot of anxiety,” he said. “Yeah, there was a lot of anxiety for the last two weeks. Because there was nothing more I could do.”

By this time, the sculptures in the upstairs gallery had all been rearranged on separate pedestals. He was slumped in a chair, looking gloomily into the room, inquiring gravely of whomever was standing closest to him, “What do you think?” People were telling him to go to lunch, give the work some space, then come back and see what he thought. He decided he'd “eat some food, drink some wine, have a cappuccino, be a nice little gentleman on the Upper East Side,” but by the time I was getting ready to leave, he was still sitting.

“I mean, I've been doing this for a long time,” he said. “There's something to lose here.” He waited a moment before adding, “But I like that.”

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