

# Shane Campbell Gallery

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For Immediate Release

## *Modern Primitivism*

Katherine Bernhardt, Mark Grotjahn, Guyton/Walker, Jay Heikes, Evan Holloway, Chris Lipomi, William J. O'Brien, Anthony Pearson, Chris Vasell

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Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

During the 80s, the art world experienced primitivism as a transcultural style. The neo-expressionism of Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat initiated the return of the artist as mythic hero just as New York learned to forget about the author as inspired creator. Germany gave us the Neue Wilden and Mulheimer Freiheit, two well-marketed groups including Georg Baselitz, Salomé, and Rainer Fetting, which reinvested art with an auratic character. They relied heavily on German Expressionism to provide the historical leverage their work required given that German culture, since 1933, hadn't had the best reception. The Italian Transavanguardia completed the neoexpressionist trifecta as Mimmo Paladino and Enzo Cucchi, among others, mined the Mediterranean past.

Given that the art world is on twenty-year cycles, the 80s are back in full effect. The recent Basquiat retrospective and Schnabel's current interior decorating gig for Ian Schrager's Gramercy Park Hotel bracket the return of primitivist work, suggesting that the arbiters of culture and taste have tapped into something larger. Primitivist work is beginning to surface again, much like the recent manifestation of neo-goth or The Beautiful Losers, as classic alternative visual culture undoubtedly headed for institutionalization, however the primitivist work shoulders a deeply problematic history. Unlike neo-goth which has been authored as a nostalgic resurrection of 80s youth culture, primitivist work is immediately identified as the heir of the West's ongoing fascination with otherness, a practice that is anything but politically correct and one to be avoided. Consequently, stakes are high.

Our narrow concept of primitivism usually precludes any serious interest in the subject aside from disinterested academic research or remote guilty pleasure as such work reveals the tension between aestheticizing politics and politicizing aesthetics. Basically, the art world expects art to behave by supporting good politics that enable it to hone its role as social redeemer. We typically associate primitivist work with Pablo Picasso and his cooptation of African sculpture, wresting form from content in an effort to break from Western modes of representation. Or, we think of Paul Gauguin's South Pacific fiction equating nature with culture, where the natives exist somewhere between the sea and the gods. In the end, both examples are devalued as we insist on art as a question of morality. So how do we account for the current plethora of primitivist work in culture, from Mark Grotjahn's masks to Peter Jackson's *King Kong* to Animal Collective's campfire shamanism to the Others on *Lost*? Is this work merely complicit in perpetuating the West's obsession with otherness or does this work extend cultural questions posed by a misread primitivism?

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In *Prosthetic Gods* (2004), Hal Foster in exploring modernist concepts of aesthetic and subjective beginnings states, "Sometimes these beginnings are seen as primordial, and cast onto a distant field of primitive life; sometimes they are viewed as futuristic, and dreamt as a new form of technological being." If modernism can be divided roughly into two camps, the primitive and the modern, we have clearly placed our faith in the latter as the art world embraces work engaged in the utopian aspirations and technological sublime of early modernist abstraction. The triangle, square, and oval represent new possibilities of reconstituting culture, a zero degree from which culture is blown backwards into the future. But what about the looking back and searching elsewhere of primitivism?

Like modernist abstraction, primitivism is concerned with redefining art and subjectivity albeit through the appropriation of cultural alterity. Most primitivist work reveals an ambivalent relationship between the artist and subject as the artist experiences a partial identification with the subject, consequently displacing the idea of artistic domination. Foster claims that primitivist work, in fact, often pressures "a particular construction of white masculinity to the point of crisis." The artist's subjectivity fragments as he identifies with and resists identification with otherness. Again, Foster writes:

On the one hand, in primitivist discourse there is an explicit desire to break down the cultural oppositions of European and other (white repression and dark sexuality, culture and nature), as well as psychic oppositions held to underlie them (active and passive, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual), a desire that is very pronounced in Gauguin. On the other hand, there is a reactive insistence on these same oppositions, a revulsion at any such crossings over, a reaction that is very pronounced in Picasso. This contradiction cannot be resolved, because the primitivist seeks both to be *opened up to difference*—to be taken out of the self sexually, socially, racially—and to be *fixed in opposition to the other*—to be established once again, secured as a sovereign self.

The psychic fragmentation of the artist is mirrored by an aesthetic fragmentation and both are concerned with newness. The exhibition "Modern Primitivism" highlights the work of Katherine Bernhardt, Mark Grotjahn, Guyton/Walker, Jay Heikes, Evan Holloway, Chris Lipomi, William J. O'Brien, Anthony Pearson, and Chris Vasell, all of whom employ primitivist strategies in varying degrees from Heikes' silkscreened tribal tattoo pillows which strip the tribal tattoo motif of its ability to signify a life less ordinary by rendering it as mute design object to Pearson's solarized photographs of highly abstracted fires which use disintegration as a metaphor for psychic and aesthetic rebirth.

--Shane Campbell