



December/January 2009

Archaeology of the Future

By Alessandro Rabottini

So much art pours out of Los Angeles – the land of Hollywood and Mike Kelley, home to both Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Baldessari – that the accumulation of signs has become the hallmark of its exports. It is an art of convulsion and contradiction. Alessandro Rabottini introduces us to the work of Aaron Curry, who wasn't born in LA, but decided to move there from Texas. To tell a slightly different story, woven from the rubble of the avant-garde, unknown idols, folklore and tabloids. On the occasion of his current solo show at the Hammer Museum in LA.

Aaron Curry's sculptures and collages seem to come from a place that mankind has forgotten or hasn't yet discovered. In the work of this artist – born in 1972 in San Antonio, Texas, and now working in Los Angeles – certain relics of art history seem mingled with the debris of the media world, as if both – the avant-garde and pop culture – had exploded in the collision. His vaguely biomorphic shapes evoke totemic presences, as if they were examples of a tribal formalism anchored to a dark future. Ultimately, it isn't clear whether his work is the rubble of a vanished civilization or hints of an era yet to come, governed by a new magic and an ancient fear.

While his frequent use of stylized, organic silhouettes could bring to mind the surrealism of Max Ernst and Joan Miró, the sensuality and stiffness of certain fossilized natural forms, this is just the first in a long series of associations that are evoked by Curry's work. Actually, one could say that it is a fuse detonating a sense of time wrapped up in itself, and a sense of history as the archaeology of the future. Pablo Picasso and the tabloid press, abstract art and superstition, tribal art and science fiction: Aaron Curry spans all these references, taking a meditated, composed, elegant attitude towards form, in the sense that he is almost extraneous to that combinatorial frenzy, junkie-chic nonchalance, formalization of precious dross which can now be found almost everywhere, whether in Glasgow or Los Angeles, Berlin or London. His images seem the outcome of a slow, almost geological sedimentation of forms and styles, rather than the result of friction between solitude, consumption, and information.

While one of today's prevalent operating models, especially in sculpture, is a cut-and-paste approach that combines the psychology of web surfing with DIY aesthetics, attention deficits and schizophrenia, Aaron Curry's modus operandi instead reveals a sort of slow formulation and re-formulation of the same formal motifs, repeated over time and slowly developed through a progression of tiny variations. This is one of the linguistic aspects of his work that I find most interesting: a sort of obsessive repetition of a few formal patterns, especially wooden

shapes joined together into volumes where the two-dimensionality of the images – be they photographs harvested from media sources or abstract graphic, gestural marks – is always at the brink of three-dimensionality. Biomorphic shapes appear like inkblots hanging in the air, stiffened organic ghosts in fluorescent colours hover within a space drawn in Photoshop. Curry's work always contains this constant osmosis between the warmth of material like natural wood and the artificial slickness of industrial colours, between the memory of a hand-made object and the mass-produced, reproduced, broadcast image, between tribal art and the world of consumption. And osmosis it is, because Curry's art may be an art of movement – a slow movement that makes shapes flow together, like a long natural germination of appearances – but is not an art of acceleration, let alone rupture. It is an art based on the sedimentation of geological eras and of rubbish, and an art made for a world where fearsome deities haunt the ruins of a shopping center.

In his recent solo show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, for example, Aaron Curry presented a selection of sculptures that primarily featured quite a limited range of colours and materials: white, black, grey, silver, wood, metal. As is often the case in his installations, some sculptures loom over the space like the mute totems of a mysterious cult, while other more elementary shapes are simply propped against the walls. The exhibit is yet another step in the path of this artist, who in just a few years has shifted from compositions dominated by bold, artificial colours – characterized above all by the inclusion of images from the world of science fiction, classical archaeology and popular magazines – to a use of a wooden structure presented in all its rawness as a pure material, up to his most recent pieces featuring a monochromatic colour scheme, almost always black or white. And especially nowadays, at a time when many artists are working in a variety of different media, moving through the worlds of production and information with a concept-based attitude that engenders diverse approaches to the specific nature of languages, constantly reinventing the rules of the moving image, of publishing and of the exhibit format, Curry's operating method – his flair for formal reiteration, this sort of expressive solitude – is fairly unique, unless one thinks of artists like Tomma Abts and Mark Grotjahn, whose unique, divergent practices seem rooted in a tradition of infinite modulation that invokes both Giorgio Morandi and Barnett Newman.

One recurring motif in Curry's slow, steady modulation of forms, for example, is pattern. In his 2008 exhibit at Daniel Buchholz's gallery in Cologne, some pieces made conceptual references to a camouflage technique employed in the First World War, "razzledazzle". This technique relied on patchwork of abstract, Modernist inspired shapes to create an optical surface that made military vehicles difficult to single out; not, as one might think, through a strategy of discretion, but through a paradoxical form of mimesis based on geometry, contrasts of light and shadow, and clashing shapes. In other pieces – collected under the title "Pixelator" – the surfaces are instead saturated by a close-knit checkerboard pattern of black and white, always created with spray paint, as if the digital skin of the images had been examined with a microscope and expanded into an optical rendering of its makeup.



Aaron Curry, *Untitled*, 2007 - courtesy David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, photo: Fredrik Nilsen

Finally, in many collages, photographic reproductions of Greco-Roman busts are layered over with thick swaths of colour, gestural marks that partially mask their features. In all of these instances, Curry seems to be trying to combine elements of a grammar of concealment and hidden identity, secrecy and ambiguity, not just in the way he turns surfaces into optical patterns, but above all by infusing the very language of sculpture with multiple elements that are two-dimensional, painted or rooted in the technique of collage. Our knowledge of past civilizations is based on infinite artifacts that are more apt to be misinterpreted and romanticized than deeply understood, and Aaron Curry seems to anticipate this fate, projecting it onto both the history of a certain avant-garde and onto contemporary Western culture, especially American culture. All

civilizations have difficulty thinking of themselves as slated to undergo a capricious form of historical reduction, because civilizations are like people; they have an inherent incapacity to conceive of their own mortality, or to see their cultural products as debris. Aaron Curry's artwork may be about precisely this: how pageantries and monuments are destined to become waste.