

Griffin, Jonathan, "Aaron Curry," *Christie's*, May-June 2014, pp. 48-53



Photography by Kyle Alexander

The Artist

AARON CURRY

The art of Los Angeles-based Aaron Curry is infused with references from Modernism to Pixar animations and tattoo designs inspired by H.R. Giger. He talks in his studio to Jonathan Griffin about discovering his identity as an artist

The Artist



When Alexander Calder began making monumental steel 'stabiles' in the late 1950s, he developed a distinctive technique for signing them: a welded 'AC', applied to the face of the sheet metal. For Calder, it was a logo of sorts, and an integral part of the sculpture: a reminder that these complicated constructions originated in drawing – from one man's hand.

Aaron Curry, who shares Calder's initials, has been using variants of this welded signature for several years, not only in his own colourfully painted aluminium sculptures – such as those that crowded Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, at the end of last year – but also inscribed onto his collages, paintings, reliefs and sculptures in wood and cardboard. Curry is a poacher and a fetishist. He self-deprecatingly describes himself as 'nerdy', a mild term for his devotion to the achievements of certain canonical artists, mostly Modernists working between the 1930s and '70s.

The 42-year old artist is no young fogey, however. Having grown up as a skateboarder in San Antonio, Texas, and now living in Los Angeles, Curry is as likely to pull from Pixar animations, heavy metal album covers, cable television sitcoms or superhero comic books as he is from the mid-century sculptures of Isamu Noguchi or David Smith.

'Most artists are embarrassed by their references,' the softly-spoken Curry tells me in his light-filled studio in Beachwood Canyon, beneath the Hollywood sign. Not him. 'As a young artist you can make something that looks like work by another artist you really love, but until you totally embrace that idea, you don't get past it and get to yourself.' This dilemma is one that faces all highly educated, professionally savvy graduate artists these days. We live in an era in which practically any genre of art-making is valid, and all influences are up for grabs – the more obscure, the better. There is no sense of a patrimonial lineage in contemporary art, nor a dominant idea of what a contemporary artwork should look like. Is it possible – or even desirable – to construct one's artistic identity without reaching into the grab-bag of the past? An overwhelming majority of artists would say not.

The irony is that, through his brazen and wide-ranging quotations, Curry has developed a body of work that is coherent and utterly distinctive, as a ten-year survey of his work at CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux this June will demonstrate. Certain things have remained consistent: a luminous, eye-popping colour palette; sculptures created from interlocking flat planes, cut from wood, card or aluminium; melting shapes reminiscent of Dali, Miró or Matta; a baggy line that evokes the Primitivist, de-skilled hands of Picasso and Dubuffet but also the shaky effect produced by drawing with a mouse in Photoshop.

The Bordeaux exhibition, Curry's largest to date, is more than a little scary, he admits. 'As an artist, you're always trying to make the next work better than the one before.' Looking back at old work is, therefore, either uncomfortable for him because it is inferior to his more recent work, or uncomfortable for the opposite reason – because it is not, which means he has failed. The show is titled *Bad Brain*: 'I wanted to call it *Shit Brain*,' he says, 'but they weren't into it.'

As effortlessly assured as his art may seem, the fiercely ambitious Curry evidently holds himself to a high standard. Stasis is unacceptable. 'I'm not thinking, "Does this look like an Aaron Curry?"' he says. 'I really try to make things that I want to see. I'm my own critic and I'm my own biggest fan. I want to make something that's really exciting.' He likens his approach to art to the feeling he had when, as a teenage musician, his mind was blown by bands such as Nirvana or My Bloody Valentine who changed the course of musical history: 'What do I do next? How do I make something better than that?' Historical appropriation, in contemporary art, has rarely been so blatantly about being in competition with the past.

Indeed, there is something excessive about most of Curry's art. It is Modernism turned up to eleven, Modernism-Max: over-caffeinated, and packed with artificial sweeteners, preservatives and other chemical additives. He attributes his fondness for neon colours to skateboard graphics from the early '90s, and to the influence of Pop painters such as Peter Saul and the Chicago Imagist Barbara Rossi, who taught at the

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School of the Art Institute of Chicago where Curry studied as an undergrad. These artists revel in the grotesque and the gauche, mixing high and low in a way that was transgressive in the late-1960s and '70s but which today is second-nature to Curry. Mike Kelley and Richard Hawkins, who later taught Curry at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, also impressed on him the importance of digging through popular culture's darkest and most insanitary corners for subjects ripe for art.

In a number of recent exhibitions he has created total environments so, as he says, 'you lose a sense of where the wall starts.' Most recently in a 2012 exhibition at Michael Werner Gallery, New York, and in 2013 at Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels, Curry has silkscreened wallpaper that covered not only the walls (and, at Werner, the floor and ceiling) but also some of the sculptures and collages installed against them. The first time Curry tried this was in a 2010 exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; there, the screen-printed wallpaper bore a pattern of water droplets – synonymous, especially in advertising, with pristine freshness. Three years later at Almine Rech, the wallpaper was based on repellent images of wrinkled skin and hair, photographed close-up. The show was titled 'NEWDZ AND NEW GODZ', and derived, according to the artist, from Hollywood's fetishization of the juvenile body – 'surgery returning us all to being kids,' as Curry puts it.

Despite being so enamoured with art history, Curry conspicuously returns to themes of newness, youth and futurity. 'But it's not about making old stuff new,' he says. 'For me, that's not interesting. I love old art because it's solid work and it speaks to us today.' The strategy of borrowing from the past is not his innovation either, he notes. Far from it. Post-modernism is now itself historicized. Neo-Geo painters were looking back at Mondrian and Picasso in the 1980s, and even in the 1930s Disney animators were recycling German Renaissance painters like Matthias Grünewald. 'It seems just really natural to me. That's the way I have to do things,' Curry says.

In his studio, several large canvases are propped against the walls. Curry is preparing for an exhibition at Michael Werner Gallery, London, which opens in June, the same month as his Bordeaux survey. Although his collages and sculptures have often contained painted elements – from trompe l'oeil water droplets to airbrushed, graffiti-like scribbles – he has never before in his adult career made paintings just with paint on canvas. Executed in flat, intensely pigmented acrylic gouache, these new paintings retain Curry's collagist sensibility: highly finished areas (some done with an airbrush)

contrast with fields of roughly slapped-on brushwork. Though mostly abstract, occasional figurative elements – such as a revolting, curled tongue – emerge from the mire. 'I wanted it to feel like I'd just put it down in Photoshop,' he says.

His source material litters the studio floor, in books and on torn pieces of paper. He picks up a book of paintings by Francis Picabia. 'This painting has been in my head for the last ten years,' he says, pointing to an off-kilter abstraction from 1947. 'I want to make that painting, but I don't want to make that painting.' I suggest that certain of Curry's biomechanic forms are reminiscent of the aesthetic of H.R. Giger; Curry answers that they're not taken from Giger per se, but from tattoo designs inspired by Geiger. He picks up a picture of one such tattoo – over a woman's entire neck – and holds it against a reproduction of a cubist painting by Juan Gris. The similarity is striking.

It is worth noting, here, that Curry paints these technically accomplished pictures entirely by hand. In his Beachwood studio, he works alone. In another, larger studio to the east of the city, where he does his wood- and metalwork, he has assistants who help him with silk-screening and with sanding the edges of his wooden sculptures. Aside from the fabrication of large aluminium works, the rest he does himself. This is partly down to his infatuation with the processes of production – one gets a strong sense, when looking at Curry's art, that it was a lot of fun to make. But more importantly, it is a philosophical position. All these 'nerdy' references, all these aesthetic precedents and influences are, today, available to anyone with a broadband connection whether they live in Hollywood or rural Texas. It is only the vessel of Curry's body, and the unique filter of his experiences, that enable him to produce his singular art.

One painting bears a large letter A, smoothly shaded to look blobby and three-dimensional. Curry observes that, as well as Calder, Picabia also used his signature as a compositional device. Van Gogh too – most famously in his later 'Sunflowers' paintings, where he painted 'Vincent' to follow the curve of the vase. 'He's saying "I painted this" but also that "I'm in the image, somehow,"' Curry says, momentarily overcome by Van Gogh's presence. 'He was so smart, so conceptual.'

'Bad Brain' is at CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux from 26 June to 14 September.
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