

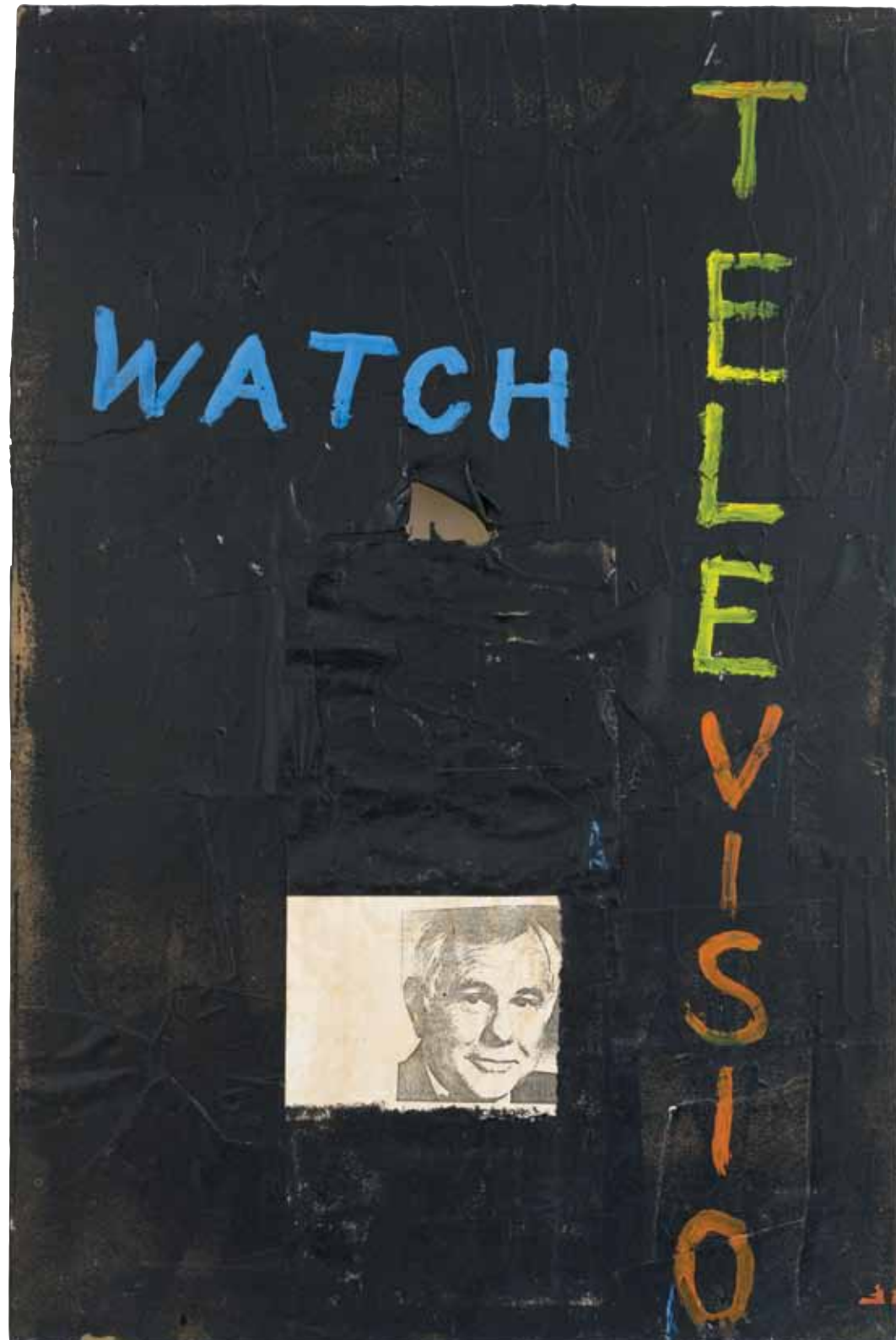
Pressed Release

**Notes on
Mark Flood's
Hateful Years**

1979-1989

LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN

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Resist Much, Obey Little

Alison Gingeras

To the States or any one of them, or any city of the States,
Resist much, obey little,
Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,
Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth,
ever afterward resumes its liberty.

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Walt Whitman's oft-quoted call to disorder in his poem "To the States" was written amid the turbulence of 1860—on the eve of Abraham Lincoln's election and with reference to the brewing Civil War. More than a century on, Whitman's provocative supplication resonates well beyond its original context to the present American condition. With its eloquent yet economic poetry, its urgent goading and empowerment of individual agency, this verse perfectly encapsulates the work of Mark Flood.

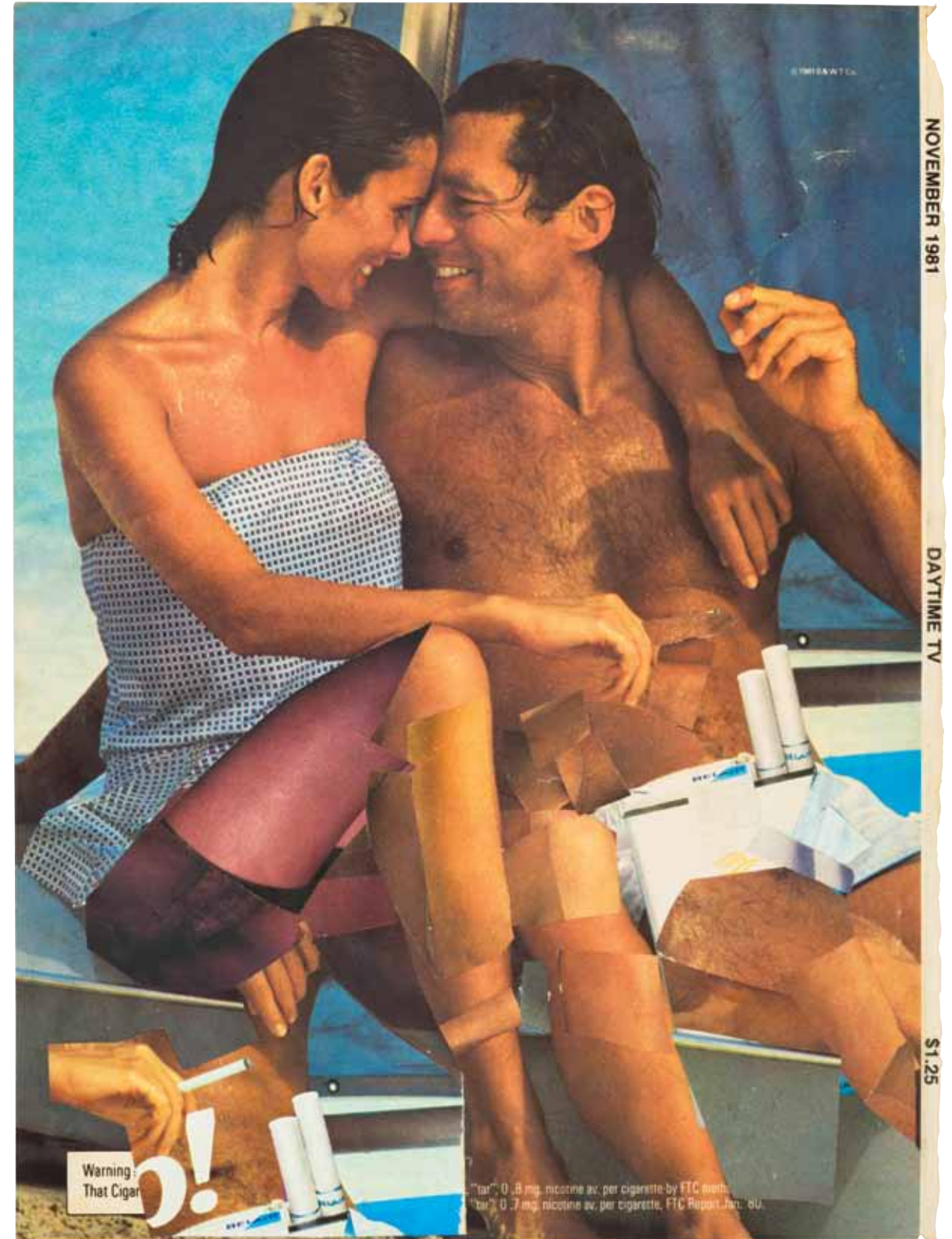
Flood is a profoundly disobedient artist whose work continuously questions American enslavement to mass media, marketing, and

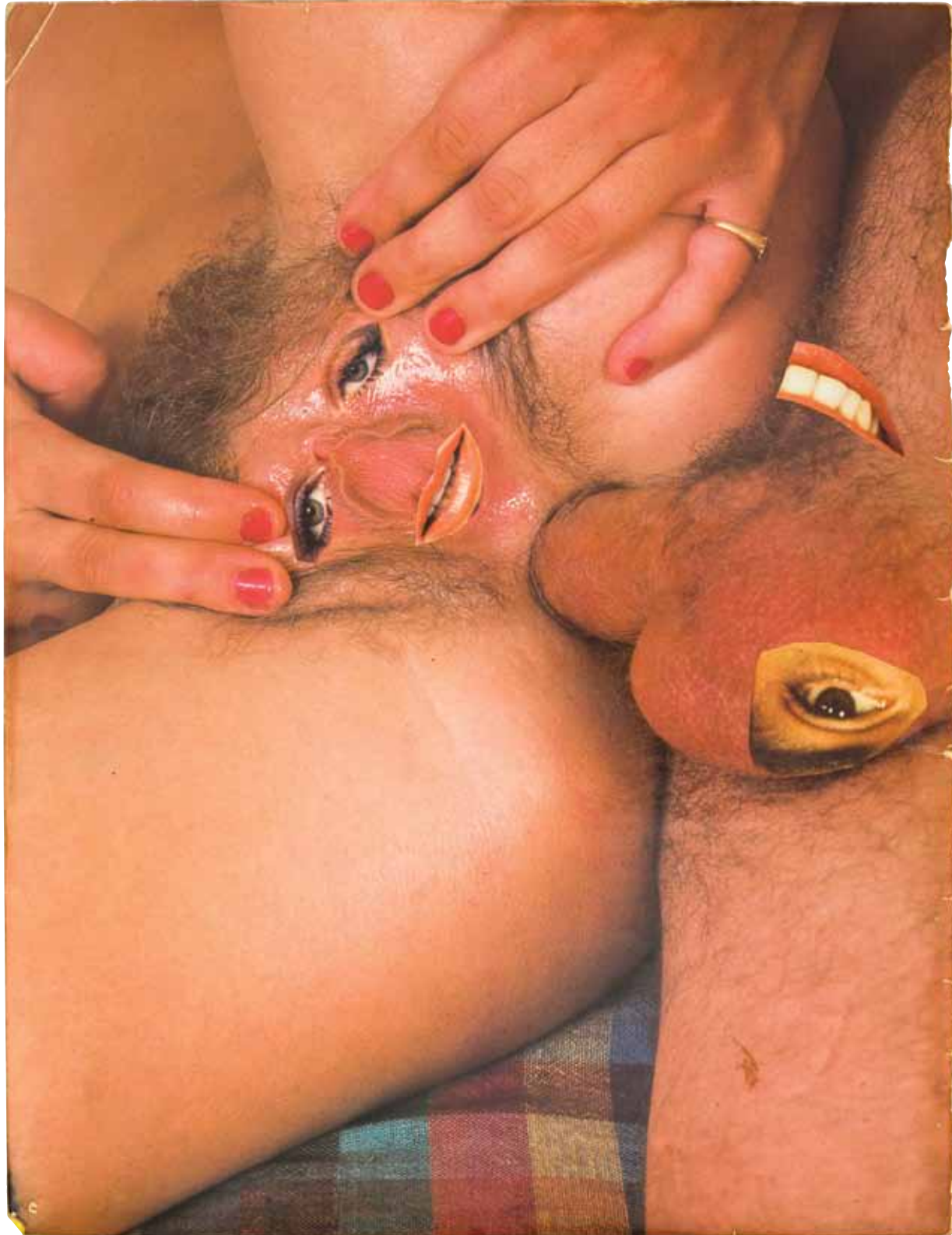
celebrity culture. Unsung in mainstream contemporary-art circles, he has been working in relative obscurity since the late 1970s in his native Houston. He has long occupied the role of an “artist’s artist”—an insider’s secret for those who had encountered his work as a visual artist or knew of his punk band, Culturcide.

Flood’s work salvages the relics of abandoned mass culture from the dustbin of obsolescence. He transforms celebrity faces into grotesque caricature through collage; he strips product and advertising images of their commercial identities; he introduces disturbing interventions into found amateur paintings; he spray-paints perverse commandments across text works. He compels us to contemplate the material detritus that nearly always follows ubiquity, but his work is not just a collection of appropriative gestures. Through his examination of the vapor trails of culturally exsanguinated people, places, and objects, Flood takes the measure of cultural waste.



From Culturcide’s signature deadpan lyrics sung directly over mainstream pop songs to his own elaborately collaged “muted” magazine advertisements, Flood has pioneered a very specific brand of cultural appropriation since the late 1970s. Working parallel to the Pictures Generation artists—though not in direct dialogue with them—Flood critically yet humorously lampooned our collective enslavement to consumerism and spotlighted our unwavering dedication to the entertainment industrial complex.





While so-called appropriation artists such as Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Sherrie Levine cast a cold, detached gaze on their “stolen” Pop material, Flood’s use of purloined images always seems to project something hot and inflammatory, a pulsing mutation of things that are at once familiar and foreign. While there are several striking iconographic and thematic overlaps with these New York Pictures artists (Marlboro Men, pornography, etc.), Flood’s work telegraphs a decidedly different tone that is as often punctuated by an acerbic wit as it is by the artist’s concurrent protestation and affection toward his subjects.

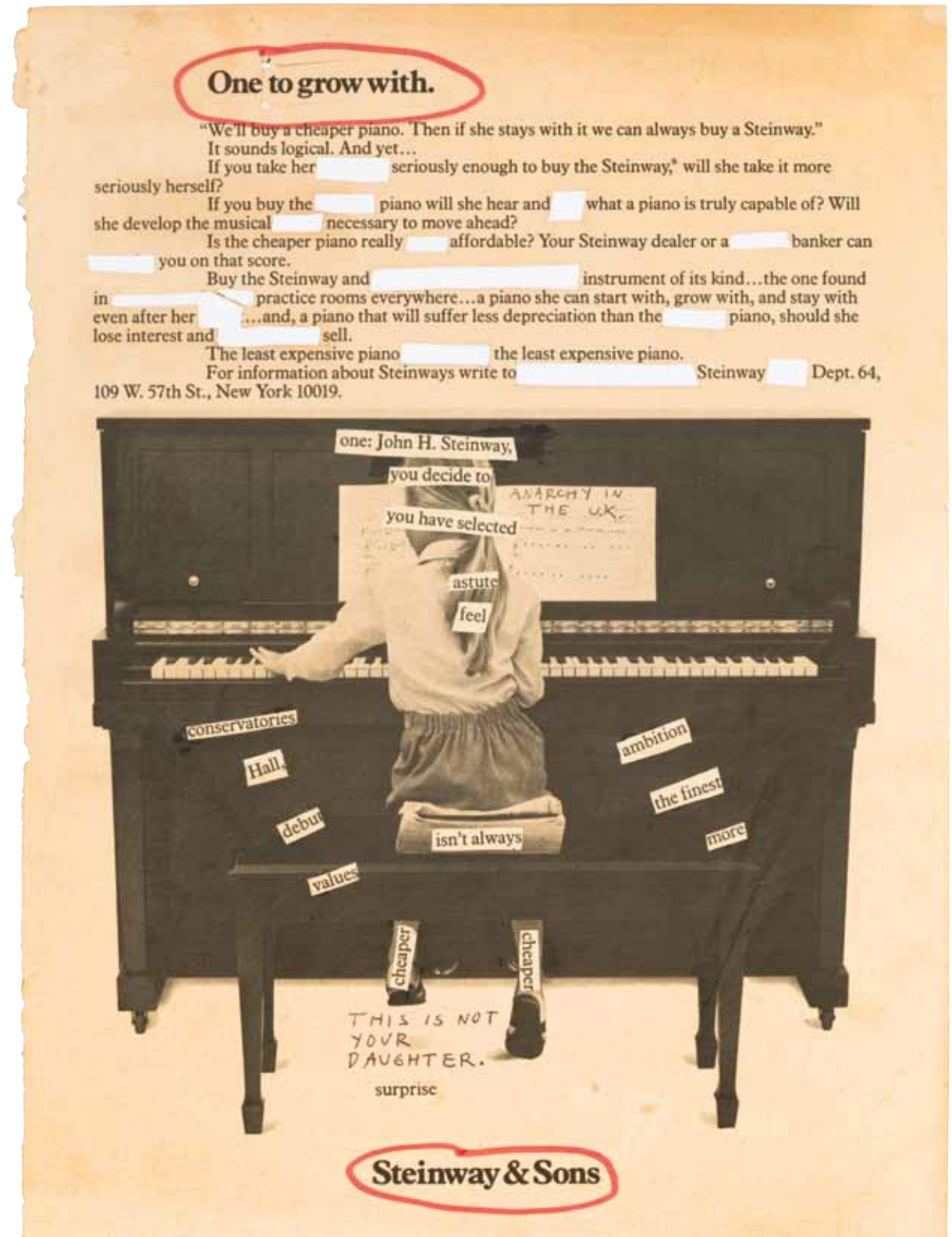


Further distinguishing Flood from his contemporaries, his acts of image confiscation function without the crutch of ironic distance. Like the pioneers of avant-garde photomontage, George Grosz, Hannah Höch, and John Heartfield, Flood seizes on the allegorical potential of collage as a political and aesthetic technique. While the largely self-taught Flood himself traces the inspirational source of his collage techniques to the cut-up, text-based work of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, it is art-historically irresistible to

juxtapose his work with the earlier agitprop montages of these Weimar artists. Berlin Dada and Texas punk are transhistorically aligned in the procedures of superimposition, fragmentation, and deformation. Consider Flood's allegorical deconstruction of the ideology behind corporate communications. His *Survive* (1981)—a collage that layers a photograph of a genocidal mass grave on top



of the Philip Morris advertorial for its corporate underwriting of the Guggenheim Museum's German Expressionism show—directly echoes the conceptual and aesthetic strategies in Heartfield's oeuvre. As in Heartfield's iconic denunciation of Fascist propaganda *Hurrah, die Butter ist alle!* (1935), Flood too pirates the very visual constructs of corporate communications and uses this language against itself without recourse to irony. This use of Heartfieldian paradigm is all the more compelling when considered under the specific political and cultural conditions in which Flood was working. These "Hateful Years"—what Flood has termed the 1980s because of its Cold War paranoia, its reactionary cultural agenda, and its laissez-faire policies under Reaganomics—were rife with repressive cultural and economic conditions. Despite the Culture Wars that were raging (with Jesse Helms, the attempts to abolish the NEA, and the rise of the Religious





Right), Flood was able to assert his powerful critiques of these Hateful Years under the censors' radar—echoing George Grosz's assertion about the advantage of collage being able to “speak publicly with hidden meaning.”¹

While this agitprop legacy is in play in many of his early works, Flood's unique position is perhaps most evident in his extreme yet precise ambivalence toward his subject matter. Far from a pure negationist, Flood seems to lay out his inner conflicts in his most compelling works. Whether disfiguring a handsome porn model's face and genitalia (*Three-faced Male Nude*, 1985) or painting over the recognizable logos from consumer products (*Muted Coke Bottle*, 1983), he oscillates between adoration of and criticality toward his subjects. In each of these examples, he allows the original object to retain some of its seductive Pop aura while simultaneously introducing elements that disturb, distort, or repel. He brackets the mechanisms of mass culture—muting the branding, rearranging the typography, and other ploys of advertising or exploitation (as in the case of the porn works)—while highlighting isolated elements or snippets of cultural iconography that he deems worthy of salvaging from the endless cycle of consumption and waste. Flood's own ponderings on the humble Coke bottle are instructive. Writing under another pseudonym, “Clark Flood” states:

Back in H-town, I concluded that the same rules applied. I perceived that the green fluted Coke bottle, from which I daily chugged, embodied the multiplicitous soul of the USA; hard, grotesquely beautiful and menacing; sometimes full of a pseudo-nutritional, purely symbolic, foaming black bile of a capitalist product; sometimes empty, like our religion, our political platforms and our civic life. The Coke bottle was us; and when all that was left of us was an endless field of broken Coke bottles, some future consciousness would catch our reflection there, gleaming off the jagged fragments of green fluted glass.²

As if heeding Whitman's plea, Flood *resists much* (of corporate brainwashing,) and *obeys little* (of any system's rules). Yet as the pure visual force and pre-Photoshop virtuosity of his collage work attests, if there is anything Flood cannot manage to resist, it is the allure of art itself. He obeys only his need to make transformative art.

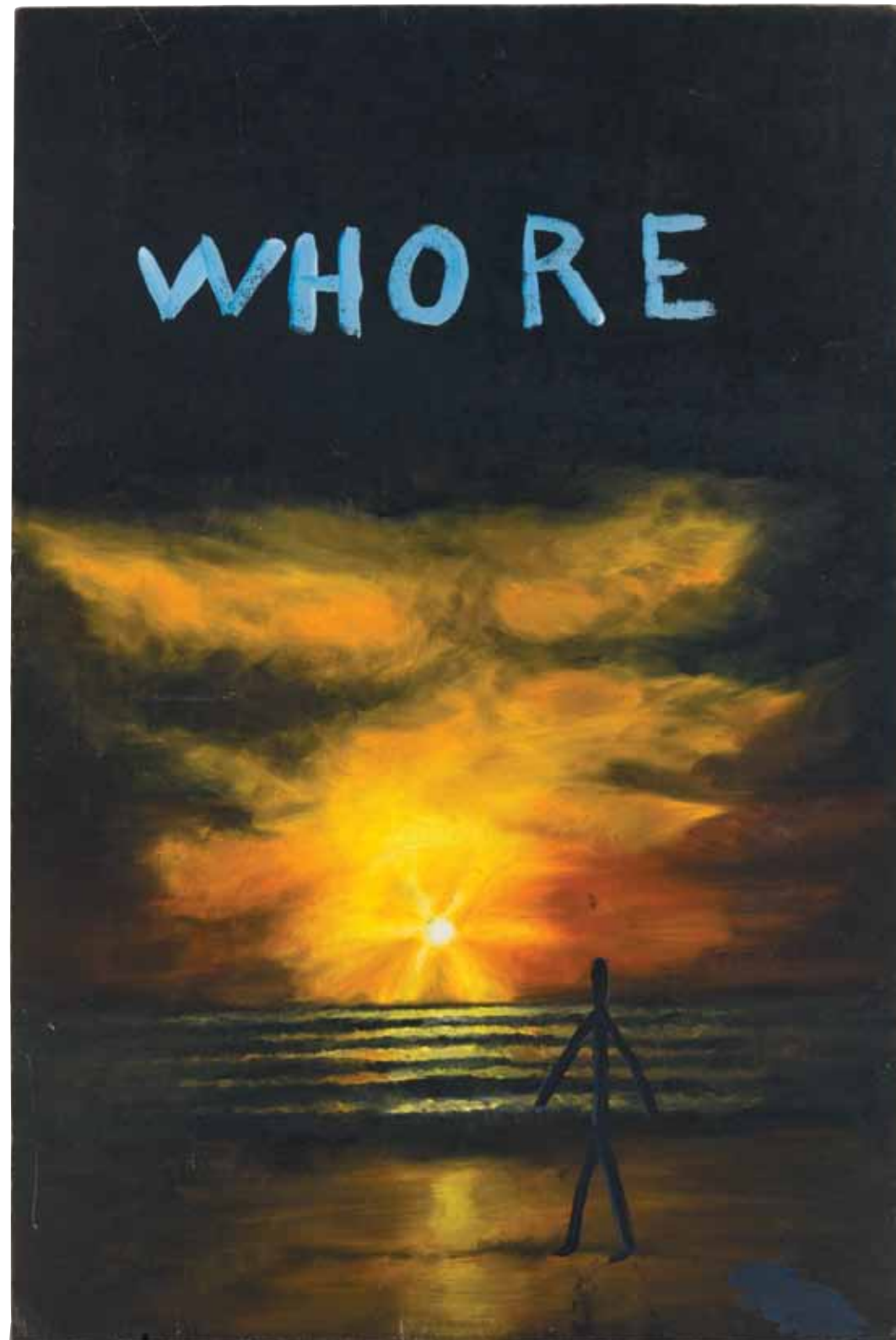
It is not without reason that exploitation, capital, and commercial culture are constant themes in Flood's early works. As a young artist and musician (he founded Culturcide in 1979 under the alias Perry Webb), he held down numerous day jobs in Houston. Most notably he worked as a file clerk for the oil giant Texaco from 1981 to 1985. Left alone in a storage facility with 17,000 boxes, Flood "ransacked all their files" and often pilfered office supplies for his work (manila folders, tape, letterhead).³ One such work that featured repurposed office supplies, *Service Your Master* (1981), features an artfully butchered MasterCard advertisement that incites the viewer to apply for a card and then submit to the bondage of debt. These day-jobbing years at Texaco provided ample fodder for Flood to contemplate the power relationship between workers and corporate employer. Again writing as Clark Flood, he reflects on the economic and class traps of the average American:

We indicated our sinister achronicity by carelessly exhibiting and indifferently discarding millions of craven pitches, plugs and notices; our time dissolved into a murky puddle of perpetual present, perfect for compulsive shopping, and resigned wage-slavery.⁴

The experience of "wage-slavery" is further explored in Flood's series of "Hierarchy" paintings. Made in a deliberately deskilled manner and infused with a punk aesthetic, simplistic stick figures painted on monochromatic backgrounds, sometimes with elements of collage, are meant to diagram corporate/worker power relations. Works with titles such as *Self Portrait with Texaco ID* (ca. 1986), *Job?* (ca. 1986), and *Manager* (1986) humorously reduce the ideology behind the American Dream to schematic drawings. Made in a communal house dubbed "Vexworld" that Flood shared with like-minded Houston musicians (also with day jobs), these early paintings express the Texaco years' lesson: hard work does not necessarily "pay off" into social mobility, material reward, or spiritual redemption.

The Vexworld environment also fostered other irreverent meditations on the American condition. In his "Idols," "Monsters," and "Stick Figure" paintings, Flood uses amateur, anonymously painted canvases bought in thrift stores as his background supports. Not only did these canvases provide inexpensive, "punk" materiality, these works are





acts of recuperation that allowed a direct conduit to issues of class and taste. Flood puts high and low on a crash course. One could extrapolate from art historian Julian Stallabrass's reflections on Jim Shaw's collection of "Thrift Store Paintings" (1990) to the class politics at play in Flood's vintage painting series:

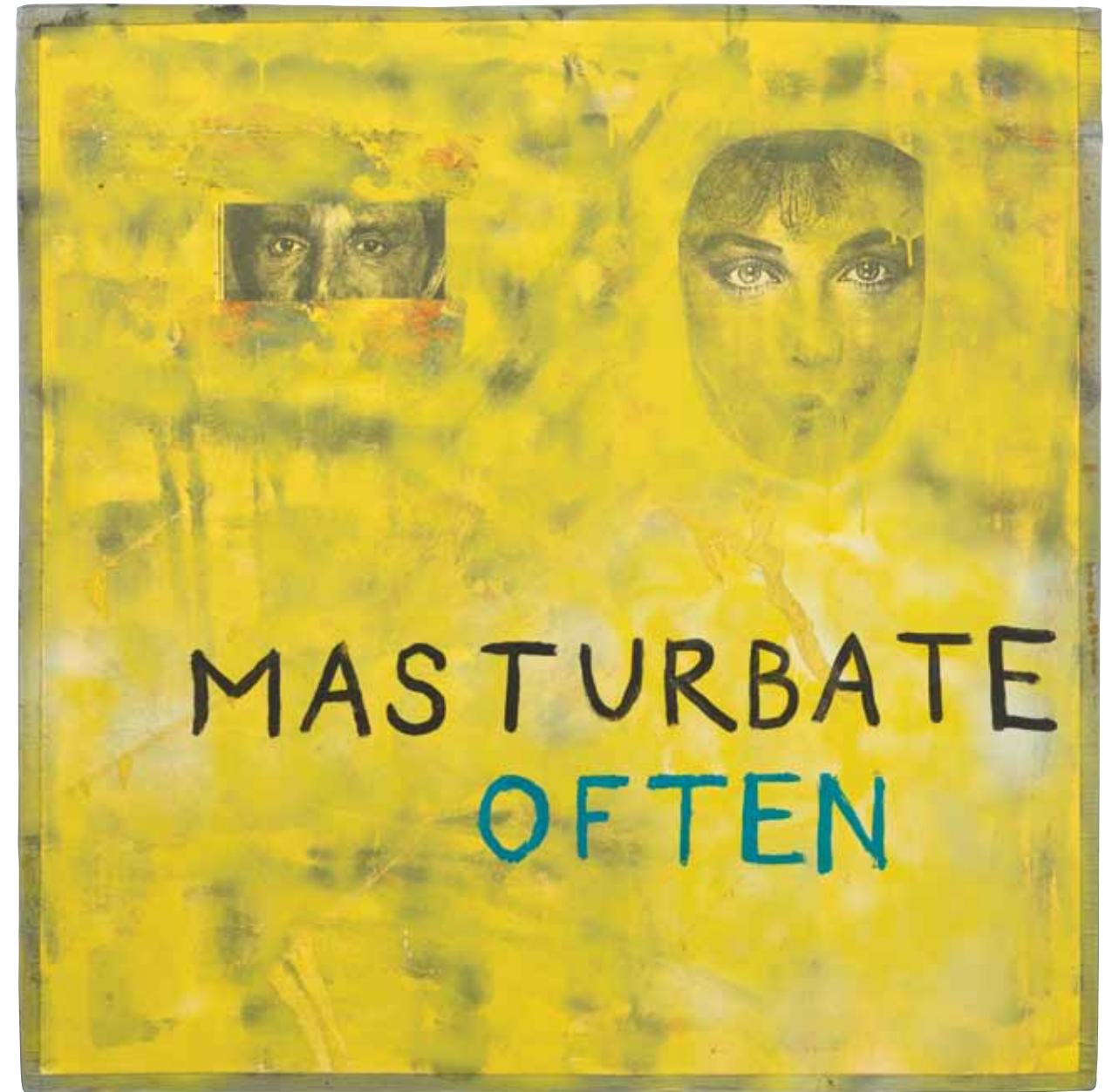


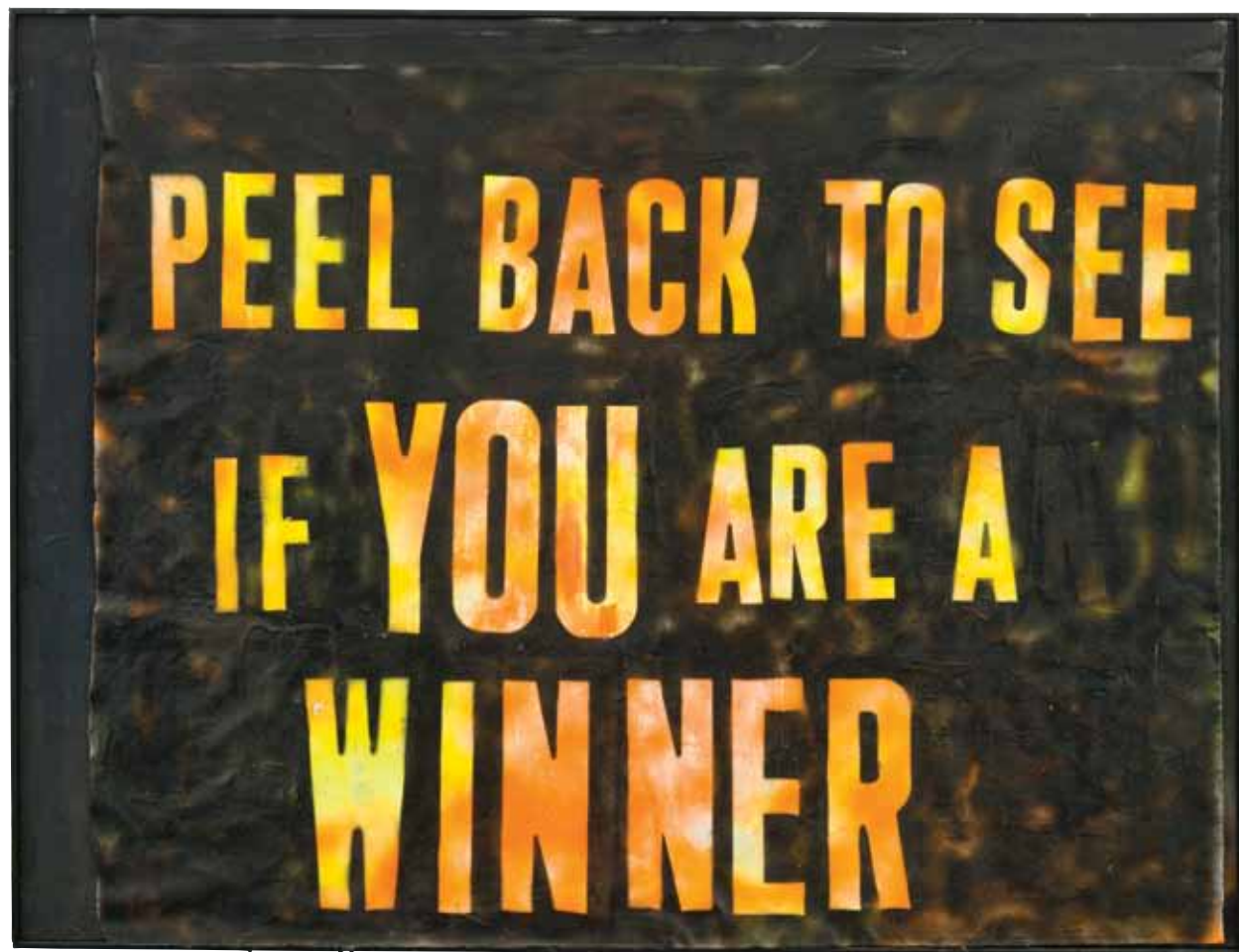
Visitors will treat these fetishes of the popular psyche with amazement, condescension and amusement. Those who believe that the division between "high" and "low" culture has been disposed of in an egalitarian, postmodern compact might take heed of this show which functions by bringing the two poles into contact, offering those who have scaled the cultural heights a thrilling glimpse into the abyss of the average.⁵

This "abyss of the average" is the very subject of a stick-figure painting in which Flood paints the word WHORE over the top of a kitsch beach landscape with a blazing sunset; a lone stick figure rendered in thick black paint is inserted in the foreground. If these anonymously authored paintings are the expression of a Sunday painter's utopic dreams and hopes, Flood seizes on these aspirational canvases as a vehicle to reflect the more pessimistic "reality" of our collective

situation. His “whore” is an Everyman, a member of the masses emaciated to a simple line drawing—enslaved to debt and media-generated desire. Prefiguring Shaw’s “Thrift Store Paintings” by nearly a decade, Flood’s found-painting works are astonishing in their incisive transformation of these populist, folk art relics into a seething vehicle to probe the American psyche and experience. As Stallabrass further reflects, “Many of these [thrift-store] pictures demonstrate a simple yet self-conscious utopian yearning for common pleasures unsullied by the demands of mundane, laboring, administered life.”⁶ If Flood was making these works to escape his own weekday toil and everyday pressures, one could only imagine the living hell that he channeled into these dystopic relics of Americana.

Not only the American condition was in Flood’s crosshairs during this period; his early works equally targeted the art world itself. His word paintings ridicule the legacy of text-heavy conceptual art while lampooning the authoritative, coercive language of advertising. Using spray paint on board with the occasional collage flourish, his “Text” paintings issue commandments such as WATCH TELEVISION, FUCK THE ECONOMY, DRINK BLOOD, and MASTURBATE OFTEN. On a certain level, his works could be classified alongside Barbara Kruger’s stock photographic images emblazoned with such commandments as I SHOP THEREFORE I AM (1987) or Jenny Holzer’s aphoristic *Truisms* (1977-79), statements printed on posters wheat-pasted around buildings with sayings such as ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE. Though Flood’s work deviates from the didactic, overtly critical intentions motivating Kruger and Holzer’s work, he proposes a darker vision much more difficult to recuperate as having a socially redemptive message. An anecdote from Flood’s *Hateful Years in Houston* is a case in point. The black monochrome *Eat Human Flesh* (1989) was hanging over the couch of some friends—“drug dealers with advanced taste in art.”⁷ As it happened, the work was visible from the front of the house, and the work became cause for more alarm as the Houston Police had been watching the house for illegal activity. When the drug bust finally went down, the painting—not the alleged small-time drug deals—became the focal point of a media circus. Flood’s directive spray-painted on the work’s surface was connected by the media to an incident of cannibalism by members of a Santería cult in a nearby border town. News crews from all the major TV network affiliates—serendipitously echoing Flood’s earlier canvas *I Obey* (1979)—busted through the





door of the house in a frenzy of tabloid “reporting.” Some days later Flood found himself interviewed with the subtitle “satanic artist,” and his tableau was quickly immortalized as a fixture in a “satanic ritual abuse” news loop that played throughout the late ’80s whenever suspicious cult-like activity was reported.

While this amusing tale of Flood’s early brush with infamy demonstrates the contrast between his dubious text messaging and more politically correct examples à la Holzer and Kruger, it also precisely belies the artistic and conceptual position that he occupies. Simultaneously a cynic and a believer, Flood makes work that may seem familiar because of its mass-culture subject matter. But his oeuvre is inimitable because of its irreverent, independent political and aesthetic edge. His work’s power comes from the unstable meanings it generates—epitomized by the *Eat Human Flesh* episode. It is all the more astounding to consider the way Flood worked and developed such dense bodies of work autonomously (outside of the reach of the New York cognoscenti) while also foreshadowing many of the themes and visual strategies used by the current generation of contemporary artists, such as Nate Lowman, Joe Bradley, Josh Smith, and Dan Colen. Flood’s legacy is active in the current production of these younger artists who have “discovered” and lionized his work in private circles over the last few years. Looking closely at his oeuvre with more than two decades’ hindsight, Flood transcends his cult status as an outsider or punk artist. His *Hateful Years* reveal a singular figure that commands broader consideration. Having resisted the culture industry and disobeyed aesthetic orthodoxies for years, Flood is himself irresistible because of his unwavering faith in the power of art.

NOTES

1. George Grosz, quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Kunst und Antikunst* (Cologne: Dumont, 1963). English translation from Dawn Ades, *Photomontage* (New York: Phaidon, 1976), 10.
2. Clark Flood, “#21. At the Cinema,” in *Clerk Fluid* (2009), 288.
3. Mark Flood, email message to author, June 14, 2012.
4. Clark Flood, “#21. At the Cinema,” 290.
5. Julian Stallabrass, “Jim Shaw’s ‘Thrift Store Paintings,’ ICA,” *New Statesman* 16 (October 2000): 42-43.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Mark Flood, email message to author.



Us Weakly

Alissa Bennett

One of the primary themes in Mark Flood's work is America's fetishization of newness and the attendant demand for a rapidly cycling supply of disposable cultural goods. Flood's collages of celebrity faces propose that the ephemera littering our streets and fluttering in our recycle bins are, in fact, our most salient and inviolable historical artifacts. In a series that both debases and celebrates the plastic visages of outdated crooners and abandoned screen idols, Flood asks us to reconsider the jettisoned relics of our recent past. The uncanny familiarity of these works reminds us that our Rome is built on a foundation of *Star* and *Tiger Beat* magazines.

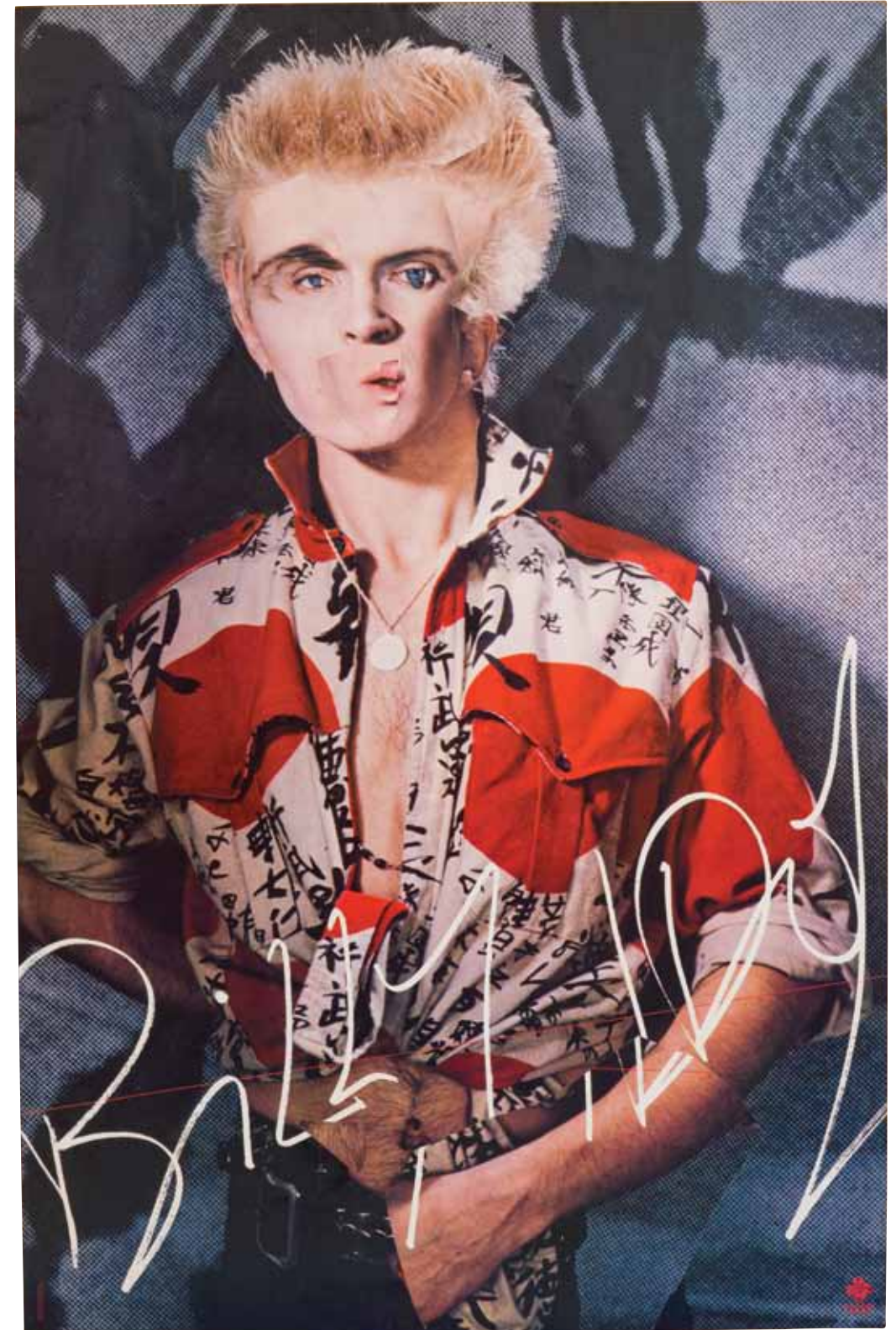
Because popular culture loops in a constant state of self-perpetuated obsolescence and reinvention, Flood's celebrities typically come to us in incarnations that are slightly outdated, aesthetically stale, and vaguely embarrassing. Though an unaltered version of Flood's Don Johnson poster remains trapped in a constant *Miami Vice* rerun without the possibility of reprieve, the artist's cut-and-paste intervention has refashioned the actor's face into a post-surgical nightmare laden with the promises of unexplored theatrical terrain. Though his hair, sunglasses, and holster remain intact, our interest

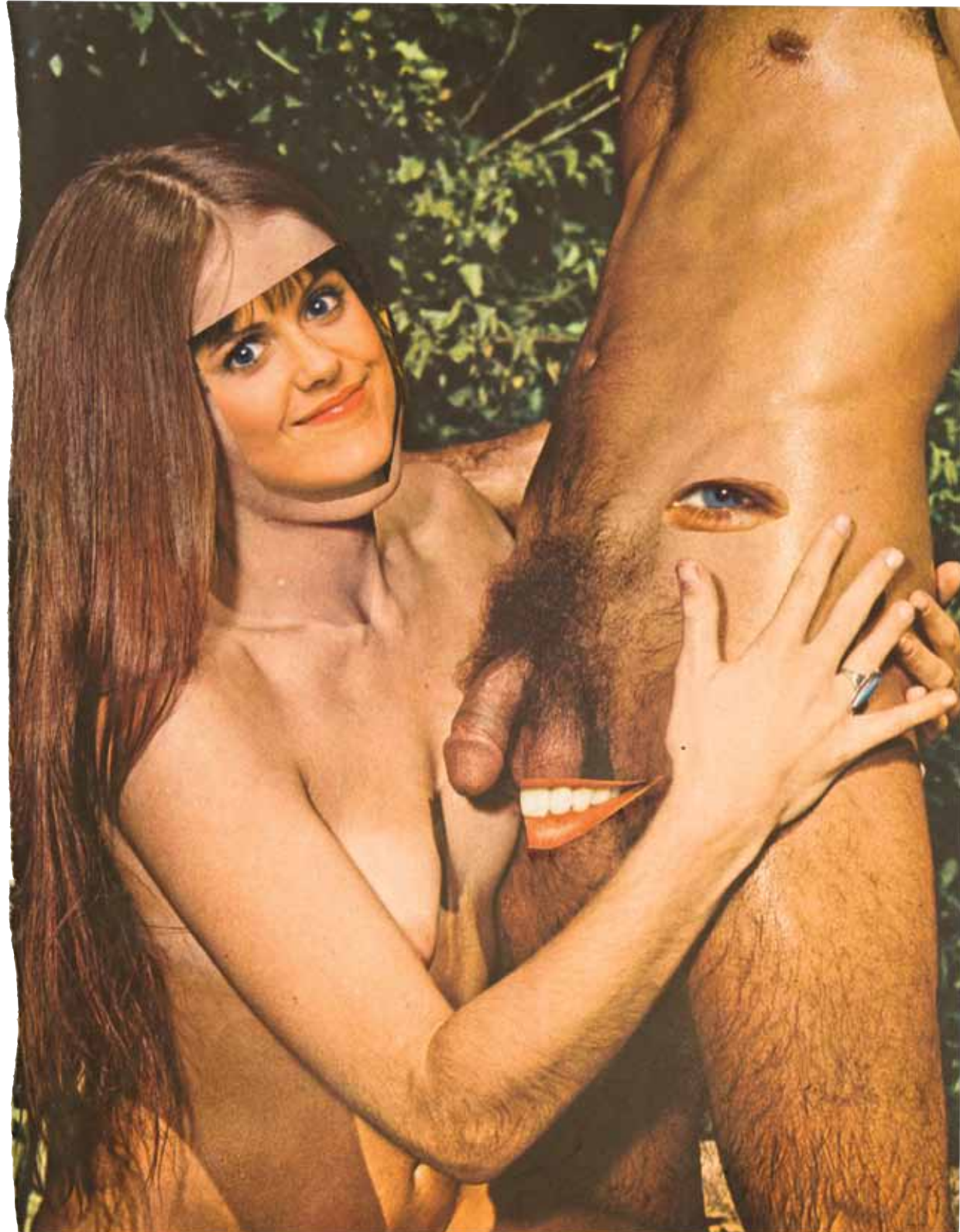
is reinvigorated courtesy of a freshly applied graft that stretches waxy scar tissue from the actor's forehead to the distant curve of an exaggerated lantern jaw. In a gesture that apes the heterosexual conventions that determined the tenor of the original image, this mottled expanse of face ignores all laws of physiognomic contour, save for a central column of ropey phallic veins that concludes with a cigarette dangling from a puckered flesh hole. "Do you love me again?" this version of Don asks us. "I did this for you!"

Executed before the Internet granted unfettered access to images and the technology to reproduce them ad infinitum, Flood's celebrity collages required several duplicate posters as their source material, a critical detail in our understanding of their conceptual function. Unlike Warhol's prismatic duplications of Elvis Presley or the visual echolalia evident in his twenty-five identical Jackies, Flood's collages enlist compression and composite; they overpack, stuff, bloat, and cram; they fill themselves to the point of overflowing excess. In a gesture of Frankensteinian self-cannibalization, Flood's celebrities alternately erase and consume themselves, their monstrosity the result not of accident or age, but rather an attempt at a reconstitution of the diffused self.

Central to these collages is the popular belief that the vessel of celebrity is too porous to hold meaning. Flood's retrofitted faces aim to caulk the cracks, close the dams, contain the leaks; they seek to re-assimilate recently forgotten faces via a series of surface massacres that somehow both amplify and silence identity. In a collage of Adam Ant, Flood has allowed the singer to retain his signature hairstyle, but his customary horizontal slash of white makeup bisects a face devoid of features, a face that simply is not there. This conspicuous absence not only offers the illusion of a blank canvas and the false promise of an empty projection screen, but also isolates and exploits the absolute horror of the blown-out signifier. The message is one that calls into question our notions of interchangeability, disposability, and the corrosive qualities of indifference.

The rapidity with which we first inaugurate and later impeach celebrities and our insatiable appetite for unattenuated newness has created a system in which idols are constructed, in part, for the





pleasure we find in their demolition and subsequent replacement. The celebrity collages examine how consumer culture attempts to erase itself, how the glossy paper trails that first buttress and subsequently sink our idols are eventually transferred into the invisible archives of the wasteland. Flood reminds us that our discomfort in encountering aged symbols of Hollywood glamour is little more than an anxiety connected to our own unstoppable hurtle toward death, that fame is simply a wheeling and wandering placeholder, and that any denial of these facts is little more than an exercise in plastic surgery.

What's My Line?

John Dogg



Mark Flood is a Canadian professional ice-hockey defenseman who is currently with the Winnipeg Jets of the National Hockey League. He previously played for the New York Islanders. He was born on September 29, 1984, in Charlottetown, North Carolina. His height is 6'1", weight 190 lbs; he shoots right-handed, and his salary is 525,000 US dollars per year.

Mark Flood is an artist who lives and works in Houston, Texas. He was also born there, in 1957. Constructing a biography of Flood is a challenge. Any of the following statements may or may not be true. He went to Rice University. He studied cooking and was keen to try to make white rice into a sustainable vitamin-rich gourmet meal. (He once froze balls of rice and would remove them from his freezer in the middle of summer and try to convince friends that the concoction was a new kind of healthy yogurt.) He made all-over paintings with rice and drove a 1968 Jeep Wrangler with a fender made out of rice that doubled as a battering ram. He tried unsuccessfully to manufacture dungarees made out of Arborio rice. His favorite song is the jingle from the advertisement for Rice-A-Roni. He started showing his art in Houston at DiverseWorks in

the '80s, and by 1991 in New York City. By the 2000s, most of his exhibitions were in commercial galleries centered in and around Eastern Europe. His last exhibition (in what is now or used to be Romania) was made up of a single grain of rice, cast in an aluminum alloy and painted black. The single grain was rumored to be a mouse dropping. His proposal to fill the American pavilion with quicksand in the next Venice Biennale was turned down. (He told me in a short telephone interview that he's planning to re-submit his proposal for the Biennale, but "this time around I would edit and strip down my last proposal and exhibit a single grain of sand on a velvet pedestal." He went on to say the "lighting" of this "sand" will be "the last place on Earth that God didn't finish.") Mark is currently working on "doilies" based on his grandmother's personal collection.

Mark Flood is a financial economist, living and working in the Washington DC area. His fields of interest include risk management, financial institutions, capital markets, and financial data and software. Current affiliations are as follows: senior policy advisor, Department of the Treasury, Office of Financial Research (OFR); and senior partner with ProBanker Simulations, LLC.

Mark Flood is a doctor who practices psychiatry in Rochelle Park, New Jersey. Flood graduated with an MD twenty-five years ago from Nasson College, Springvale, Maine. He is board certified in the state of New Jersey. He went to graduate school at Texas Tech University and did his internship at Health Sciences Center School of Medicine in Lubbock, Texas. He graduated in 1987. His hobbies include skeet shooting, and he is part of a summer-stock theater production based in Westchester, New York. This past summer he played the part of Tommy in *Deaf Dumb and Blind*, based on the rock opera masterpiece by the Who. He is also a ham radio operator and can recite the entire screenplay from the movie *On The Beach*. (He is quick to ask the question, "Who or what" is sending out the S.O.S. in the movie?) Mark has been married for seven years and has three children.





Muted Objects

Alissa Bennett

In all its mediums and formal iterations, Mark Flood's work is thematically unified by his consistent suggestion not only that waste is the historical residue of American culture, but that our stockpiles of conceptually exhausted signs and symbols will serve as the souvenirs of contemporary civilization, and that discarded and forgotten objects retain echoes of life. In the "Muted Objects" works, Flood stages a series of strategic interventions in which the identifying markers of popular consumer goods are partially or entirely obscured. In an interrogation that addresses the relations between signs, proprietary eponyms, the readymade, and the pervasive powers of commodification, Flood simultaneously illuminates our culture's dedication to commercial products and indicates that it is this dedication by which the future will measure us.

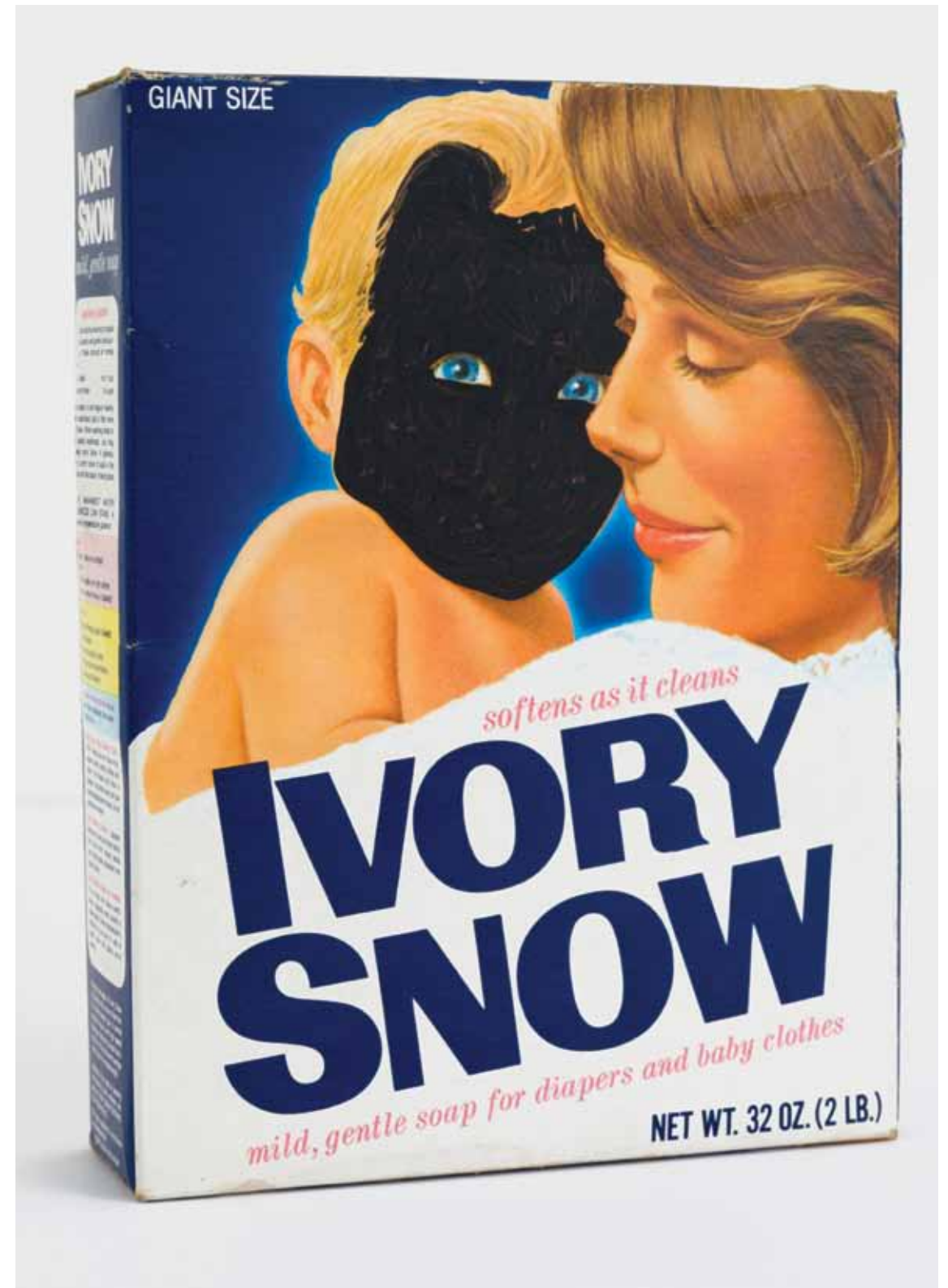
Among a group of objects that have been at once enshrined and desecrated, we immediately recognize a defiled Coke bottle rescued from the wasteland of a garbage heap, a rusty can of Pledge whose features have been erased and reconstituted, a whitewashed carton of Marlboro Lights that has retained only a regal-looking Phillip Morris insignia and some stray brown and golden ribbons. Though each object has been stripped of its most immediately recognizable elements,

we are able to name it. The power of these works is rooted in our ability to recognize their concealed signs; the successfully branded commodity, however “muted,” still telegraphs an endless loop of sound-bites and glossy promises.

The “Muted Objects” series exploits the Duchampian model of the assisted readymade as a prop of cultural critique to its full potential: an altered box of Ivory Snow detergent that features a woman holding a faceless baby has sacrificed its dedication to whiteness yet retains its claim of being 99 ⁴⁴/₁₀₀% pure (a simultaneous ode to Roland Barthes and Marilyn Chambers, perhaps); the concentric circles radiating across a box of Tide have been transformed into a paper target ready for the shooting range; the ice-capped mountains on a bottle of Evian are concealed behind hastily applied black paint, but the bottle still reminds us of the water’s mineral-laden weight. Because we immediately grasp the referent, each item resists banishment into the realm of the formal.

Within the series is a group of collaged and overpainted magazine ads in which product names, copy, and models’ faces are hidden under amorphous blobs of opaque paint. Stripped of their narrative elements, these fragile vignettes oscillate between generic masculine hyperbole (as in *Muted Marlboro Ad*) and strangely vacant snapshots redolent of stock photography (as in *Muted Car Ad*). Though the remnants of these images still manage to indicate the products that they are advertising (our associations between Marlboro cigarettes and the cowboys who smoke them are strong), what we are left with feels more like a haunting than a seamless subliminal suggestion.

In a series of works that simultaneously highlights and derails the symbolic power housed by common consumer items, Flood asks us to reconsider the false notion that there is a separation between history and the waste generated by everyday life. The impermeable membrane that cleaves American identity to the consumption of commercial goods and our reliance on these goods as indices of self-location are crucial elements of American culture, and the muted objects alert us to how psychically entrenched the residual souvenirs of our consumption are. Flood’s “Muted Objects” force us to fill in the blanks, to cover the distance between what we know is missing and the cacophonous echo of the familiar.



survive



...be as simple—
ing for your hair
soon Skin Care.
Complexion Bar
a cleansing bar
y grime gently
out dryness
ancing Rinse
ol-free rinse
epares skin
oisturizing
moisturizer
ula that's
o prevent
smooth
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an mean
clearer
ong skin.
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without it
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ook good
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VIDAL SASSOON SKIN CARE
Available wherever Vidal Sassoon Hair Care products are sold.

Source: October, 1979 national probability sample, by telephone, of 1,000 adults.
Survey conducted for Union Carbide by Roger Seasonwein Associates.

32%

AMERICANS REJECT NO-GROWTH FUTURE

see technology and business as force

In a new public attitude survey conducted for recognition of the n
uncertainty of gover

The spirit of Marlboro
in a low tar cigarette.

Marlboro LIGHTS
Marlboro 100's

The Surgeon General Has Determined
Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

Kings: 12 mg "tar", 0.8 mg nicotine av. per cigarette, FTC Report May '79
100's: 12 mg "tar", 0.8 mg nicotine av. per cigarette, FTC Report May '79

These are some works painted when
the world
apart. They are, not joyous and
exuberant affirmations of life. They are part of a
fascinating exhibition gath

They wanted
to know not
They succeeded
The marks still speak

the language of
human feeling is
language of computers. Sponsorship of art
It's a business

It takes art to make a company great.

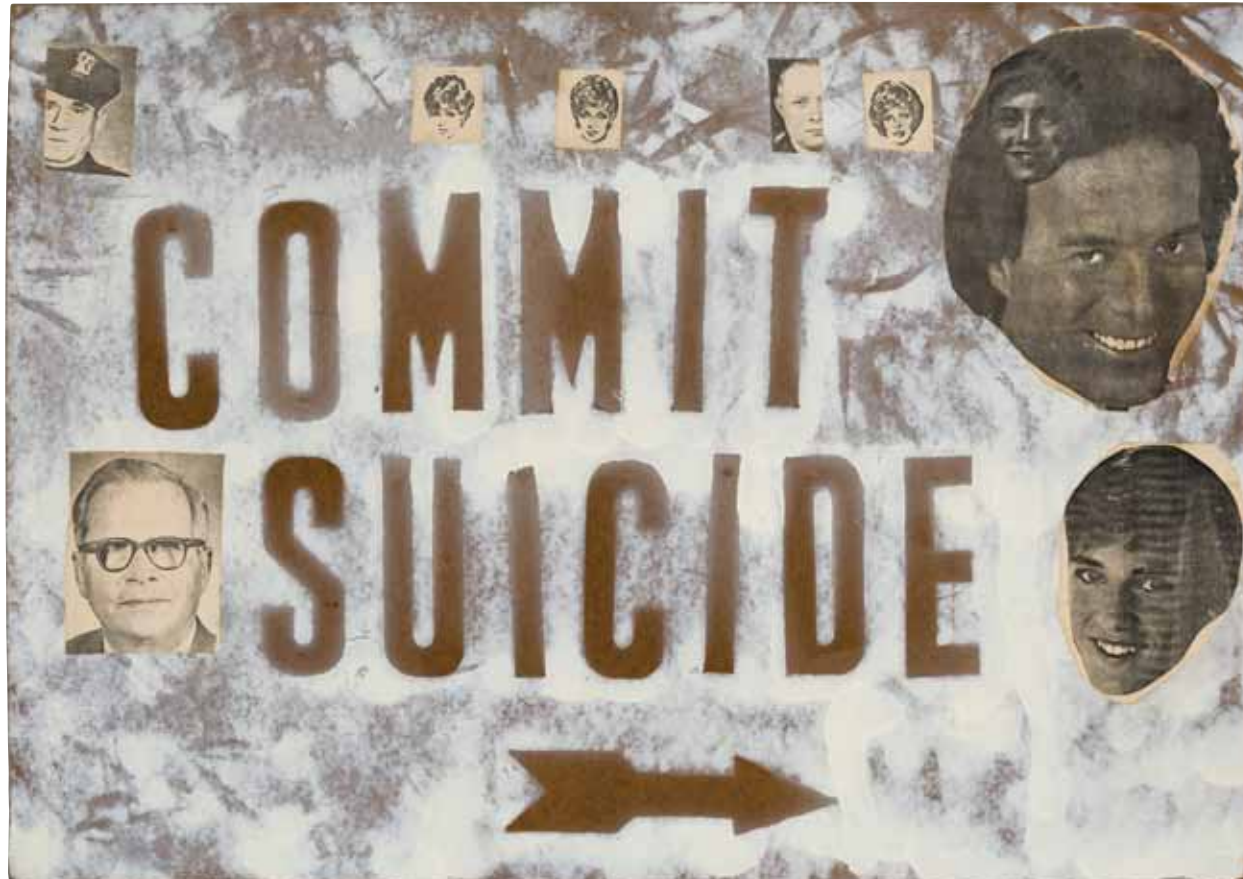
Makers of Marlboro, Benson & Hedges 100's, Merit, Parliament Lights, Virginia Slims and Cambridge,
Miller High Life Beer, Lite Beer and Löwenbräu Special and Dark Special Beer.
7 UP and Diet 7 UP.

"Expressionism—a German Intuition, 1905-1920" appears at The Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York, November 14, 1980 to January 18, 1981; San Francisco Museum of Modern
Art, San Francisco, February 18 to April 26, 1981. This exhibition is sponsored by the Federal
Republic of Germany, Philip Morris Incorporated, and the National Endowment for the Arts. An
indemnity for the exhibition has been provided by the Federal Council on the Arts and
Humanities. Additional support has been contributed by Lufthansa German Airlines.

(top left) Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: STREET WITH RED COCOON, 1914. Thyssen-Bornemisze Collection, Lugano.
(bottom left) Vasily Kandinsky: SMALL PLEASURES, 1913. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. (top
center) Piet Mondrian: De Kerk, SELF PORTRAIT WITH CAMELIA BRANDT, ca. 1906-7. Museum Folkwang,
Essen. (top right) Emil Nolde: DIANEY AROUND THE GOLDEN CARL 1910. Staatgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich.
(bottom right) Franz Marc: THE SMALL BLUE HORSES 1911. Staatgalerie, Stuttgart.

Assisted Culturcide

Bob Nickas and Crack Foyer On the Art of Mark Flood



Bob Nickas: Some of us are aware of Mark Flood as an artist, some as a writer, and then of course he has fans from his time with the band Culturcide. But there is a long sticky thread that connects all of his various guises and disguises, the pleasures and terrors of his many acts of subversion, his intellectual crankiness.

Crack Foyer: Mark's work can be very funny and irreverent, but it's also pointed, poisoned, and poignant.

B: Coming out of punk, the attitude is basically: Nothing is sacred. At the same time there's a general misunderstanding of the original spirit of punk at its core. When you say, "Rip it up and start again," you want things to go on—

C: Rather than come to an end.

B: It's a very positive message. If you're up against the more insidious forms of social control, you're endorsing freedom of thought and expression, and it can be incredibly empowering. All of the things that Mark is involved with in his art, and has been for some time

now—appropriation, sampling, recycling—are tools to be used freely for the purpose of laying bare phoniness and hypocrisy, and having a good time. The images and the objects, as well as your targets, are free for the taking, and for taking down. Why be reduced to being an abused consumer, lulled by manufactured emotion, when you can get mad and get even? Just think of all the fun you might have.

C: I'm reminded of how perfectly the work of the political cartoonist Thomas Nast was once characterized: the fine art of making the wicked squirm.

B: I love the paintings from 1983 that he identifies as protest signs—*I Hate My Job*, the incredibly moving, Situationist-inflected *Stop Destroy Forget*, and *Color My World With Media Pigs*, which he once carried in an anti-KKK rally.

C: True protest needs to educate as well as to entertain, and it's not for the faint of heart. You have to be up for the job. When you scratch the surface of a debased system you will certainly encounter some ugly and inconvenient truths. Exposing them to the harsh light of day is neither pretty nor polite.

B: That said, there's still something quite juvenile about Mark's aesthetic—

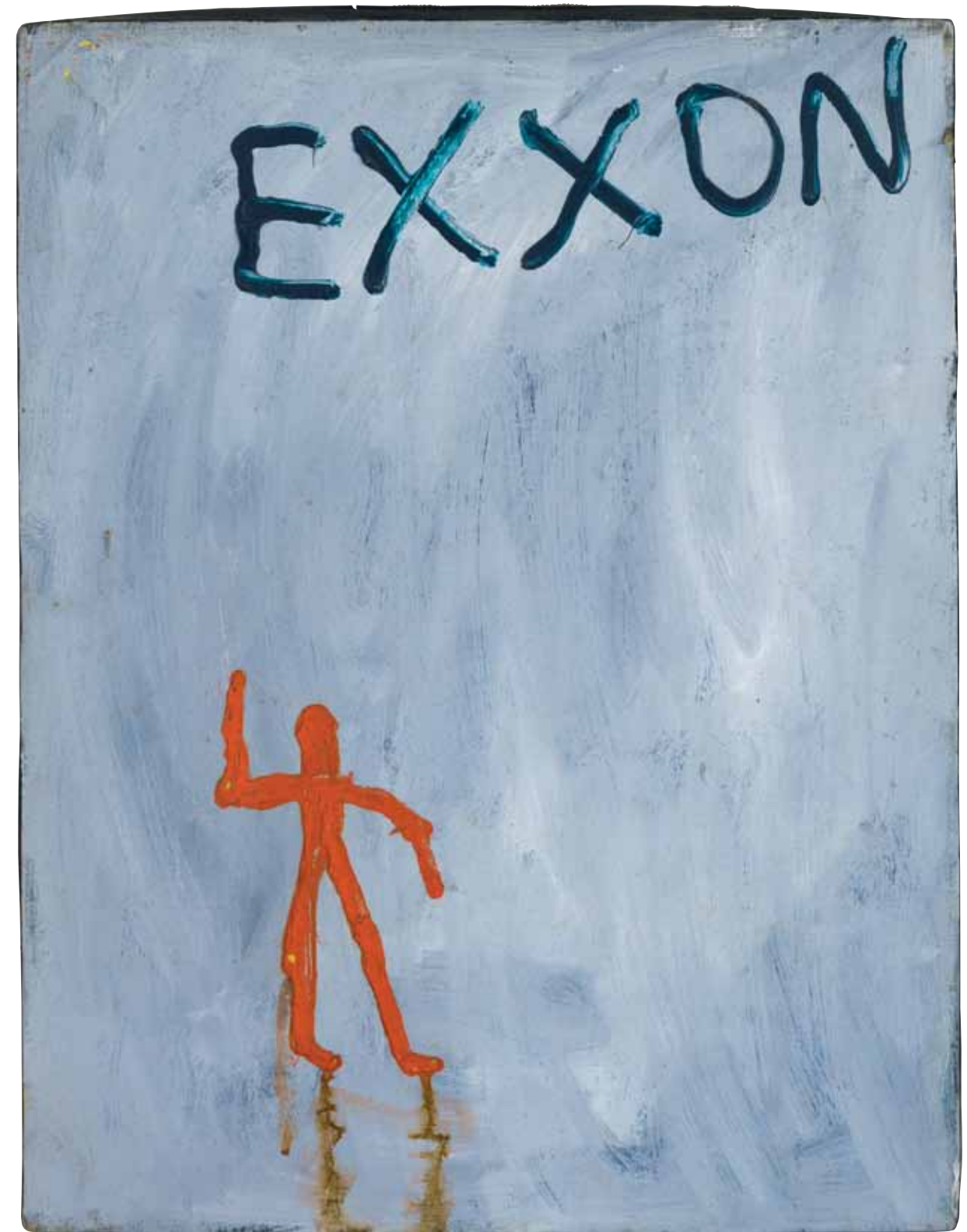
C: Oil isn't the only thing that's crude in Texas.

B: —which is juvenile but sophisticated at the same time. It's very much a part of what draws us to his work, in whatever form it takes.

C: Just as the Surrealists and the Situationists discovered, there is an uncanny beauty to be found in the most unlikely places. The very notion of beauty is continually being questioned. And along the way if people are insulted, pissed off, and disgusted, then that's the price we have to pay. Enlightenment should never come cheap.

B: Especially in this country.

C: Don't forget that Mark came of age in Houston in the 1980s, a big oil town in boom times. This decade also ushers in the onslaught of



corporate and celebrity culture—a nightmare from which we are still trying to awake. It's clear that as he looked at the world around him, he didn't exactly like what he saw.

B: In his book *The Hateful Years Volume 1: The Eighties*, he includes a photo of himself—at least I think it's him as a younger teen—that was taken at the Gulfgate Mall at Easter. He's sitting on a preposterously giant pink bunny, and he's wearing a muscle T-shirt with the phrase SEE THE NIGHTMARE.

C: It says a lot about Mark and his art. I mean, it screams volumes.

B: If art is only ever a reflection of reality—

C: Or the realms of the unreal.

B: —we came to understand in the '80s that disaffection filtered through punk was a matter of defects in a defect's mirror. That's Steven Parrino quoting Darby Crash of the Germs.

C: Both are appropriate towards constructing a lens through which to view a certain American sensibility of that time, one that includes other artists besides Mark and Culturcide, who intersect art, music, and social critique.

B: There's Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw, along with Cary Loren and Niagara, in *Destroy All Monsters*. Later, Mike and Jim went on to work with John Miller and Tony Oursler in the Poetics.

C: Although Raymond Pettibon wasn't a musician, his work is inextricably linked with the sound and fury of Black Flag and all the SST bands for whose album covers and posters his art was put to service. He helped define the whole post-hippie attitude around that scene, and injected a sense of history that passes from a utopian to a dystopian perspective, an acknowledgment of the politics of time. In this respect, the notion of cultural demise encompasses everything from Cady Noland's examination of violence and the American psyche to the sprawling, psychedelic distortions of the Butthole Surfers. Their live shows, complete with the most mind-blowing films, pyrotechnics, and the sense that anything can happen next—

accompanied by either wonder or dread—certainly qualify as some of the headiest performance of our time.

B: They were fellow Texans who were active in the same period as Culturcide.

C: That's right. But before we go on, how should we define the term? As the killing of culture?

B: As a logical conclusion, or an alternative—homicide, patricide, suicide . . . culturcide?

C: In Mark's art there is such an anarchic continuation of the readymade—

B: The assisted readymade.

C: Right, and a plundering of the image world, a mining of ads and commercial products, and celebrities as the objects of our affection and disaffection. . . .

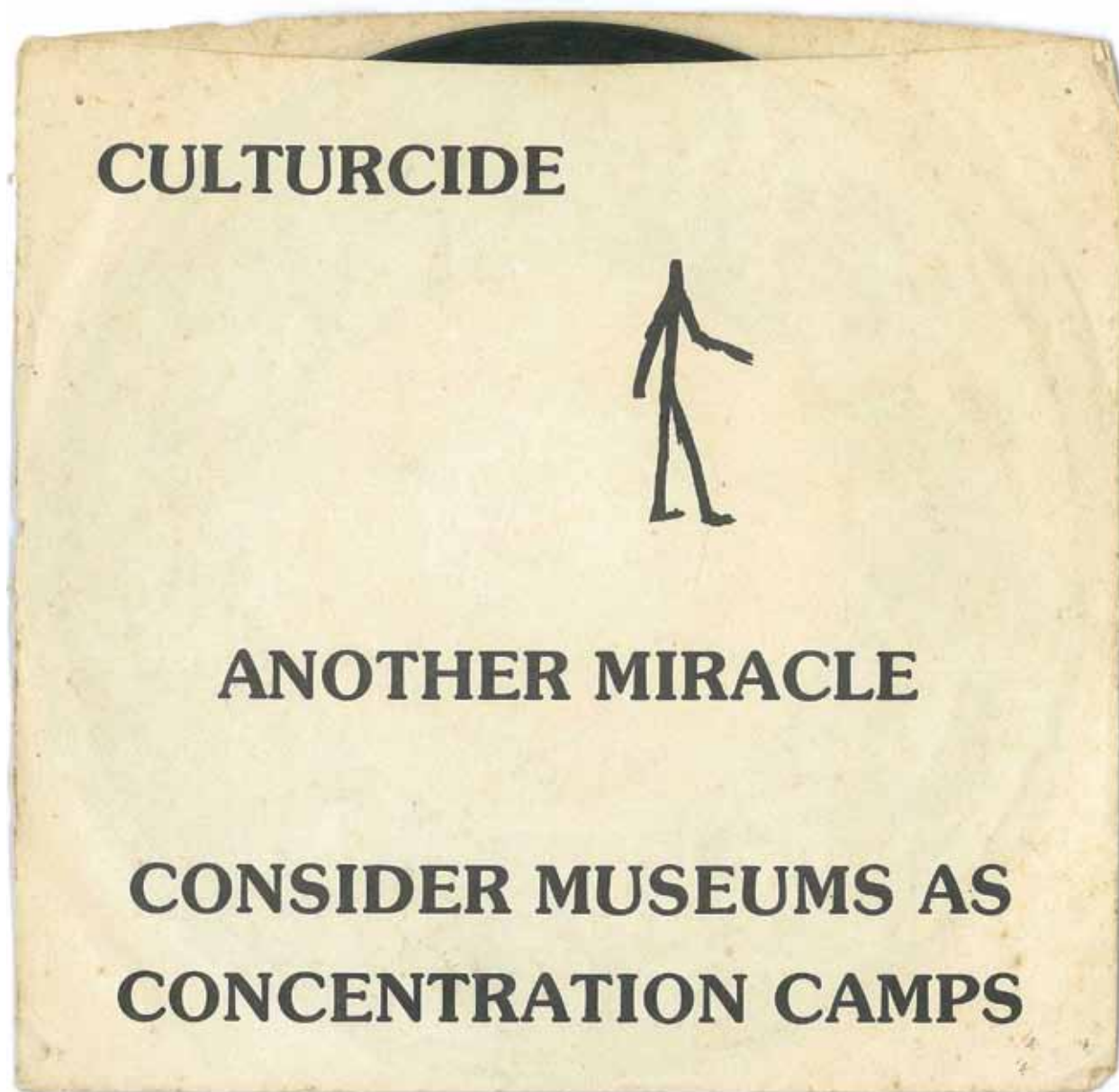
B: We might then term his work Assisted Culturcide.

C: Exactly. Just look at the band's statement that appeared in the catalog for the 1986 New Music America event in Houston.

B: For which they had the honor of playing a free outdoor closing party along with Brave Combo and Sonic Youth.

C: They wrote:

The work *Culturcide* will present for NMA '86 is a critique of the institutions, inscriptions, and emotions of the contemporary, economically-ordered regime. The form of this work begins at imitation of the audio genres of the mass media spectacle, and ends at disfigurement and correction of authentic spectacular artifacts. Our influences are our personal experiences of the slavery of the bureaucratic routine, of the degraded nature of the societal compulsion to consume, of the dreariness of day-to-day living in an economically-organized landscape. *Culturcide's* work



reflects our city, this oil-stained, over-developed parking lot, packed with cars, littered with advertising, designed for profit, not people.

B: Amen.

C: Amen is right. Because you could replace Culturcide with Mark's name and this could easily serve as a double-barreled shot of an artist's statement. A lot of the work in this Luxembourg & Dayan show was made between '85 and '89, so these sentiments give us a fairly accurate sense of his state of mind at the time.

B: It's also, though considerably after the fact, an indictment of the now-prevalent institutional critique artists who ended up as, guess what? Institutional darlings!

C: And now look at them. Institutional up-the-creek . . . without a paddle. You have to wonder if anyone who went through the Whitney Independent Study Program ever heard Culturcide's 1980 single "Consider Museums as Concentration Camps." Mark has a collage titled *Survive*, which he made the following year, that is particularly scathing. In it, he's deconstructed a Philip Morris ad for an exhibition at the Guggenheim, "Expressionism—A German Institution, 1905-1920." Against a backdrop of human bones and skulls, he cut up the text to read, "These are some works painted when the world was falling apart. they are not joyous and exuberant affirmations of life. the language of human feeling is the language of computers. Sponsorship of art It's a business."

B: So he takes on the museum, big business, advertising, and, quite early on, technology as well. In the *Clerk Fluid* book, Mark gives museums names like The Center For Useless Mediocrity and the Museum of Mocha Latte. As for art academia, he reminds us, "What feels like prison and looks like prison is sometimes only school." There's definitely an embittered clarity to his critique.

C: On that note, here's my favorite passage:

Now I see the art world as an express train that makes no stops for anyone. Artists are like hobos trying to catch a ride,

and they have to run very very fast all the time even to have a chance of hopping on. It's impossible, but it's easier if you're young. The track doesn't even run through most cities, towns, so you have to go find it. Practice your running while you wait because it won't be slowing down for you. Also check out all the maimed groaning bodies along the track, the artists who tried but failed to hop aboard. And lost their legs or an arm or got bifurcated in the process. . . . You might want to go through their pockets for ideas.

B: Mark has a number of paintings that I refer to as “the directives,” which suggest, BE GOOD, ENJOY LIFE, WATCH TELEVISION, DRINK BLOOD, EAT HUMAN FLESH, MASTURBATE OFTEN, FEEL WORTHLESS, PRAY TO GOD, COMMIT SUICIDE, and, last but not least, FUCK THE ECONOMY.

C: The DRINK BLOOD painting actually comes with a syringe.

B: You could make these same works today and what would it be? A matter of current events—the way that certain individuals remain robotically pacified, are still vampirically hooked on meat and alcohol and substitutes for sex, but not death—with a star turn for the newly discovered 1%.

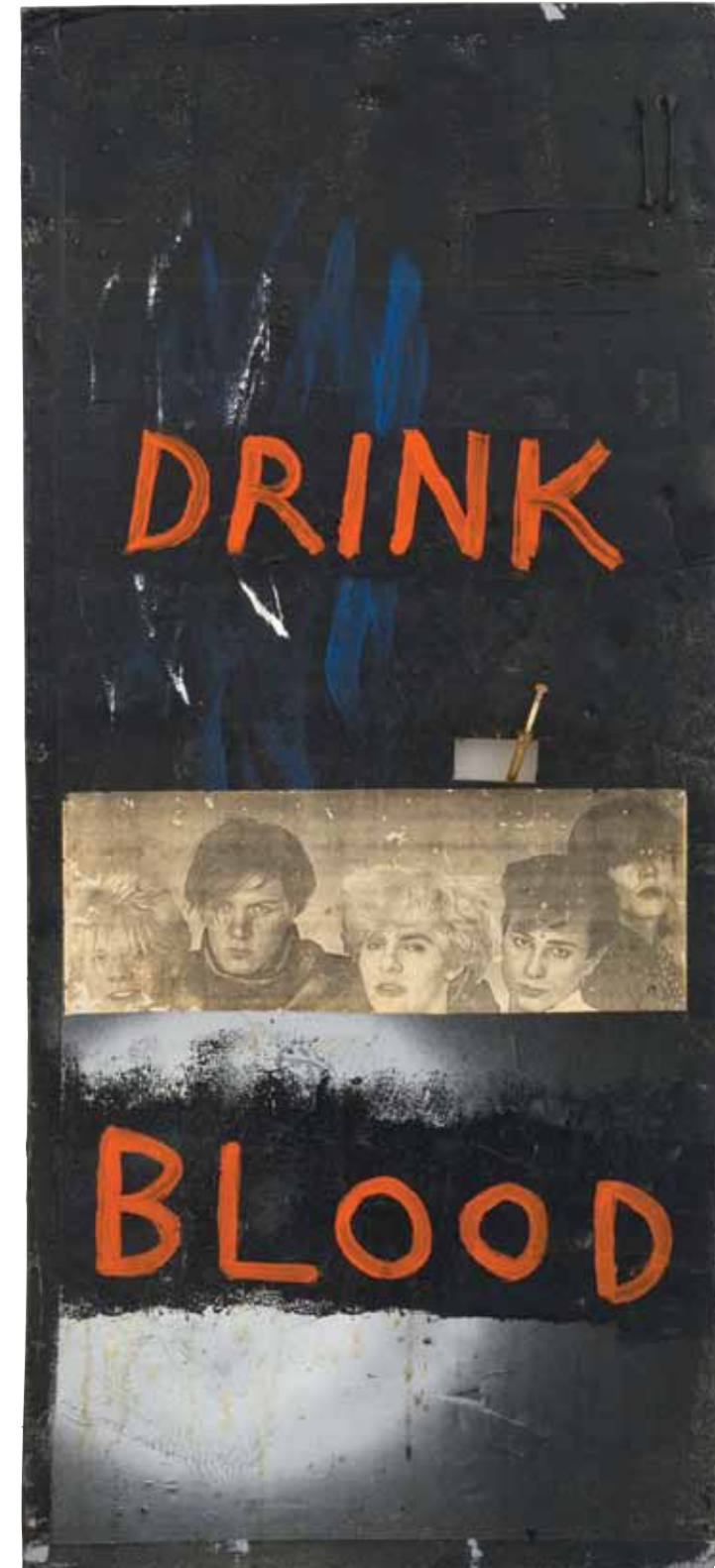
C: A career is something else people get hooked on—despite the frustration.

B: With Mark's piece *Lottery*, we're confronted with a painted sign that instructs us, with the promise of fluorescent spray paint and glitter, PEEL BACK TO SEE IF YOU ARE A WINNER. You lift up the flap and there's the inevitable letdown: PLEASE TRY AGAIN.

C: You know who could be standing next to that—like a deformed carny at a carnival? Mike Smith as Baby Ikki. In his big diaper.

B: Prosperity used to be right around the corner in this country. Today it's more of a revolving door. Or a slide at a water park. Or cable with 200 channels. Or a Range Rover. Take your pick.

C: I'll go with the SUV.





B: Life is not a car commercial.

C: But it should be.

B: Thinking back to Culturcide's statement from '86, this is the same year that the band's most notorious album was released, *Tacky Souvenirs of Pre-Revolutionary America*. It is without doubt an unparalleled example of appropriation. It's more of a wanton act of expropriation.

C: What does that mean?

B: To deprive of one's possession.

C: So many bands have covered well-known songs, either in tribute or as a cheap way to score a hit of their own, but not Culturcide. This album does not contain any cover versions, and there are no samples. Anyone can sample from a track. What Culturcide did was to write their own lyrics for about a dozen very well-known songs, and then they sang them on top of the original recordings.

B: From a corporate point of view, we're talking major copyright infringement. Of course this is a good twenty years before the debates on fair use.

C: You're often punished for being ahead of your time, and they were. With this record they took on Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson, David Bowie, and the Beach Boys. "California Girls" became "They Wish They All Could Be California Punks." Bowie's "Let's Dance" was turned into "Let's Prance." The song "E & I" was a parody of the very unfortunate collaboration between Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney, "Ebony & Ivory."

B: On which Culturcide sang, "Blacks and whites are equal slaves."

C: Their version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" is so sharp an attack on the facade of democracy that it's a wonder they weren't arrested for treason. But then this was a long time before the Patriot Act went into effect.

B: *Tacky Souvenirs of Pre-Revolutionary America* is absolutely as important as Springsteen's *Born To Run*.

C: Born to run . . . down my left leg. It's twenty-five years later, and we're still living in pre-revolutionary America, and always will be.

B: This skewering of pop stars and celebrity not only shows a bitter animosity towards the music industry, but reveals a deeply ingrained love-hate dynamic that is always in play for anyone who sets foot on a stage, who wants to be loved, and expects to be paid. What we would call today's entertainment-industrial complex.

C: In case you haven't noticed, this formulation also applies to the art world today.

B: Just look at Mark's incredible collages from the early- to mid-'80s. Barry Manilow, the man who writes the songs that make the whole world sing; David Lee Roth, who went from Van Halen to Las Vegas casinos; John Travolta, who appears to be melting down with *Saturday Night Fever*; and Roger Daltrey of the Who. Was there any irony at all when he sang, much later in life, "Hope I die before I grow old?"

C: "Before I grow mold."

B: The complex technique that Mark uses in this collage work is almost de-constructive surgery, as he applies his X-Acto knife like a scalpel, and then layers flesh on flesh.

C: If the erased/effaced ads and products he's done are his "Mutes," then the representations of celebrities are his mutants. There's definitely something acidic to these proceedings—John Heartfield on steroids, a kind of agitated agitprop.

B: The "Mutes," which are from the early '80s, wreak subtle and not-so-subtle havoc with cigarette ads. They nearly comprise a one-man anti-smoking campaign. With *Smoker in Red Hat* (1981), he's added an extra set of lips with a cigarette, as if the man is now smoking through a hole in his throat. In *Daytime TV Couple*, from the same year, he's placed part of a pack with two extended cigarettes in the





man's crotch, so he has a doubled but wimpy erection. There are others where Mark has obliterated the faces in the ads, as with the Marlboro cowboys.

C: An apt comment for much of his work: If you see something, deface something.

B: Mark treats the porn collages to his most complicated interventions. As befitting what for many will qualify as obscene, demeaning representation—pornography—he savages and heightens the obscenity with incredibly vulgar, outrageous insertions. Faces, eyes, and mouths appear in vaginas. And smiling, wholesome movie and TV stars become anatomically holesome. The cast of characters includes Pam Dawber, Robert Redford, Loni Anderson, Burt Reynolds, and Diana Ross.

C: None of whom could have been much amused. But in the end, Mark takes porn out of the realm of titillation and insists, by way of grotesque collage, on just how interchangeable all those body parts really are. It's Frankensteinian, really. I mean, think back to the time when these works were made. Almost everyone saw *The National Enquirer* at the supermarket checkout, and it was totally obvious in those pre-Photoshop days that the art directors would cut the head off of one star's body and tack it onto another's.

B: That's something Cady Noland used to talk about. A human chop shop for celebrities.

C: You create all sorts of compromising situations, or unflattering physiques, with a pair of scissors and a glue stick. A simple trick, but one that worked perfectly well.

B: This may be something that Mark admired, because in his art he never aspires to any great technical prowess. Like in punk rock—with its one-chord wonders and incompetent guitar solos—the idea is to get the job done as efficiently and economically as possible, to work with the raw materials at hand and keep that rawness and immediacy intact. There are no pretensions to mastery.

C: Not by a long shot.

B: You could say that the rough facture of his work is actually based in fact. Let's not forget that Mark is also availing himself of found materials, particularly in terms of painting. Many of his works are painted additions to, or an obscuring of, a painted or pre-printed image. He has often used found paintings, probably from flea markets or garage sales, as a starting point. He might even have come across them on the street, tossed out with the trash.

C: This is another political aspect—scavenging for materials rather than buying them down at the art supply store. I'm reminded of the way that Chris Johanson has, for over twenty years now, been working with whatever is at hand and turning it into art. He insists that the material has its own history, and he readily responds to that.

C: And so, too, do images have their histories. Think of Jim Shaw with his ongoing collection of "Thrift Store Paintings," a classic in its own right. And he doesn't alter them in any way—except for bringing them into the gallery, where these castoffs instantly shift from the realm of anonymity to being Jim Shaw's.

B: But Mark needs to transform what he finds. He really needs to make it his own, bring it into and allow it to represent his own world. With some, you may not see that he's added anything at all. In my favorite painting, there's a deer poised by a river, under a small cluster of trees. At first, it appears untouched. And then you notice a thin black figure has pressed itself almost imperceptibly up against a tree, perhaps unseen by the deer, and by viewers as well.

C: With other paintings, it's as if he's created an anti-billboard. *Weekend* (1983) is a good example. To an amateurishly rendered tropical beach scene he's added a few stick figures that are swimming and relaxing, but with K-MART written high in the sky, and an island named TEXACO off in the distance. Then there's *The Aristocrat* (1986), which looks like it's on top of a classic Rembrandt portrait. And one of his best, *The Parents*, from the same year, which is clearly over-painted on a canvas that was imprinted with an image of Picasso's *The Lovers* (1923). Here, the abstract geometric masks that Mark painted over the faces might be nothing more than a precocious prank, but look closely. At the point where the hands of the lovers are entwined, Mark has painted a small child's face, which gives his

changed title a much more poignant resonance. It's quite tender.

B: So even with the Picasso, this certainly isn't art about art.

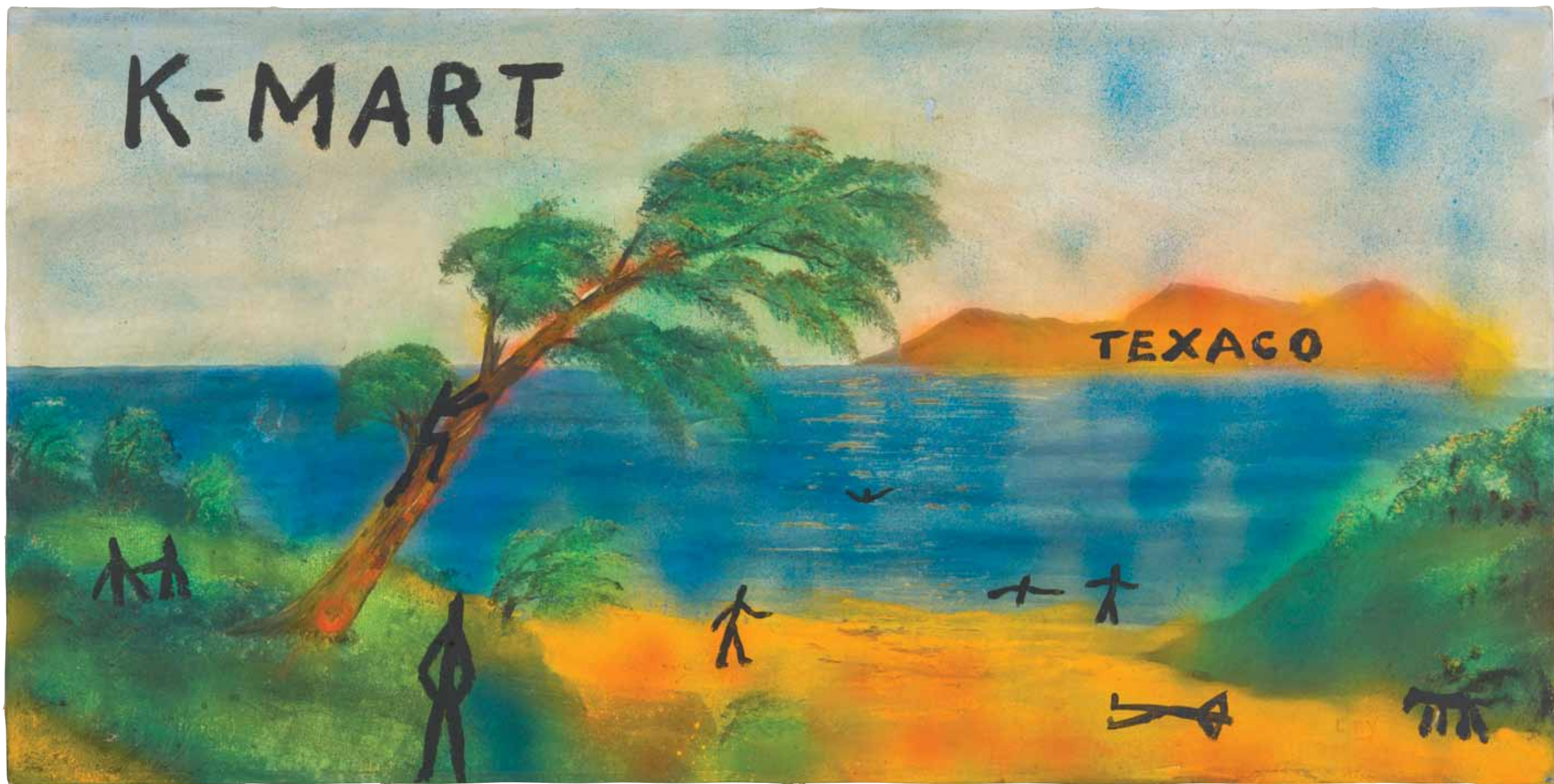
C: Not that there'd be anything wrong with that.

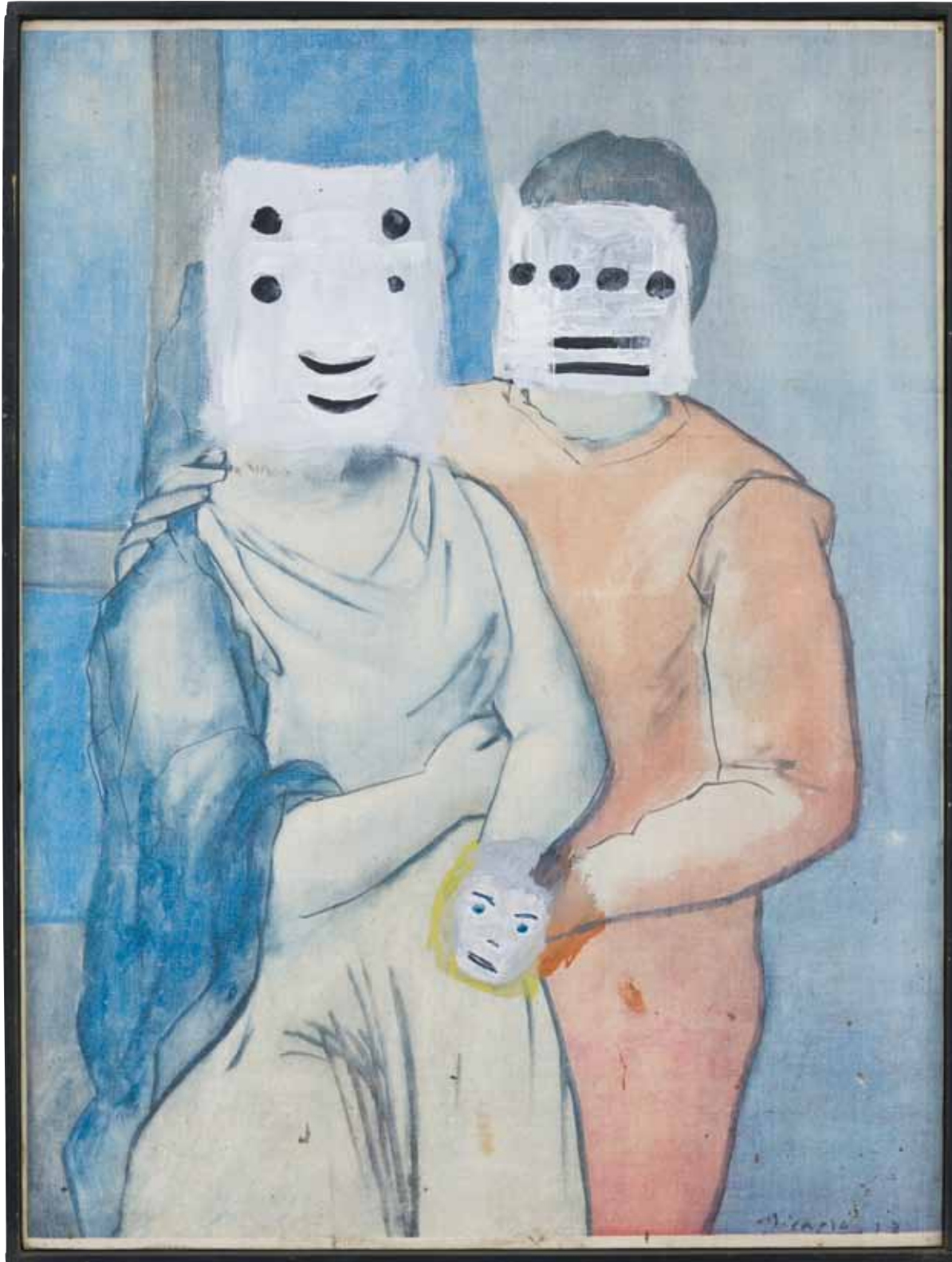
B: After all, to the man who loves art for its own sake, it is frequently in its least important and lowliest manifestations that the keenest pleasure is to be derived.

C: Or as I like to say, irreverence remains its own reward.

K-MART

TEXACO





Eat Human Flesh: Regarding Mark Flood's Idols and Monsters

Ellen Langan

In the king's bed is always found, just before it becomes
a museum piece, the droppings of the black sheep.

—Nathanael West

Idolatry, in its infinite forms, is the perpetual human epidemic. Deploying its most sinister two-pronged attack, idolatry both blurs and magnifies our collective vision. Mark Flood's world and all its adept modes of creation counter-assault this phenomenon, suggesting we are a culture overwrought with a disease caused and spread by the obsessive attention we spew at our idols. For example, "Bieber-fever," by Urban Dictionary's online definition, is termed "a sickness that has recently become more common, where a girl, or boy, is extremely obsessed with Justin Bieber, and everything related to him. There is no cure found for this yet." Indeed. In *Ziggurat* (1992), Flood outlines the progressive structure of this mass infection by assembling an ascending group of adjoining canvases. Upward from big panel to small, its pyramid reads: AUDIENCE, FAN, REALLY BIG FAN, OBSESSED FAN, STALKER—

cascading levels of diagnoses. Flood's research on idolatry and the proclivities that accompany it begin with the multifarious works that comprise the *Hateful Years*—the decades that are “pre-‘Lace’” for us Flood lovers—predominantly outlined in this book's images and accompanying texts.

Sometime around 1980, Flood's artistic production becomes sprinkled with “Idols” and “Monsters”—the *Hateful Years*' foundation, their haunting guts—flea-market canvases and found modernist-master lithographs overpainted typically with black acrylic. Their masked faces and mutated stick figures playfully stare at the viewer from each background's conventional milieu. These works, with their anarchist tendencies and art-historical underpinnings, embody the notion of the anti-masterpiece. In *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Julian Jaynes claimed that ancient humans considered their thoughts to come from gods and kings speaking to and through them. They obeyed the voices of their internal rulers for every need, as if they were physically present. Perhaps these disembodied “voices” we obey have not changed much in degree over time; we just imagine they belong to a different kind of “ruler.” Popular culture today presents these gods in one lump sum. Flood unveils this breed of psychology, reminding us of the cult of personality to which we've succumbed. In *I Obey* (1979), Flood's tendentious message is the hypnotic shaman taking hold via the television set, the gods of CBS, NBC, ABC, and PBS.

But Flood's idols and monsters trump and destruct the ones we find on our TVs and in our movies. Morphed, cut, and infected with disdain for uniculture, they offer insight into the way we as humans relate to one another. Moreover, these canvases are not just reconfigurations of our relationships, but by proxy, our power struggles, ultimately serving as grave markers of empty desires. They dethrone our kings and, frighteningly, empower the individual. Subverting the notion of idolatry in works like *The Parents* (1986), *The Aristocrat* (1986), and *The Couple* (ca. 1988), Flood's subjects are defaced and erased, the mode of traditional portraiture subsequently vetoed, in flagrante delicto. Or take *Peter Pan* (1987) and all the abundant symbolism contained within J. M. Barrie's cavorting tale. We all know Peter, born a contrarian rebel, cut off Captain Hook's hand and fed it to a crocodile. Delve further





into the flagitious history of this universal favorite, and the violent preface spirals into theories of Jungian archetypes, sexual sadism, black voodoo magic, and satanic fable. Hints of this are immanent in Flood's picture, with Pan, sword in hand, fashioned with six eyes and spirited phallus. (Quite accurately, a Houston art legend reveals that when these Flood paintings were exhibited, they were seized as evidence in an alleged satanic cult investigation.)

Flood invites us to consider the refuse that follows this plague of ritualistic monotony. Recombinative appropriation thrives in the realm of the domestic, rife with material culture to expend, to sort, to reuse, to worship, to love, to discard. In the seminal texts of *The Invisible Dragon*, Dave Hickey writes that we gather around our fashion, sports, art, and entertainment icons as we would about a hearth, that we "organize ourselves in nonexclusive communities of desire." Flood examines how our disease begins with these simple notions of pleasure—how an innocent teenybopper's pinup-plastered wall begets an innocuous crowd of star-gawkers, but in Flood's world at any moment the crowd could quickly morph into Nathanael West's ominous angry mob, their disappointment over false idolatry unleashing a jihad that takes shape after humanity becomes non-subjective globs. Idolatry is the scion of obsession, feeding our mass cultural infection.

Flood's idols and monsters serve as bellwethers for his later *Hateful Years* output, segueing into and around the celebrity canvases and collages. Similarly to the "Idols" and "Monsters," the meaning of these crudely altered portraits is not determined by the subject's identity, but instead by the very mutation of their flesh. Quasi-human figures dispense broken commands, their presence unearthing the totemic power found in even the most minor of celebrity. SEE THE NIGHTMARE. Flood's is a world in which the flashes in the pan, the one-hit wonders reanimate zombified, and loiter—where the warped but still God-like voices of Justine Bateman or Tony Danza can command the viewer to perform the weightiest of tasks: BE GOOD, COMMIT SUICIDE, ENJOY LIFE, EAT HUMAN FLESH.

With all its unabashed contradictions, the common strain in Flood's *Hateful Years* productivity is the deformity of this very notion of

fame; and with each disfigurement there is a offered a correction, whereby Flood achieves the most honest answers about this cultural epidemic. It is as if Flood disrupts the gathering about the hearth, to say "See how monotonously sick we all are?" The tenacious human recycling impulse spews out a Corey Haim, a Don Johnson, a Hannah Montana, a Justin Bieber, like a vending machine. A season of *American Idol*, a Satanic ritual, what does it *really* matter? Inasmuch as Flood considers repulsion, he always offers a giant medicinal spoonful of seduction. And we remain about the ceremonial hearth, and we beg for more.





The Lace Paintings

Alison Gingeras

Mark Flood began his series of “Lace” paintings around 1999, and they quickly became an integral part of his mature oeuvre. These incontestably beautiful abstract paintings might seem like a non-sequitur in Flood’s practice, but conceptually they stem from his overarching obsession with anachronistic cultural signifiers. The origins of the “Lace” paintings can be traced to the very same Houston thrift stores where other bodies of work began: Bolts of lace, intricately patterned old tablecloths, and curtains were sourced from the shops where he found the canvases for the “Stick Figures” as well as the “Idols” and “Monsters.” As in his other recuperations of artifacts from yesteryear—like a “muted” Coke bottle or an overpainted Sunday painter’s canvas—Flood has rescued discarded relics from oblivion through his painterly process, in this case impregnating bits of old lace with successive layers of paint in order to create patterns on canvas.

Steeped in Flood’s erudition of late-twentieth-century abstraction, the “Lace” paintings represent an aesthetic coming-out of sorts. As they do not have an immediately legible reference to pop culture, they mark the first time Flood entered into a direct dialogue with

the rarefied world of “postmodernist” painting. His systematic procedure of precisely layering fabric and paint together recalls both the palimpsests of color in Gerhard Richter’s so-called squeegee paintings or “*Abstraktes Bild*” series as well as Rudolf Stingel’s silver ornamental paintings with baroque damask wallpaper. The earliest “Lace” paintings were used as supports for large color Xeroxes to be collaged on their surface. But as the body of work evolved, Flood dropped the collage elements, allowing the abstract compositions to be autonomous. They became increasingly dense and complex as he experimented with tearing the open-work fabrics to create elaborate arrangements of texture and pattern, and as he expanded the range of his palette, he carried the “Lace” paintings into exuberant chromatic terrain.

While the “Lace” paintings are not exactly part of the Hateful Years chronology of the 1980s, they provide a timely epilogue to this exhibition. Not only do they reflect the continuum of Flood’s art practice, but they provide a meditation on the necrophilia associated with the “dead” medium of painting itself—a Floodian ode to *Arsenic and Old Lace*.



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Courtesy of the artist and Zach Feuer Gallery

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24 × 18 in. (61 × 45.7 cm.)
Private Collection

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