

THIS IS HOW NEW YORK WORKS  
**CAPITAL**

**“ARTIST MARK FLOOD MAKES A RARE APPEARANCE AT...HIS OWN EXHIBITION,” CAPITAL NY**

Melissa Smith – JULY 21, 2012



**“So, you’re in a band with Mark?” I asked.**

“I’m Mark. I’m Culturecide, man.”

Mark was Mark Flood, the artist and, as he said, leader of the band Culturecide. He was lying slack on a mattress with crumpled blankets as sheets at Luxembourg & Dayan gallery, where his latest show, *The Hateful Years*, a retrospective of his work, opened yesterday. He tried to play a beat-up guitar.

*Twang.*

“I need some new strings man,” he said.

He was slight, wearing jeans and a casual gray button-down. Wedged in a corner, he was kept somewhat hidden by a dinky metal fold-up table. The walls behind him were covered with pages ripped from pop-culture magazines, stolen street ads, and clippings about Culturecide. Refashioned consumer products sat on the table—like a laundry detergent box with the word “Dead” scrawled on it. A record spun on a turntable but there was no music.

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The room looked like that of a particularly disaffected teenager—one with a contemptuous, punk attitude and a taste for Coca-Cola (there were at least 20 cans strewn about). To accentuate the effect, the show has been put up on the top floor—the floor above the office—of the Luxembourg & Dayan gallery, an area meant for storage: the attic. Of course, it's the attic of a stately Upper East Side townhouse that only curates two shows a year of exclusive, top-tier contemporary art.

“So did you see my surrogate upstairs?” Mark Flood asked me later in the proper gallery space, “and was he surly and unhelpful?”

“A bit. Did you ask him to be surly and unhelpful?” I asked.



“No! He’s just that *naturally*,” Flood replied.

This was, actually, the real Mark Flood. He has been hiring such “surrogates” as stand-ins for openings and exhibitions for more than 20 years. Until recently, he’s been so fussy about publicity that in press kits he’d superimpose photographs of his surrogates onto the articles. The Mark that I met upstairs will be at the gallery for the next week, on a mattress, on the ground, trying to play the guitar, impersonating the Mark I chatted with downstairs. Flood’s den upstairs could be a mock-up of the domiciles of his younger days: he has said that he would essentially squat in soon-to-be demolished buildings, thereby avoiding even the threat of rent (although he’d give the landlord a few hundred dollars for his stay).

“I haven’t been to an opening in so long,” Flood told me. “Until the New York Times thing I’d never published a picture of myself since 1987.”

I asked Flood why he came out from hiding.

“I guess I’m picky about who I work with. I like these people,” he said, pointing to the curator of the show, Alison Gingeras, and P.R. rep Andrea Schwab. “They are people I can work with. I don’t work with people I can’t

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work with. I don't really need anything so I just do what I want.”

Flood isn't surly, like the Mark upstairs, but he could be called brazen. He has a track record of trashing the art world, playfully demeaning reporters in rooms full of reporters (Wednesday, however, he was rather friendly and engaged with all the reporters), and exhibiting art that he considers “ugly.” He seems to hate everything—pop culture, consumer culture, celebrity culture, our “image world,” what art is supposed to mean, the formal industry that surrounds art, the list goes on. Considering the possibility that Flood's appeal stems from his overt disavowal of “mass markets,” and from his playful disobedience, one is tempted to wonder if it's all not a bit of an act, if Mark and his surrogates aren't playing very similar roles.

It was during the '80s, while living in those squats, that Flood started Culturecide as a countercultural punk band. The name means culture killer. He's been happily flouting the rules of contemporary society and the art world ever since, riding on the margins: moving out of New York to Houston, Tex., working at a Texaco gas station and a video store. Even his work, for a number of years, at the very connected Menil Collection in Houston was, at least according to him, defined by its marginality.

“What did you do at the Menil?” a reporter asked him Wednesday.



“I was an ornament—an eighteen-year ornament,” Flood replied. “In the early days, I'm telling ya, they didn't have job descriptions,” Flood continued in a chunky Southern drawl where consonants got lost. “They didn't care about that shit. It was just a bunch of wealthy people obsessed with art and I got sucked into it because I was obsessed with art. Then after a while it started turning into the bureaucracy and then I left.”

Meanwhile, since the days of Culturecide, Flood has been making artwork that is, indeed, ugly. The mess of Flood's anarchist den on the top floor is typical of his aesthetic: defaced consumer products—like Muted Coke Bottle or Muted Evian Bottle, which are simply these products with the logos blotted or crossed out—and pop-culture imagery—disfigured celebrity posters and the faces of the famous awkwardly pasted onto pornographic images.

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“We’ve all had that dream before,” one reporter said while looking at Loni and Michael, in which Loni Anderson and Michael Landon were shown coupling.

Later works included his “Heirarchy paintings” (line diagrams of company logos or crudely painted employee IDs, meant to illustrate power relations in the corporate world) and his “Directives” (canvases spray-painted with phrases like “Eat Human Flesh,” “Watch Television” or “Fuck the Economy.”) Such work is rooted in unambiguously malicious critiques of mass culture, commercialism, advertising, and any notion of traditional aesthetics; but it has its adherents, including artists Nate Lowman and Dan Colen, both of whom famously advertise their countercultural, so-called “bohemian” lifestyles.

Flood’s most recent works are his “lace paintings,” which he’s been at for more than a decade now. Originally conceived as backdrops for his text incitements, the lace paintings took on their own life. Painted in acrylic on canvas, the images are created by using tattered lace pieces—sourced from thrift and fabric shops—as stencils. They are dipped in paint, then spread on the canvas, then painted over, then removed (the timing for removal is evidently key). They are intricate, delicate, technically innovative, and abuzz with color: wholly unlike anything else he’s done. They have certainly become highly sought-after and are largely responsible for the invigoration of his career.



He’s 54 now, and though most of his career was spent in blissful anonymity, this is his third New York show in recent years, and in 2006 Flood was able to quit his day jobs to become a full-fledged working artist. He still lives in Houston and still relies on his surrogates to avoid the public (at least before this opening), but he’s also represented by blue-chip gallerists Zach Feuer (in New York) and Javier Peres (in Berlin).

After everyone had milled around the opening for a while, Flood introduced the show, staying true to its title:

“Well there are all the overly hateful paintings upstairs, but with these beautiful paintings,” he said, referring to the lace paintings, “I want to explain that they too have a hateful dimension. ”

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“I was inspired by the art critic Dave Hickey, one of the three great art critics, and he just wrote that art bureaucracies bring artists an audience so they can make ugly art, and if you make beautiful art, you can bypass them,” Flood continued. “I always made ugly art.... I started [the lace paintings] and it did indeed totally bypass the art world [...] because total strangers not interested in art would go, ‘I’ll buy this.’ That’s when I sort of launched my career as it is now ... I guess I’ll take questions from the angry mob.”

“It’s very rare that you get an opportunity to talk to Mark,” Alison Gingeras, the curator of the show, cut in to remind everyone.

“Yes, it’s going to be very rare,” Flood said.

Gingeras then explained that the exhibition is installed in reverse chronological order with Flood’s oldest work on the top floor working down to the newest on the ground floor. She also offered that there are key themes, like idolatry, that could guide viewers through the work.

“Yes, It’s very important that we control how you think,” Flood said, and snickered. He took a few questions, but was careful to maintain his hectoring tone.

“People did say things in print and to my face, and this may be difficult to say in a room full of reporters, but I don’t really care what anyone thinks.... I play the game, whatever. The art is more important to me than what people think of it and what sells.”

‘Mark Flood: The Hateful Years’ is on view at Luxembourg & Dayan gallery, 64 East 77th Street, through September 29. Bottom three photos courtesy Luxembourg & Dayan gallery; all others by Melissa Smith.