



Bones' Beat: Mark Flood's Chelsea Whores at Zach Feuer Gallery

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We're at Chelsea Whores, Houston-based Mark Flood's second one-person show in New York and his first at Zach Feuer Gallery in Chelsea. The artwork immediately to one's left is a spraypainted stencil on a tin sign called, descriptively, *EXXON / TAKE DRUGS*. A work a few feet away, *METH / COMMUNITY BREAKFAST*, consists of a Golden Oaks Montessori lawn sign--the plastic kind on a pair of prongs that pokes into suburban verges to advertise local events--with a message stenciled on the front in silver spraypaint. The message reads "METH." The artist's name is misspelled, 'Mark Lood', on the adhesive vinyl signage by the front desk. Mark Flood is 52 years old.

The ink was still drying on art world paragon Vince Aletti's remarks when I looked at the gallery guest book--"more attitude please, really"--and I co-signed. At this professional level, at this point in time, in New York, there's no getting away with work as blissfully offhand and noncommittal as this. There's too much art to be seen for expensive large-scale shrugs to occupy any real space in the art brain's real estate, and we should be able to shut the door on this show as we do with the thousands of stoned young men pawing without direction at the world through art. Flood is decades clear of the young spacers, however, and this show has an almighty twist.

But first, what of the stuff that looks dumb? It is dumb! The point made by *METH / COMMUNITY BREAKFAST* would appear to be that wholesomeness and destruction coexist in American

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communities. Fair enough: there's rich potential for top-notch shock in an underbelly's swooping reveal. But all Flood did was pinch a sign from a roadside lawn and spray a word on it. He didn't put the altered sign back for the community to reflect upon; he took it to an art gallery. To call him a prankster would suggest an active, politicized subversiveness of which, here, there's no evidence. Flood presents an unmeasurably small amount of intellectual and physical effort--in this work he is taking it very easy--so ambivalence and acceptance become the available viewer responses. Meth is a particularly mean death drug, and yes there are at least two Americas, but this work is neither incendiary nor urgent, and there's no way as a viewer to pump yourself up and make it so. It's not bad, this work, for like the trifling crime that got it going, it's not really anything.

Elsewhere in the front room, flat relief sculptures *Inscribed and Display* could have been paintings, being that they are made on large, professional-grade stretchers for canvases. Instead, they are collages on plastic, attached with grommets to the stretcher's supporting beams in brazen disregard for the best use of such expensive cross-braced carpentry. The young New Yorker Richard Aldrich showed similar stretchers earlier this year at Bortolami Gallery, and Sigmar Polke is at it uptown right now. But these painters, gingerly dissecting the organs and picking at the skeletons of contemporary painting, have academic and philosophical ambitions. Flood's repurposed frames speak of grabbing the nearest thing at hand, of giving something a try because it's nagging his peripheral vision, or because it's left over, or because he wasn't in the mood to make a painting that day. It is a gesture driven by the question of "why not" rather than the statement of "why", and it begs to be met with "who cares" and, furthermore, "whatever". Ambivalence once again abides, ruthlessly.

Here's the twist. There are several 'lace paintings' in the show, a form that Flood that has been working on for about eight years. They are straight, friendly paintings, in acrylic on stretched primed canvases. Using knackered patterned lace as a stencil, Flood creates intricate, tactile, psychedelic, nostalgic, multicolored layers that add up to tableaux both delicate and robust. Ken Johnson called them 'visually absorbing' in a lukewarm review in last Friday's Times, but this is an understatement. They are exquisite, and visually arresting to the point of addictive. These commanding works could hold their own on a museum wall next to godhead contemporary painting. Saturated mid-'80s Gerhard Richter abstractions come to mind, and Flood doesn't pale.

The lace paintings were no more of a stretch to make, and are no more complex, than anything else in the show, yet they have power and respectability. It occurs for the first time, as a viewer takes in these impossibly rich paintings, that Mark Flood might know exactly what he is making when he produces these disparate works. Flood can make extremely beautiful, desirable, expensive paintings (my Houston art source, Bongo Willie, tells me that Flood's lace paintings are hotly collected baubles among the local aristocracy) and he can make things that are gleefully inert, unsellable, even annoying. And he takes great pleasure in exhibiting them side by side. Flood doesn't boast and blare what he knows about the contemporary art scene, but I have a hunch he knows more than most.

There's a stenciled message and spraypainted arrow pointing to a black-curtained door in *25 ADDITIONAL PAINTINGS*, another of the many easy, whatever works in the show. I pulled back the curtain and wandered through, only to find myself in the private back room of the gallery, face to face with no art, just a lady writing emails, making money, doing her job. Judging contemporary art is a cavalier game. Being clowned by an artist while you're making sweeping value judgments about them is a bracing experience, for it reminds the critic that he's not necessarily in charge.