

CHRON.

Would the real Mark Flood please stand up?

Painter. Punk. Provocateur. The renowned Houston artist, who has a new gallery show this month, can't be pinned down.

Robert Boyd – March 2, 2023



Of all the Houston artists who have earned international reputations, Mark Flood may be the most mysterious. Though he's been a leading figure of the city's art scene since the 1980s, thanks to his painting, his music, and his writing, Flood hasn't exactly stepped into the spotlight. At times, it's felt like he's done everything to avoid it, from eschewing press to toggling between multiple names and skipping out on his own openings.

The artist has a new show this weekend, a kind of homecoming: Mark Flood: A Guide for Nude Investors, which opens Friday, March 3 at Reeves Art + Design. The question is, will the real Mark Flood even be there? He has a reputation for sending surrogates in his place. They'll claim to be Flood, not breaking character even when it's obvious that they aren't the real thing. At the opening of ARTSTAR at Zack Feuer Gallery in New York in 2012, Flood held an event where 10 men sat at a table for a press conference, each identified with a placard in front of him that read "Mark Flood."

Flood first gained local fame as the leader of an industrial punk band, Culturcide, which he founded in 1979. His stage name was Perry Webb. At the same time he was writing and playing scabrous, obnoxious

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punk songs, he was starting to paint under the name John Peters. Flood has had other pseudonyms as well. How do you make a name for yourself when you never settle on one name? Mark Flood has managed.

The art in his new exhibit is mostly derived from the internet but printed and painted onto large canvases, usually with some graffiti-like alterations. “I’ve dabbled in screen art but I still believe in wall art because I think it will last as long as there are walls,” Flood says in an interview with Chron conducted, at his insistence, by email. “There’s going to be something over the sofa, over the bed. I want it to be a Mark Flood!”



John Peters is his real name—or at least the one he was given at birth, in 1957. By the early ‘80s, he had dropped out of Rice University and began making music inspired by industrial pioneers Throbbing Gristle. If you were listening to college radio in 1986, you may have heard “They Aren’t the World,” a prankish spoof in which Flood/Webb/Peters and his bandmates in Culturcide, Dan Workman and Ralf Armin, dropped new lyrics (“There comes a time/when rock stars beg for cash/ and that’s how the world is supposed to come together as one”) over the original recording of “We Are the World.” Naturally, the album on which it appears, Tacky Souvenirs of Pre-Revolutionary America, is long out of print, thanks to its blatant copyright violations, making it a collector’s item at this point.

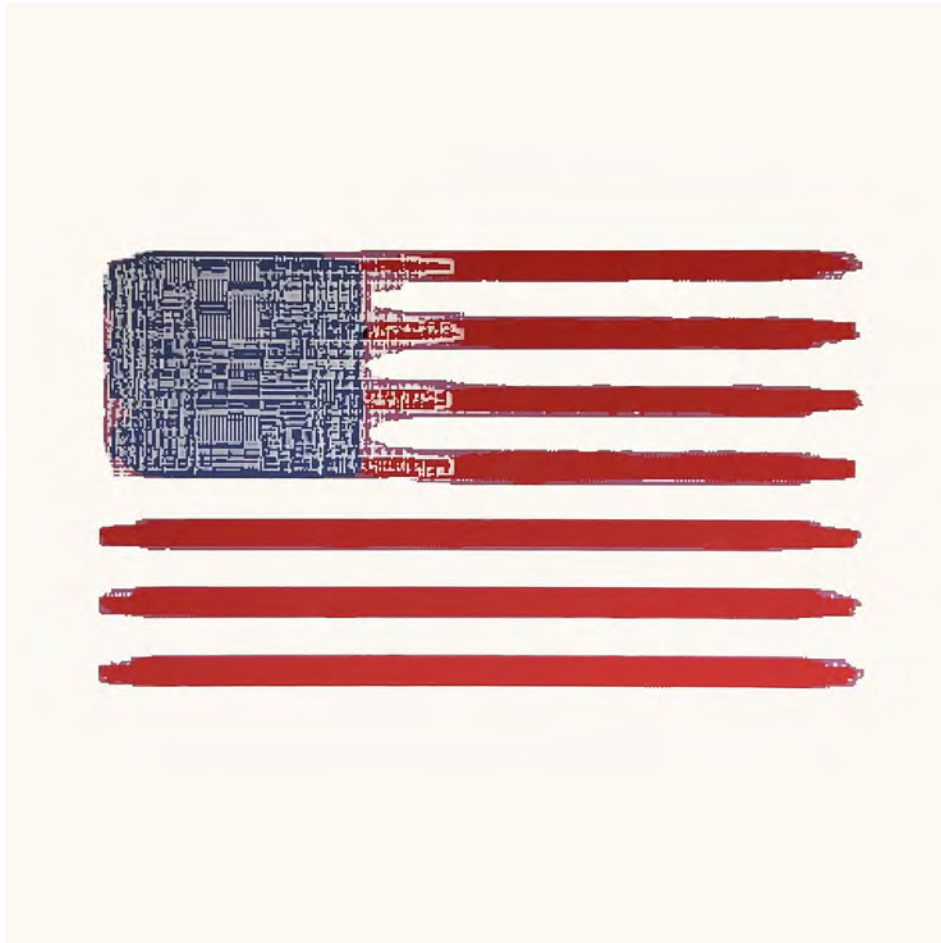
The song was an early example of Flood’s devotion to a defunct group of French radicals, the Situationists, whose heyday was the 1960s. One of the practices they advocated was “détournement”, where an original work is altered in some way, creating a contrary meaning from the original. Détournement is similar to satire or parody, but it uses the original in a much less altered way. “I was heavily influenced by the Situationists in the ‘80s,” Flood writes. “But I also was inspired by the toasters of reggae, like U-Roy, who sang over mixes of other people’s music.”

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At the same time he was playing with Culturcide, Flood was developing as a painter, under his given name. He worked out of a studio at the Commerce Street Artists Warehouse, where he became an important part of Houston's lively underground art scene. His artwork, like his music, was caustic and designed to offend. For example, his 1989 exhibit Imperatives at GVG Gallery featured works with words painted on them like "EAT HUMAN FLESH," "DESTROY YOUR BODY," and "COMMIT SUICIDE." After the exhibit, police raided a house on suspicion of drug trafficking and found the "EAT HUMAN FLESH" painting there. This led to local authorities and television news speculating that they had discovered a satanic cult. It was great publicity for Flood, whose next exhibit at Commerce Street was mobbed by nearly a thousand people—almost unheard of for a show by an experimental artist.

By 1992, Flood had stopped using the name John Peters professionally. He mostly produced artwork as Mark Flood, although he also called himself John Klonos or Susan Faber. And he wrote for various art publications, including Art in America, Artforum, and the Houston online journal Glasstire under alternate pen names like Clark Flood.

In the early 2000s, Flood developed a new painting technique in which lace fabric or doilies are soaked in paint and arranged on a canvas. The lace would be lifted, leaving a highly decorative painted impression, often against a contrasting background color. Unlike Flood's pestiferous earlier paintings, these lace creations were quite beautiful, and they earned him new popularity. Suddenly, an artist whose work had only been seen in experimental and non-commercial art venues was showing up in commercial galleries in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin.



"I love the art world and the people in it," Flood insists. "I experience my art as an invitation for all of us art-worlders to laugh at ourselves." That goal is plain in the songs and videos Flood produces for his exhibits. Take, for example, one he cut for his 2010 Berlin exhibit Bitch Moves: In the classic Culturcide

mode, it defaces Bob Segar's "Night Moves" with lyrics like, "I decided to let some nice rich people buy my art/but I couldn't figure out to get them to pay their part." Other lyrics would be unfit for publication here.

For ARTSTAR, Flood remixed video from the Bravo TV show *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*. The resulting piece, called "LET'S START YOUR CRIT," makes the critics who appeared on that show appear to be unbearably cruel. That's in keeping with the dim, dyspeptic view he's offered of critics elsewhere. In his *Glasstire* column, Flood likened art critics to the monster from David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, "the half man/half insect [that] vomits his acidic digestive juices onto the leg of a helpless man."

Needless to say, Flood's relationship to the art world is complicated, maybe especially so since he's been embraced by it. His *Glasstire* column piled scorn on artistic institutions and their bureaucracies. Reading it makes one wary to write about Flood—and skeptical of his claims of loving the art world.

A Guide for Nude Investors is his first solo show in Houston in several years. It's a massive undertaking, displaying a lot of work he's produced over the last decade. Flood's source material is a combination of news photos, celebrity images, advertisements, internet memes, and pornography. Some of the paintings are abstractions painstakingly created from looking very closely at computer images—so closely that a small number of blown-up individual pixels make up the entire image.

One could say that there are two Mark Floods. On one hand, there is the artist who makes beautiful lace paintings; on the other, the mastermind behind *Culturcide* and creator of harsh, angry artworks—the kind that mostly make up *A Guide for Nude Investors*. But of course there are really many Mark Floods, with different names and practices: the painter, the writer, the musician, the punk, the satirist, the champion of the art world, the puckish critic of the art world and its absurdities. Whether any of them will be there in person tomorrow is anybody's guess.

Mark Flood: *A Guide for Nude Investors* runs March 3 through March 25 at Reeves Art + Design. For more information, please visit the gallery's website.