

"Mark Flood: Gratest Hits" at CAMH Offers 30-Year Mixed Bag

BY SUSIE TOMMANEY

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EAT HUMAN FLESH, by Mark Flood, on view in "Mark Flood: Gratest Hits" at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

In spite of local artist Mark Flood's distaste for "the machinations of the art world," he and Bill Arning, director of Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, have found common ground. "We're very like-minded people, almost the same age; [we] both started off having rock bands," says Arning. "I started off as a punk rock kid and when I looked at [Flood's] early Culturecide records that 'the museums are concentration camps for art,' I can hear his voice within me still."

Flood, who feels that institutions create too many interferences between the viewer and artwork, has not sold out or compromised his principles by holding a show at CAMH; instead, he has developed a newfound joy in wealthy art collectors. "In Flood's worldview, there's nothing more pure than that. When you watch a millionaire run into Art Basel Miami to buy a piece of art, because they have to have it, that's the only thing pure in the art world," says Arning. There was an "aha" moment for Flood after he read Dave Hickey's *Invisible Dragon* essays on beauty in the early '90s, giving him the freedom to create his beautifully detailed lace paintings. "He loves the fact that [when people] see a lace painting, people are compelled to buy them," says Arning. "They go for crazy amounts of money at auction. He loves that they inspire this desire, this lust."

The quintessential Texas artist also has mined that lust into a new film, *Art Fair Fever*, and CAMH has planned at least one screening of the film. Some have seen a rough cut at Cardoza Gallery, but it's finally finished and has proven to be quite funny, even for those who aren't denizens of the art world. "I call it the *Hard Day's Night* of the art world," says Arning, who says it's a strangely loving vision of the insanity that is the art world of today, about how art functions in the global economy, and the international feeding frenzies. "It's funny as can be, too."



Heaven's Gate, by Mark Flood, on view in "Mark Flood: Gratest Hits" at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

Courtesy of CAMH

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Expect a mixed bag in the 30-year (almost) retrospective titled "Mark Flood: Gratest Hits," ranging from the rough (*ASK YOUR DRUG DEALER*, *Bevilacqua's BLOOD*) to his highly coveted lace paintings (*First Song*, *Heaven's Gate*). "As Mark keeps saying, it's not a full retrospective, it's more of a grab bag, but it does cover most of his career," says

Arning. "It does start off with the *Eat Human Flesh* paintings." That work caused outrage in the '80s, with fears of Satan worship, and drew the attention of local authorities. "So Flood being Flood, he made 20 more and spread them around Montrose and the Heights. That sort of contentiousness also typified the work," says Arning, who says it's both funny and quite exciting to see. "The big point of the show, in my mind, is that people who see Flood's output as one-dimensional outrage combined with the gorgeous lace paintings are missing a sort of philosophical statement that he has made from the beginning, that art is too important to not take seriously."

Arning told Flood that he "could spare him a lot of the standard things that happen in a big museum show" but couldn't spare him from the fact that he's going to be portrayed as the hometown hero. Yes, Flood still lives in Houston, and "loves the fact that he can be wildly independent here." He has a love-hate relationship with the city and has found beauty in the ugly, often taking VIPs from the art world on less-than-traditional tours. "They might miss the Rothko Chapel, but they'll get the San Jacinto Monument and the Ship Channel," says Arning. "He loves the strip malls, and he knows they're ugly, but there's something about them that's really primal for him."

Flood also has mixed feelings about social media, and has previously questioned why we're all placing free content on Facebook. "But he's fascinated by the idea of, instead of having real engagement, you press the 'like' button," says Arning. Flood has produced a mound of 5,000 *LIKE* paintings at CAMH ("These are actual paintings, not plastic like in Miami") and is encouraging visitors to pick up a painting and place it anywhere in the exhibition that attracts them.

In setting up the show, Flood wreaked a little havoc for the staff over at CAMH. "The idea of a normal checklist doesn't apply," says Arning. "Every day there's something new that he's bringing in. It's going to be chaotic in there." Expect to see pseudo-posters, multimedia, ephemera, collages, text paintings and documents, as well as more recent works that depict corporate and digital domain logos. "I think what's going to happen when people see the show, they'll say, 'Oh, right, this is why I fell in love with art,'" says Arning.

There's an opening reception 6:30 to 9 p.m. Friday, April 29; an exhibition walk-through at 2 p.m. Saturday, April 30; and a screening of Flood's film, *Art Fair Fever*, at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, May 12.

"Mark Flood: Gratest Hits" runs April 30 through August 7. Regular viewing hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursdays; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays; noon to 6 p.m. Sundays. Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose, 713-284-8250, camh.org. Free.