

# HICKSPLOITATION



*An unorthodox analysis ranging from Texas to Renaissance figuration techniques to contemporary country to Picasso. One of the most prominent Los Angeles-based artists discusses the work of AARON CURRY, one of the most promising representatives of the new generation.*

*words by RICHARD HAWKINS*

From Left:

*Model for the New Dark Age  
(reconfigured), 2007  
Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los  
Angeles and Michael Werner Gallery,  
New York*

*"Bad Dimension", exhibition view  
Galleria d'Arte Moderna e  
Contemporanea, Bergamo, 2009-10  
Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los  
Angeles and Michael Werner Gallery,  
New York*

## COVER STORY

### LOCAL YOKEL

The first thing you should understand about Aaron is that he's not originally from your culture, but through time, curiosity and desire, he has assimilated into it. Which, of course, can be said of most people growing up outside of major metropolitan areas. But Texans, especially we small town Texans, suffer from a particular kind of anti-culture undertow.

Most of Texas does have all the affable homespun charm and humor of hick flicks and *King of the Hill*, but it's worth remembering that Texas is also Bush country. Take a trip to Dallas or Houston someday and you might meet some of the nation's most friendly people... but live there for a while and you'll be tempted to paint a much darker picture of the Lone Star State in large strokes of absolute intolerance and sheer resentful ignorance.

"I CROSSED ME A \_\_\_\_\_ WITH A \_\_\_\_\_." "WHAT'D YA GET?"...

The droopy balls, the cow skull, the dog's prick, the Pappy Yokum boot (like the one thrown out the window at a yowling alley cat or the one hanging from Ad Reinhardt's tree), the leaky faucet, the back fence, the crooked stovepipe, the Picasso bull's back leg, the Bigfoot, the gaping maw, the *Sixpack Annie* jugs, the cockeyed, the old codger's fat dangling earlobes, the ratchet jaw and the monkey wrench, the plumber's crack, the bone through the nose, the sagging old-lady tits, the *Hee Haw* donkey's buckteeth, the shot right between the eyes, an anvil dropped from a great height, a bear trap, a toilet plunger, a banana peel, an apple core, Stringbean and a commode lid. In other words, wonkiness incarnate, a cartoon cache fashioned from an Acme DIY kit. The only thing missing is a dead fish's head with an X for an eye.

### ALL Y'ALL PEOPLE

San Antonio, Aaron's hometown, is much larger than your average whistle-stop (at least in terms of population) and is also the site, to its credit, of that damn Alamo every schoolkid is forced to remember. Culturally, San Antonio now boasts a few fledgling art and history museums, but much of the backwoods dynamic of very, very small Texas towns is still working overtime. (Most notably in San Antonio's—sadly defunct—Jax Beer Museum, in which one could once see a whole collection of sculptures made from deer horns and "paintings" made from pecans and hickory nuts.)

The most prevalent trait of this backwoods mentality is a pervasive preference among its citizenry for "the local," a concept that motivates actions, maintains prejudices and is invariably echoed in the billboard motto plastered near yokel city limit signs, "Small towns have big hearts."

The local is the local because it's not global. It's actually hardly even national, and a quick tally of small town Texans would prove that half of the eligible voters don't even register to vote for President (unless someone black or female is running; then they come out in droves to vote against that candidate). But have an election for county road commissioner, and they literally chomp at the bit to cast their ballot because their entire identity staunchly resists what they perceive to be culture-at-large in a grand self-misidentification called, if not backwoods-ness, then "we simple country folk."

### GRISAILLE

For Late Medieval and Renaissance artists, grayscale figuration often evoked classical art and, specifically, classical sculpture—reliefs, tableaux, statues, etc.—essentially three-dimensional objects, rendered in two dimensions. There is a range of theories on the use of grisaille, incorporating economic considerations (the dirt and carbon used to make umber, sienna and black were more readily available than the semiprecious stones originally needed to make ultramarine or the imported cinnabar needed to fabricate vermilion), compositional and decorative considerations (the polychromatic sibyls and prophets of the Sistine Chapel ceiling are juxtaposed with monochromatic caryatids, ram's skulls and sirens, which serve to frame the prophets while simultaneously integrating them into and distinguishing them from their architectural setting) and concerns over emotional impact (in Giotto's faux-stone *Vices and Virtues*, a decrease in the tantalizing sensation and distracting dazzle of color increases the portent and sobriety of the subject portrayed).

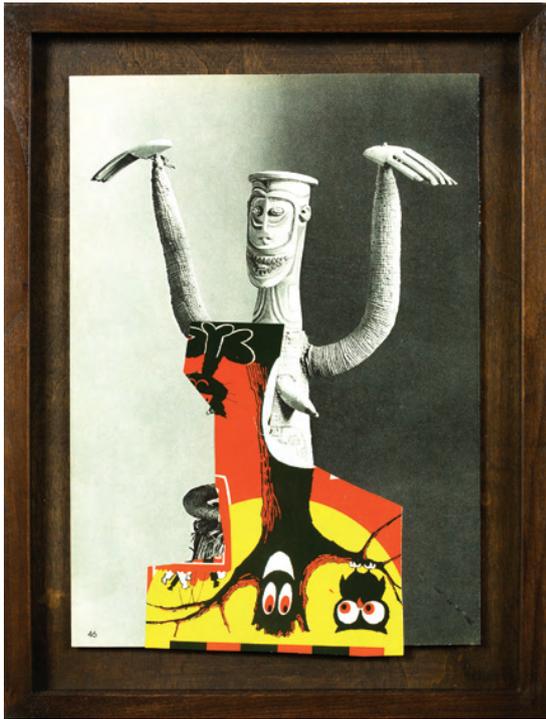
#### ARTIST'S BIO

AARON CURRY (b. 1972) was born in San Antonio, Texas and currently lives and works in Los Angeles. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and at the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena. Curry recently had solo exhibitions at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (Bergamo), the Ballroom Marfa (Marfa) and the UCLA Hammer Museum (Los Angeles), and his work was featured in the exhibition "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century" held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York) in 2007.

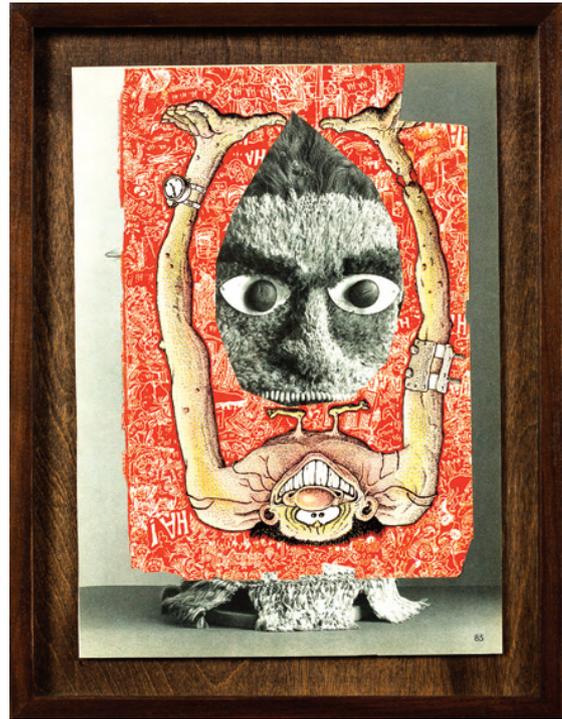








*To Fold and Puncture*, detail, 2006  
 Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles  
 and Michael Werner Gallery, New York



*Haunt (Thief)*, detail, 2006  
 Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles  
 and Michael Werner Gallery, New York

The question remains, however, why representations and evocations of the classical were so intrinsically linked to the use of grisaille. (It's taken for granted that the classical period was primarily represented by sculpture, since classical examples of paintings were virtually non-existent through the Renaissance, whereas you still can't dig a hole in the city of Rome without running across a marble arm or leg). Depending on the theological bent of whichever Papal or cardinal patron was doing the patronizing, Renaissance artists were either encouraged to or discouraged from forcing syncretic connections to pagan subjects in their religious pictures. Grisaille became one method (allegory being another) of having potentially subversive and heretical subjects both there and not there, a zone of ambiguity and disputation outside the fully polychromatic Biblical narrative, the "real" story, and intended to mean—according to the sectarian viewpoint of whoever's looking—either that the cult of Attis, for example, is continuous with the story of Christ, or else that all that old heathen stuff crumbled under the weight of a cross.

Or perhaps it's something else altogether. Grisaille may have merely served the same purpose as black-and-white flashbacks on soap-operas: to portray the done-already past, a recap of last week's episode, yesteryear, the old-timey.

Aaron's use of grisaille, specifically on wooden, planed and interlocking structures, plays on the surfaces and at the edges of these historical ins-and-outs.

#### INTERLOCKED

In Aaron's case, the provisional is not a critique of permanence. An interlocking construction of planes is a 3D sculpture easily reduced back to 2D elements.

#### UGLY STICKER

And ask Aaron sometime about "ugly stickers." Cartoon monster heads along the lines of Garbage Pail Kids, they were designed primarily by Basil Wolverton and were marketed as chase cards planted in bubblegum. They were a little before Aaron's generation, but there was at least one still hanging around, stuck to the wall of his grandmother's house in San Antonio by one of his uncles. Given its age, it had begun to become unsticky and had peeled up along one of its edges. It doesn't sound like much of a primal scene, but imagine an artist whose works hinge on 2D things gone 3D—the planar—and it begins to take on greater significance.

#### PLANARITY

The planar: it's either thick two-dimensionality or thin three-dimensionality.

#### 2-AND-A-HALF D OR DOUBLE D

Collages often start as three-dimensional objects reduced to two-dimensions. Take African masks, for example, photographed and reproduced in an old book. The reproduction, then, through cutting, becomes three-dimensional again (the element is an object, but just barely). In Aaron's case, the cut is often a hard, choppy cut that calls attention to the act of cutting, for its intention is to never fully integrate into its eventual collage context, but instead to remain a remnant which carries not only the reference of the African mask's original clonkiness and cobbled-togetherness, but also the materiality and surface of a gravure, a duotone or even a shitty and brittle half-tone reproduction (and in this sense, it's a fetish re-fetishized).

## COVER STORY

### SWEAT BEADS

Like shading in a drawing or etching, moisture on a surface describes volume within a flat rendering. As droplets of liquid glide down, say, the fleshy surface of a farm ripe tomato in a supermarket, or shimmer on the surface of a cocktail glass in a whiskey ad, or splash and cling to plump cheeks in creampie or bukkake porn, three-dimensionality is evidenced through liquid's ability to describe a shape by following and amplifying its contours.

Or else it's an ooze from within. Typefaces from *The Munsters* and *House of Wax* are not as much about candle-drippings as they are about bodily interiority. You can think of pimples ready to pop or the lashed and scourged body of Gruenwald's Christ.

But you can also think of uncontrollable self-moisturizing as evidence of arousal: pre-cum, lactating JuGGs, the sweaty brow and drooling jowls of Chester the Molester, the Vaseline-smear lens of Penthouse or the spritzed panties of Japanese hentai girls.

### CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

In order to hold the countrified in place, a grand, mythic and threatening beast called the "city-fied" has been constructed in countrified minds. The countrified is held not only in contrast to but utterly resistant and directly antagonistic toward the city-fied. Rednecks hold on to their red necks by refusing to let concepts like gay and interracial marriage into their purview because, well, gays and mixed-race couplings are evidence of the city's tenacious attempts to colonize the country folks and rob them of their heartfelt, hard-fought Rebel mindset.

Museums and what most of us count as culture are, by the way, pure citification.

### SHEEEUWT, OH FUDGE, GOLLYDURN AND OTHER HALF-OATHS

Aaron's set of references are too often misunderstood as privileging pop and the low-brow over Picasso, as if Aaron were yet another naive American artist who uses and abuses a rich history of paintings and sculptures to charmingly reincorporate and lampoon. Which is not the case at all. The frequent appearance of Picasso-esque motifs in Aaron's work is more likely his foil for the small-mindedness of a country culture that, upon finding out you're a painter, would more often than not want to know exactly what kinds of barns you find yourself 'a-painting.

(As a last example, here's my own mom on the Picasso that Steve Wynn put his elbow through: "A buncha million dollars for that ole ugly thang? Sheeeeuwt.")



G.O.W. (*Bricklayer*), 2008  
Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles  
and Michael Werner Gallery, New York



Pierced Line (*Brown Goblinoid*), 2008  
Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles  
and Michael Werner Gallery, New York

### INFO

This piece is an excerpt from Aaron Curry's first monograph, soon to be published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König and edited by Alessandro Rabottini.

### CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

From February 26 to May 24, the Kestnergesellschaft (Hannover) will host, for the first time in Germany, a solo exhibition by Aaron Curry. David Kordansky Gallery (Los Angeles) will present an exhibition of the artist's work in the near future.

### AUTHOR

RICHARD HAWKINS (b. 1961) is an artist based in Los Angeles and an Associate Professor in the MFA program at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena. His first comprehensive retrospective was presented at De Appel Centre for Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, in 2007. Recently, he had solo shows at Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, and Corvi Mora, London, and a new solo show will be held at Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles, in 2010.

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*Pixelator...*, 2008

Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles  
and Michael Werner Gallery, New York

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*Tommy...*, detail, 2007

Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles  
and Michael Werner Gallery, New York