LEHMANN MAUPIN

540 West 26th Street
New York NY 10001
Telephone 212 255 2923
Fax 212 255 2924

201 Chrystie Street
New York NY 10002
Telephone 212 254 0054
Fax 212 254 0055

lehmannmaupin.com

Artasiapacific
November, 2010

Exposed by My Gaudy Plumage Once Again

William Pym

Ashley Bickerton made a crucial, defining contribution to the art and culture of the American 1980s. Put plainly, at his mid-twenties peak, no artist more vividly captured the essence of a decade dangerously drunk on capitalism. Consider the wall-mounted sculpture Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Aries) (1987-88), a perfectly machined cuboid thing-and "thing" really is the word for something so gleefully pointless-in wood, aluminum, rubber, plastic, Formica, leather, steel and canvas. Sinister in its still, immovable bulk and decorated with 30 corporate logos across its seven-by-five-foot face, this Self Portrait describes exactly what happens when objects are able to act as substitutes for human feelings.

Karl Marx called the phenomenon commodity fetishism, warning of its power in 1842, and in Bickerton's 1988 it had quite clearly taken over: man as an amalgam of corporate affiliations, nothing more. His essence is fully represented, in this self-portrait, through his endorsement of Gillette razorblades, Trojan condoms, the Village Voice newspaper and Fruit of the Loom underpants. The "tormented" part of the title is obviously a joke on the cliche of the anguished artist, because the protagonist has absolutely everything he needs. Bayer aspirin is the chaser of choice for Gusano Rojo liquor, and nothing complements Manhattan Cable TV quite like TV Guide.

Self-Portrait is now owned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and has been canonized, in textbooks and graduate-school seminars, among the most important artworks of its decade. It recently traveled to London for "Pop Life," a blockbuster exhibition of art-as-commerce at London's Tate Modern, in late 2009. And it remains hard to fault the work. It is as vulgar and ironic as an artwork can be, but there is an earnestness to Self-Portrait's laborious execution and presentation that is hard to deny, a relishing of its own sensationalism that suggests Bickerton's relationship with its creation is far from straightforward. The critic David Rimanelli commented in 1994 that the artist's works of this period "were perhaps the most concisely sarcastic integrations of Pop and institutional critique in a sarcasm-rich period," and Bickerton happily reflected on the quote during a long series of interviews with ArtAsiaPacific. "It sounds bad, but to me it was nice," he laughs. "1 like double-edged-I like cutting in every direction. All meanings are slippery and collapsing. Yes I believe in value, no I don't. Art can be everything at once, and it's no problem. I'm happy with that." Whatever it is, Self-portrait is evergreen, enduring beyond its era because it is as unapologetic today as it was when it was made. When faith in what money can buy becomes overpoweringly eroticized, it eventually becomes a way of life: greed becomes a commanding force in the lives of art's practitioners and fans, not just the people who buy and sell it. All are implicated by this towering relic that refuses to decompose.

And Bickerton cast his damning spell from the start. He took to prominently time-stamping his works-"Season 86-87," for example in brutal estimation of contemporary art as a self-renewing retail cycle operating no differently from fashion.

In Landscape 1 (1988), an LED display presents the perpetually rising supposed value of the piece, starting, from the moment it was shown, at USD 25.000. Bickerton played a sadomasochistic tug-of-war with his clients-people who had money, thought about money and wanted to spend money; a sweaty bourgeoisie memorably known as "yuppies." And his work always won. Meanwhile, viewers without checkbooks happily caught a fever from the germs of hype flying around. An October 1986 New York magazine feature of a four-man show at Sonnabend Gallery that included Bickerton and Jeff Koons told readers to "Get Ready for the Next Art Stars." In the same magazine, a week later, the art critic Kay Larson had an unequivocal response: "Cynical, consumerist art becomes the perfect mirror of its coked-up, sensation-seeking society. And the society that adores trash snaps it up." Both extremes buoyed the work's credibility. Bickerton knew it, and he kept going.

It was inevitable, however, that all artist who staked everything on the machinations of commerce would eventually perish by its casino-like fluctuations. The hysterical art market began to slow down following the Black Monday global financial crash in October 1987, and by 1990 Bickerton's star status had dimmed. Another art world and another generation of artists was taking shape. Bickerton began to show an interest in the natural world with works such as Stratified Landscape (1990), an industrial wall-sculpture made surprisingly render through its incorporation of beds of coral and seaweed. The work appeared to be leaning toward archaeology in the old-fashioned sense, but ultimately it could not revive the artist's audience. Bickerton had stopped making front-page headlines. Today, he is endearingly circumspect, far from maudlin, about this moment in his career. "We all got spanked, pretty much, after the Eighties, and some of us never came back," he recalls. "The days when we'd sit around and have all those arguments were gone anyway. Everybody had reverted back to their studios, buying places upstate, moving out, drifting off. We used to joke that you'd have to go to the Sydney Biennale to see your neighbor in Brooklyn. So," he explains, with considerable understatement. "1 decided to go a bit further."

Bickerton left New York to live full-time on the Indonesian island of Bali, at age 34, in 1993. Such a relocation for this quintessential
New York art star is not as strange as one might think. The artist's British father, the noted linguist-anthropologist Derek Bickerton, led his family to live around the world-from Barbados to the Balearic islands and Jamaica-while researching the origins of pidgin and Creole languages in the 1960s, so the younger Bickerton felt very much at home on an island. His family settled in Hawaii when he was 12, and he discovered surfing there, a pastime that became a passion during his studies at the California Institute of the Arts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bali boasts some of the world's best waves-"it's a place I'd been going for years," he says-so he knew what was waiting for him there. Finally, from a professional and practical perspective, Bickerton believed Bali to be a place "that's built for sending boxes of stuff out, because everyone's doing export. The infrastructure is there." His emigration makes sense; there is c1early more to it than flight from an unfavorable art climate. Moreover, the Landscape sculptures of the early 1990s were pointing to newly organic artistic concerns, away from the brittle urbanity of the 1980s works that had looked, as he put it, "like odd pieces of stereo equipment." Bickerton was ready for his practice, and life, to change.

We may now look at the work he ended up making in Bali, however, and be rendered speechless, or he forced to avert our eyes. The Alley (2009), a mixed-media painting six feet rail and almost eight feet wide, depicts a male figure, manic with total excess, down a tropical tourist-trap backstreet. His left hand clutches a carrot-sized joint and a beer bottle with a chipped lip; his right hand appears to dig into the back of a head pressed into his open Bermuda shorts. A wailing naked woman grabs at his free arm. A crazed transvestite runs hysterically, talon-nailed fingers grasping at air, from the back of the scene. The women's bodies are covered in a painted camouflage of blue, red, yellow and green. The man has blue skin and is missing a front tooth, and his eyes have rolled back in his head. The faces of the figures speak only of madness and rage. The painting is truly grotesque-degraded and degrading. “I wanted to do something about where you're out of order in some strange place," Bickerton says, "when you've gone too far, crossed too many lines, where there's people mad at you, and there's something sexual and violent happening. 1 wanted to go as far as possible."

The same can be said of the way the work was produced. The Alley is an elaborate stew of old-fashioned and contemporary techniques. The narrative elements of the piece are made up of photographs of live models with painted bodies. (In The Alley's case, the two main protagonists are the artist and his wife.) Hundreds of these photos are then digitally stitched together. They are smudged in place, resized, warped and generally roughed up via the wonders of Photoshop-"a drug," Bickerton says-and then printed, archivally, onto canvas. Having established this underpainting, so to speak, Bickerton fusses over the surface in oils and acrylics, baffling the viewer with what paint was printed earlier and what pigment now sits on top. For good measure, a final layer of abstract spots of paint, which have been scanned into a computer and printed out, dots the surface. One's sense of depth, of what is real and what is one step removed, begins to fall apart. Finally, a fat, eight-inch-deep burnished frame rings the whole thing, riddled with drilled holes of different widths and decorated in miniature Hindu carvings, mother-of-pearl pattern motifs and carved coconut forms borrowed from Ballinese folk an.

Visually speaking, this garish, obsessive work overwhelms. It most closely resembles the lysergic mania of 1960s psychedelic art, but drugs cannot explain Bickerton's Bali work. Amphetamines were omnipresent while the artist cut his teeth as a studio assistant to the legendary painter Jack Goldstein in the early 1980s, and abstinence was not a hallmark of the decade that followed, but Bickerton's brain was chemically sober when he made these works. "I’m not interested in marijuana," he clarifies, "though I do like pothead art." So what explains it? Trying to understand this work, after feeling that one understood the artist before he left New York, where does one start?

In Bickerton's mind, the evolution of his work and his life obeys a plain, consistent logic. “I don't know if anyone gets this," he concedes. "but the paintings are parodies of what a painting is supposed to be. People thought my work in the 1980s was sculpture, but I thought of it as painting even then, with the handles, the covers and the electronic counters. The reason they came out of the wall is because paintings are supposed to come out of the wall." The sculptures were, if one takes his argument at face value, a continuation of the still-life painting tradition. And the gaudy frames that developed in Bickerton's Bali work can be seen as the next phase of this technique-they contain the painting, they announce the painting, but they also

question what one can consider a painting to be.

As for the themes in his Bali work-the exaggerations and brutal perversions of island life-Bickerton faces them head-on. "Paul Gauguin was the elephant in the room:' he says of the Post-Impressionist who abandoned cosmopolitan Paris a hundred years ago to embrace life and art in Tahiti. "All these wispy artists who run off to an island to paint nativist scenes of mawkish maidens and rustic old dames with dollops of local color, Bali's full of them. I dealt with the 'ethnic' question by doing what I did years ago," which is to toy mercilessly with his viewer's expectations and hidden desires. "What are these paintings supposed to have?" Bickerton remembers asking himself this question in the late 1990s as the art world in London and New York began to wonder if he was drawing inspiration, as Gauguin had, from his tropical environment. "Exoticism, sex, color, locale, big frames, value ... so I did all that." Antagonism of his audience, from clients to critics and fans, remained his imperative.

Bickerton's "Extradition" series (2006), for example, revealed all the inanity of his audience's perception of the island artist. The heavily Photoshopped prints of Bickerton in his environment pose as long-lost discoveries from ethnographic archives, the sort of willfully exotic, inaccurate colonial reports of the late 19th century. Flecked with fake scratches and brown spots of mold that directly emulate "the rotted old pictures under glass that you found in Bali bootleg cassette shops back in the day," the works in "Extradition" were designed as "advertisements for a fictitious life." Extradition With Computer has the artist percbed on a pillow, tapping away on a PC that sits atop a mother-or-pearl chest. His topless Balinese wife lies on her back beside him, playing with a baby, while a piglet perches on her knee. Extradition With Fruit has the wide-eyed artist thrusting a cornucopia of dripping tropical fruit out of the frame as four beautiful women, one pregnant, dance behind him. Bickerton is offering this wild life to the viewer. "Straw hat on, naked girls, piggies-I'm feeding them this horseshit and they believe it. This is the first real picture that people had of my life in Bali, and they bought it."

So all this extreme content and technique, these provocations exist in Bickerton's work to question art's purpose. "Painting is too cartoony; it's childish, it's silly," he declares, in a riff so perfectly formed and dynamically delivered as to sound like a manifesto. "Photography is too cold. Sculpture is just bloody presumptuous and daft and takes up too much space. But somewhere in the middle the painting gives the photography warmth and human life, the photography gives the painting some kind of scientific veracity, some rational purpose, and tile sculpture gives it body. Through that thinking 1 came to make these things that aren't really paintings, but are about paintings."

To be satisfied with that version of Bickerton's art, however, would fail to address a central feature of the artist's Bali period. Intellectually speaking, Bickerton can explain the wild appearance of his recent work within the context of his ongoing, near-scientific investigation of the art object. Emotionally speaking, though, one must appreciate that very few people are actually capable of plumbing depths of the kind that he does. Discussing Rosie and the General (1994), an early figurative Bali painting that depicts a 98-year·old man with one arm and one eye having sex with a morbidly obese early-teen girl, the artist claims that he "wanted to do a picture of utter, utter degradation, utter exploitation. Something so wrong, but that could

happen." The work is exactly as abhorrent as it sounds.

"1 represent no moral force" and "what I see is normal for me" are the artist's bland first responses to the proposition that he may be wired differently than the average person. When pushed, he went further, recalling the renowned critic Jerry Saltz's charge, in an otherwise complimentary 1996 review, that a picture of a monkey acting like a human was "a one-liner straight out of Mad magazine." Bickerton smarts at the notion that his observations are in any way played for purely comic effect. "I read Jane Goodall, her studies of primate societies, and [pioneering 20th-century anthropologists] Bronislaw Malinowski and Tobias Schneebaum. From early on I was obsessed both with tribal and primitive societies as well as early hominid development." It is evidently very important to him that we see humanity, in all its complicated ugliness, from an evolutionary, animalistic standpoint. He points to a reproduction of Ruby and Rommel (1998), in which a hard-partying ape helps a young girl celebrate her birthday. "A chain-smokingchimpanzee in a dispel' named Ronmlel, who's actually able to communicate, is not out of the question. Bestial little monsters celebrating this weird abstract idea called a birthday-for me it's completely normal."

The Patron (1997) is a life-size portrait of a wealthy art collector with his hand down his underpants, his Brancusi and his Mondrian lit by the glow of late-night television, his hairpiece resting on the corner of his Herman Miller marshmallow sofa. Many critics at the time saw the painting as a castigation of the people on whom the contemporary artist is forced to rely, yet Bickerton's take on his best-known work from the 1990s is devastatingly sympathetic: "He has made choices, and built a carefully thought-out world for himself, and in this private world he can revert to a mammalian state." He is not a villain, simply an animal like everybody else.

In this light, then, a new term appears in the in-progress discourse of the chimeric Ashley Bickerton, a word that the savvy, tough artist would never himself use: self-acceptance. One may dress the man's work in the garb of timely and intellectual "institutional critique," one may enter the cozy circle of debate about art that refers to art, but Bickerton's grand theme may ultimately be as achingly emotional, simple and universal as respecting and loving oneself. From the crass logos and oversized signatures of his 1980s sculptures to the formal ostentation and thematic extremity of his Bali paintings, Bickerton has at every stage owned up to the folly of man’s desires and needs, and this is how his career must be seen. His work is mad because he has allowed himself to see man's madness.

During his interview with AAP, Bickerton paused for a long time over 'The Expats (2004), a largely unmanipulated photocollage and paint work featuring two men arguing over a table littered with beer bottles in a Southeast Asian bar. "Two fools blathering," he says. A pair of prostitutes stand by, waiting, growing more disinterested by the minute. Without blotches of decoration or fluorescent skin, the piece is unusually direct. "That's me," he said, pointing to the tubby, painfully sunburned man on the left "I literally ate pizza for four months. We arrived in a group to shoot the setup, and the girls' eye bounced from person to person, but 1 wasn't there. I was invisible." A total lack of awareness, a lack of self, turns man into something les than human. In Bickerton's oeuvre, seeing makes us vulnerable to the world's temptations, but it also allows us to recognize each other as human beings.

Man's center is no more New York than iy is Bali, and his needs are indifferent to any marketing or hype.