



BAD HAIR DAY

CLOCKWISE

FROM LEFT

Meat Tenderizer
(2012); Joel
Morrison comes
face-to-face with
his *Pop Defekte*
(2011); *Basketball
Rim Drawing #7*
(2012)



Heavy Metal

THE SOLO EXHIBITION OF SCULPTOR **JOEL MORRISON'S** PLAYFUL ART ABOUT ART AT GAGOSIAN GALLERY HONG KONG IS A REVELATORY EXPERIENCE, WRITES **DIANA D'ARENBERG**

I EXPECTED ANOTHER ARTIST in thrall to Jeff Koons and the post-pop-art production machine, and for the cynical ennui to set in within minutes. I even had ready a few quick-witted Donald Kuspit quips about art. But I didn't need them. Across the length of Gagosian Gallery Hong Kong's immaculate and sterile space was an equally impressive and immaculately presented series of 12 stainless steel sculptures by the 36-year-old Seattle-born, LA-based sculptor Joel Morrison, touted by some as being one of the most significant sculptors to come out of the US in recent years.

Morrison looks like a mix between Turtle from *Entourage* and a Brooklyn intellectual. He's disarmingly humble, but clever as he engages with the canon of art history and the work of contemporary and modern predecessors – without a trace of pretension or intellectual posturing. He's an art historian's artist as much as an artist's artist, and succeeds in marrying a dialogue with art history with an exacting eye for detail and technique.

Using found and everyday objects such as water bottles, kitchen utensils, light bulbs, bullets, sneakers, hot dogs, and everything in between, Morrison creates polished stainless steel sculptures that reference classical Greek sculpture, Duchampian ready-mades and futurism with humour and intelligence. The gleaming stainless-steel surface of the works veils and embellishes the true identity of the objects used, and transforms the mundane into something shiny and new yet indeterminate. The bulbous (at times amorphous) shapes depend on viewer engagement and interpretation to imbue them with meaning. These objects take on another





“My works will always be contemporary because they reflect back real time”

life once cast in metal. Bulging peaks appear as though something is encased within, struggling to push from the inside out.

The process is one of spontaneity and immediacy, throwing together discarded objects found around Morrison's neighbourhood. “They're not just foreign objects,” he explains. “It's stuff you see every day – just put into a different context.” Morrison creates a new visual language out of these old objects, and there is a tongue-in-cheek feeling of slick luxury from sculptures that are created out of waste and excess. It's easy to read a social message into his use of discarded objects. His approach, however, is born more out of pragmatism than of ideology. “Found objects are just there – and they're better than I can make them anyway. They're really collages of scenarios.”

Morrison's technique of using cast objects and seemingly encasing them sarcophagus-like in a new material recalls Christo as much as the shiny new surfaces repeatedly call to mind Koons and the modernist sculptures of Constantin Brâncuși. But the forms that emerge from the panoply of objects

thrown together, coupled with the approach to production, showcase the influence of his adopted city. The LA art scene has long reflected and idealised the glossy, glamorous, fetishised culture of narcissism that is a defining and indelible characteristic of the town. An obsession with surface and slick, polished perfection bled into the 1960s and '70s Finish Fetish art movement. “You had these artists like Craig Kauffman and John McCracken, and even Robert Irwin and James Turrell. Light and space was so important to them. Then there was the conceptual movement in LA from Cal Arts, which included John Baldessari. These ideas are a nice mix for me,” Morrison says. “I thought it was cool to make conceptual works, but then also use Finish Fetish and really combine it.”

Though on preliminary viewing there appears to be a monochromatism defining his work, Morrison is skilled at playing up the advantages of the materials he works with. He explains, “The reflections in the stainless steel all become about colour; that's why I use metal. All these works are about colour for me. When you walk by, it catches

SENSE OF SPACE

ABOVE
Morrison's solo show at Gagosian Gallery Hong Kong



JAWS OF LIFE

FROM LEFT

More of Morrison's strange forms on show at Gagosian; Vic (2011); Yogurtland (2012)



SUNSET STRIP

Proving that it's more than a one-industry town, Los Angeles has churned out a string of influential artists. Here are a few LA-based artists making international waves:

MARK BRADFORD transforms salvaged billboard posters into multi-layered collages, painted art works and installations, drawing from the diversity of southern California.

The work of **FRIEDRICH KUNATH** encompasses painting, drawing, sculpture and film, and is inspired by Californian counterculture.

London-born **WALEAD BESHTY** has captured international attention with his photographs, which pose probing questions about our culture of materialism.

The ceramics, paintings, poured-urethane sculptures, collages and video work of **STERLING RUBY** have seen the artist named "one of the most interesting artists to emerge in this century" by art critic Roberta Smith of *The New York Times*.

Figurative sculptures by **THOMAS HOUSEAGO** are described as grotesque, bizarre and madly imaginative. Houseago's playful works predominantly employ "lo-fi" materials including plywood and plaster.

your reflection and reflects back your blue sweater, your red lips. They will always be contemporary because they reflect back real time."

The viewer is seduced by the reflective high-polish and light of the finished surface, but unlike the super-polished works of McCracken or even Koons, Morrison's pieces also revel in imperfections. The artist's hand is visible throughout, in defiance of the assembly-line approach that has become common practice in the contemporary art world. "They're not fabricated in the way that Anish Kapoor or Jeff Koons would do it," says Morrison. "I don't have a team of people doing it. I do it all myself, and draw on industrial techniques to make my works." Finger indentations from the casts, scratches, textures and seams are incorporated into the finished piece. "It's these flaws and imperfections that give the work personality."

Morrison assimilates discarded objects into a framework of art history with a sense of Dadaist prankishness. *Futurism is a Trap* (2012), for example, serves as a wink and a nudge to the Italian Futurists' obsession with hygiene and cleanliness, whereas *Tomb* (2012), hanging near the gallery's entrance, resembles a painting draped by a shiny metallic packing blanket – a reference to a Frank Stella that could just as easily be a tongue-in-cheek play on Louise Lawler's works.

The genesis of the piece lies in the quotidian as much as the objects Morrison uses. "I had to put a blanket over a painting to protect it from construc-

tion in my kitchen. I liked the piece with a blanket, and the fact that you couldn't tell what was under there. Was it a Picasso or a Def Leppard poster?" he explains. "And then I noticed that the stitching pattern on the blanket was the same as an important Frank Stella drawing, *Getty Tomb* from 1959."

Beneath the layers of references, there's always "a simple but searing punchline," according to the artist. One art in-joke Morrison employs is *Corner Piece (Curved)* (2012), based on the Robert Morris minimalist *Untitled (Corner Piece)* from 1964, and which also draws on a long history of artists producing corner pieces, from Sol LeWitt to Félix González-Torres. "A few years ago, I saw the Robert Morris corner piece and it was sitting there wrapped up in a cargo blanket," Morrison explains. "That became the finished work itself. When we took it out of the crate, it was in a cargo blanket. And when we took it off, it was still in the cargo blanket. I thought it was a more honest way of presenting it. Things end up in crates, in backrooms. They become such a commodity – and it's important to be able to laugh at that aspect."

It's self-referential "art about art" but, as Hong Kong-based Gagosian gallerist Whitney Ferrare comments, "His work finds a happy middle ground between figuration and abstraction, and he creates this humorous dialogue between the two." This dynamic visual language is what makes Morrison's work challenging on a both a critical and aesthetic level, but also so engaging and arresting. ■