

Finkel, Jori. "In The Studio," *Art + Auction*, March 2008, pp. 60-62, 64, 66.



DEPARTMENTS

IN THE STUDIO

60 At 30, Nathan Mabry is already being celebrated for sculptures both witty and wise. BY JORI FINKEL

➤ **WEB EXCLUSIVE** The artist talks about his many influences in a Q&A at [artandauction.com](http://artandauction.com).

SOUREN MELIKIAN

71 New buyers proclaimed their presence at the fall sales of Chinese art in London and Hong Kong.

OBSESSIONS

82 A Russian-born collector finds solace in his trove of early 20th-century works. BY KATHERINE JENTLESON

➤ **WEB EXCLUSIVE** How do Boris Stavrovski's favorite artists fare on the block? Visit [artandauction.com](http://artandauction.com).

CONNOISSEUR

93 Japanese basket makers transform bamboo into surprisingly sculptural forms. BY MARISA BARTOLUCCI

BOOKS

99 Recent Asian-art volumes guide collectors through diverse, burgeoning fields. BY LAURA WHITMAN

MARKETFILE

137 The business of art.

139 Artist Dossier: Winslow Homer  
145 In Brief  
150 Auction Review  
160 Databank

➤ **WEB EXCLUSIVE** [artandauction.com](http://artandauction.com) previews a show of Homer's works at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Finkel, Jori. "In The Studio," *Art + Auction*, March 2008, pp. 60-62, 64, 66.





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# NATHAN MABRY

NATHAN MABRY BUYS TONS OF STUFF ON eBay. That's where the Los Angeles-based sculptor, who was trained as a ceramist, found his electric front-loading kiln for a mere \$1,500 (and a commitment to pick it up from Oklahoma City). That's where he bought two West African Senufo rhythm

pounders, wooden sculptures that now stand proudly in his studio. And that's where he gets many of the latex masks—from frightening Halloween disguises to a face of Michelangelo's *David*—that he has devilishly slipped onto venerable figurative sculptures before photographing them.

Then there's his biggest find yet: a seven-and-a-half-foot-tall bronze re-creation of Rodin's *Thinker*, offered on eBay by a California foundry. Mabry has just bought it for \$10,000 and is awaiting its delivery when I meet with him at his Culver City studio one fall day last year. "I'm really excited to see it," he says, showing me a picture of the pseudo-*Thinker*, which has strangely exaggerated features. "I will be putting a mask on it to create a pastiche of a pastiche."

Opposite: Nathan Mabry, seen in his Culver City studio, has become a hot commodity in the art world because of his technical ability and sense of humor. His dealer Philip Martin says that Mabry's works "have a peculiar presence as objects." That's evident in *It Is What It Is (On the Bed, on the Table, on the Chair)*, 2006, seen at the Rubell Family Collection, this page.





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Nathan Mabry's eBay habit says something about the way he works—sampling and synthesizing different cultural influences and artifacts, high and low, modern and ancient, handmade and mass-produced. Just 30 years old, he is fast becoming known for creating pieces that combine forms associated with hard-core Minimalist sculpture (think Donald Judd or Carl Andre) with the erotic shapes common in pre-Columbian Peruvian ceramics. It may sound gimmicky, but Mabry pulls off this pairing with a light touch and a wry sense of humor, not critiquing either aesthetic as much as playing with—and embracing—them.

This month, both his new sculpture and the adjusted Rodin readymade will appear in the artist's much-anticipated second solo exhibition at Cherry and Martin gallery, in Los Angeles. Before partnering with Philip Martin, Mary Leigh Cherry had shown Mabry herself, starting in 2004, right after he graduated from UCLA's MFA program and just a few months before the Hammer Museum's "Thing" show of new sculpture, in which the artist featured prominently. Cherry and Martin has since launched him internationally, through a solo show in L.A. that remains up until April 15 and via displays at art fairs. The gallery devoted its entire booth to Mabry last year at the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) fair during Art Basel Miami Beach. His work was also part of the "Red Eye" show of Los Angeles work at the Rubell Family Collection.

Along with the Rubells, other early collectors of Mabry's works include L.A.-based media executive Dean Valentine, London-based financial analyst Amir Shariat and the ubiquitous Charles Saatchi, who owns two of the artist's sculptures and a set of three photographs. Mabry's prices now start around \$5,000, for a drawing, and go up to \$70,000, for major sculptures, which are typically issued in editions of three.

"People are drawn to the quality of the works as objects," says Philip Martin. "There are a lot of different levels on which you could enter his works. You can look at them conceptually, as with Brancusi—what's the sculpture and what's the base? You can look at them as a combination of different cultures. You can look at the sense of humor. But above all they have a peculiar presence as objects."

The artist is talking with galleries in New York, Milan and Tokyo about representation. But at press time Cherry and Martin was Mabry's only gallery. It's a challenge, Cherry says: "When everything's selling so fast, how do you share it?"

"I like the pace I have right now," the artist tells me. "Getting another gallery is not my focus." Rather, his focus is getting ready for his new show, and his studio reflects this. A one-story cinder-block building previously used as a machine shop, the 2,900-square-foot space is still filled with industrial-looking machines. Along the right wall are a top-loading kiln, a front-loading kiln, a chop saw and a Dust Dog »



A Mabry menagerie displays his versatility. Clockwise from top: *Untitled*, 2007, in bronze, marble and wood; *Mosaic Mask (KO)* and *Mosaic Mask (xoxo)*, both 2007, in colored pencil and rhinestones on Mylar; a view of the artist's studio; the bronze *Timeless*, 2006; and ceramic works from the "It is What It is" series in progress.





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system to suck up the mess. Toward the back, where Mabry's wife, Tia Pulitzer (a sculptor who shows with Black Dragon Society, in L.A.), has set up shop, are workbenches and hand tools.

Throughout the studio, Mabry has work in different stages of completion. One table contains small multiples that he has just completed for the Philadelphia gallery Cerealar: a pair of bronze skulls, one with an elephant nose attached to it by a bronze version of an elastic band, the other sporting a camel nose. He calls them the male and female, respectively, of some invented species. Each comes with a wood box of Mabry's own design that doubles as a pedestal and shipping container.

A drafting table holds a powerful drawing of a mosaic-patterned skull done in green and gold pencil on a large Mylar sheet. The image based on a photograph of a Mixtec ceremonial skull from Mexico encrusted with jade and turquoise tiles (most likely to celebrate immortality or bestow supernatural powers), which Mabry traced meticulously and then colored by hand. "It's almost as labor-intensive as putting on the stones originally," he says, noting that his final touch will be to add Swarovski crystals to the drawing to create a "grille" on the skull's teeth.

In the center of the studio stands a model of his newest sculpture: four curvy Moche vessels from Peru with stirrup handles and animal bodies (he sees them as "zoomorphic humans or anthropomorphic animals") perched on top of boxy, Judd-inspired stools. Although the plan is to cast the work in bronze, at this stage it consists of cardboard, with blown-up photographs of the pots standing in for the sculptures to come.

Often Mabry's source photographs come from books. But he took these pictures himself, while visiting museums and ancient sites in Peru last summer. "I don't think people realize how directly I work from primitive imagery," he says. "People would probably recognize African sculpture, but the Moche imagery is ambiguous to a lot of people. It looks very contemporary—a lot of people probably think it comes from my imagination."

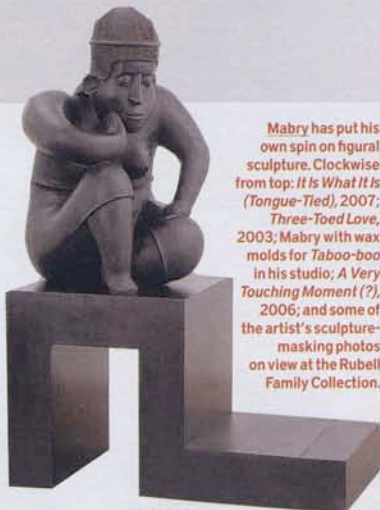
This contemporary look helps to keep the Minimalist-Peruvian couplings, including the cleverly titled *A Very Touching Moment* (*Cumming Linguist*), from being too pat. The structure of this work "is yin and yang," he says. "It's not meant to be a hierarchy but a way of suspending the logic of time—bringing together cultures from the 1960s and the 1500s, before the colonization of Peru." He calls his creation a "synchronicitous stew," noting that bronze helps give the disparate elements equal weight.

Bronze is also convenient for Mabry, who prefers making a mold through the lost-wax method to firing unique ceramic works. "I only fire three to four one-of-a-kind pieces a year," he says. "It's very stressful because something can blow up or crack. A lot can happen."

Mabry became versed in the properties of clay, including its volatility, when he was a teenager. He grew up in Napa, California, with parents who worked in the wine industry. His father, >>



"THE MATERIALS I TYPICALLY WORK WITH—PLASTIC, BRONZE, CERAMICS—ARE EXACTLY THE THINGS THAT WILL SURVIVE US."



Mabry has put his own spin on figural sculpture. Clockwise from top: *It Is What It Is* (*Tongue-Tied*), 2007; *Three-Toed Love*, 2003; Mabry with wax molds for *Taboo-boo* in his studio; *A Very Touching Moment* (?), 2006; and some of the artist's sculpture-masking photos on view at the Rubell Family Collection.





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who also played in a reggae band, had mystical leanings, reading Carlos Castaneda to the young Mabry when the two went camping. The artist started working in ceramics as a junior in high school, when he made a geometric side table with a greenish black glaze that the teacher encouraged him to submit to the county fair. He won the blue ribbon for best in show and went on to apprentice with a local ceramist. His senior project was building a wooden kiln.

Mabry went on to study ceramics at the Kansas City Art Institute, earning a BFA, before going for his MFA at UCLA, where he worked with such diverse artist-teachers as James Welling, John Baldessari and Paul McCarthy.

Did he experience prejudice against ceramics, regarded in the art world as a craft? "There was a certain amount of resistance," he says very diplomatically. "But it only made me want to work harder."

The result of this hard work has been witty, even juicy, conceptual work crafted from age-old materials like clay. In this respect, Mabry can be seen as part of a larger movement including such diverse artists as Ken Price, Grayson Perry, Kristen Morgin and Anna Sew Hoy, all of whom are making ceramics relevant to contemporary art, even though the medium itself is timeless. "It's funny," Mabry says. "The materials I typically work with—plastic, bronze, ceramics—are exactly the things that will survive us."

Perhaps less obviously, his photographs also evince this interest in making things permanent, since they preserve the bizarre juxtapositions created by his sculpture-masking pranks. He performed his first guerrilla-art act four years ago, when he noticed, across from Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, a bronze sculpture of a man and woman walking. He added a scary mask so that "it looked like the creature from the Black Lagoon," he says, and then snapped a picture. Most recently, he photographed a 1923 bust by Aristide Maillol in UCLA's sculpture garden wearing various fake noses, including a mouse snout.

"It's such a dumb gesture," Mabry admits, "but it creates this compelling imagery." It's reached the point where collectors now call the gallery and ask that he adorn their own sculptures. He has already done a few.

For now, though, he would rather think about transforming the giant Rodin, which he is sandblasting to achieve a classic black patina. When that's done, he will cast a mask in bronze and weld it to the figure.

What kind of mask? "I really like one I've used before—a large latex mask with a tongue sticking out and eyeballs bulging out of his head," says Mabry. "*The Thinker* is already so loaded, it could be nice to have something that takes you in a different direction." ■

➤ **WEB EXCLUSIVE** See [artandauction.com](http://artandauction.com) for a Q&A with Mabry about artists and teachers who have influenced him.



Clockwise from top:  
*A Very Touching Moment (Cunning Linguist)*, 2006;  
*Taboo-boo*, 2007;  
Mabry's re-creation of Rodin's *Thinker*, bought on eBay, at right in his studio; another view of *It Is What It Is (On the Bed, on the Table, on the Chair)*, 2006; and *Vanitas-She and Vanitas-He*, 2007.

