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Clifford Rainey, Art Documentation, and Aesthetic Fundamentalism

An Interview

Clifford Rainey was in the Detroit area last spring for an exhibition at the Habatat Galleries. James Gilbert conducted the following interview.

JG: You have enshrined a glass Coke bottle and nail-pierced it, much like an African tribal fetish figure. Explain more of what the purpose was behind the image being pierced and also the coloring that was used.

CR: It's one of those pieces which has evolved over the last four or five years. The initial idea was from a trip I was on when I went overland from Kenya down to South Africa and back up through Zambia to Kenya without going on main roads. One of the things I was expecting when I went there was to go into villages and see people making pots and various things. In fact they did, but in a different manner than I was expecting. They would make pots and sell them at the side of the road to tourists. (One of the main concerns that runs through all my work is conservation.) Instead they would take everything discarded, like old plastic drums, oil cans or Coca-Cola cans, they would use those, so they wouldn't make pots to use as utility, they would actually use discarded things.

When I travel I really try to get away from other human beings, trying to move away a little bit and find out the way things used to be. Sometimes I'll be out on an island, like I'm the first person to step onto this island - or some forest - literally every corner you turn, there is a Coca-Cola can somewhere. I'm not being detrimental to Coca-Cola, it's just such a successful product. But that again has been at the back of my mind.

When I decided to put all these things together in a piece, I wanted to call it "Africa". Africa in its broadest terms. So basically I wanted to get the feeling of walking through a museum and you were almost fooled into thinking that there was something from Africa, something from the past. Then the more you looked at it you'd realize that it couldn't be. So one of the major things behind this piece was the fact, first of all, it was this kind of fetish - the large Coca-Cola bottle - and it's larger than it should be, but the main thing is it actually is cast from recycled Coca-Cola bottles. Which is the real center of the whole thing. It's actually made from thrown away Coca-Cola bottles. I cheated a little bit and used other glass to get the gradations; after that, the background, the canvas behind with all those safety pins, beads and things. There are two colors in Africa which are really strong. One's red and one's green. They are really the colors of Africa. So I'm almost using primary colors, in a sense. I've used the color in the bottle, in one way, but then I use cadmium, because cadmium is so dynamic. So this piece evolved over a period of time and changed and changed and changed, sort of like an orchestra.

JG: Where did the totem base come from?

CR: It's actually a railway sleeper, literally a discarded one. Everything there is found materials.

JG: They're symbolic, otherwise you wouldn't use them?

CR: Yes, the railways, and over there (pointing to another piece) I use port boxes. The railways opened up certain areas.

JG: Could you explain the anvil above the head on the wall over there? It seems threatening. What does it represent?

CR: All these things are sort of autobiographical. They are my attempt to try to understand the situation we're in. One of my major conflicts, which has existed for a long time, is that I both absolutely adore human beings and I absolutely detest them, including myself. When I hear about the Space Shuttle, I am absolutely in awe of this technology, and I think it's fabulous in what we are doing. At the same time, it's the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus, and I'm from the school who thinks he wasn't such a fabulous fellow. Basically, I have that conflict. I'm into space travel, and if I were living in the time of Columbus I would most likely have been favorable towards Columbus.

I just moved to Northern California and when I went there I really had this vision of these beautiful mountains and hills and the desert. And of course it's totally built over. It's a population explosion.

There are too many people for the water table and various things. And yet in some ways I like the idea of human beings pushing things ahead. That's what we are all about. So there are a couple things that come out of it. The piece is called "Bright Red Stick". Even though it's an African piece the actual title comes from the Native American. Sometimes I mix cultures quite freely. Again this piece was cast from Coca-Cola bottles. Of course the head was based loosely on an Efi head from ancient Nigeria. It was taken from that idea. Every time I made a wax, each wax was distorted and changed. The idea was if the head was ever found in the future, an archeologist might immediately identify it as being from Efi, four hundred years ago. Then when they send it to a university and analyze it, they'll find out it was made from Coca-Cola bottles. That will really confuse them.

The other thing was the Industrial Revolution. Getting back to the railway idea, getting back to technology. The idea of the anvil and the Industrial Revolution is basically what computers are doing at the moment. Just totally changing the world. It made countries like England become empires. Again I'm looking at it in two different ways. I look at history: I can't criticize those times because we're not living in those times. So there is that kind of spiral conflicts. I can go out in the street and be furious with people for polluting the air, and yet I love Ferraris. I constantly refer to books. One is of the exhibition in New York at the Museum of Modern Art. "Primitivism in 20th Century Art." In the back of my mind with this piece I was sort of thinking like Picasso, the way he would have used an anvil. There was a lot going into that again, you know, twisting, twisting, through.

JB: There is red on the objects and background and piercing in both anvil and the head which seem tortured and forced upon the image and not comfortable.

CR: I would use the word uncomfortable. A lot of people think that I cut

and slice them and they're tortured. That's not the idea. They're politically tortured, not physically tortured. There are two organizations I'm interested in. One is Amnesty International and the other is Greenpeace. One is for human beings and the other is environmental. Basically the head series came from a series of drawings I did for Amnesty, in England, for fundraising. The idea was an awkwardness with your society, with your life. The reds are for the conflict. The color on the heads comes from an Egyptian series I did three or four years ago. A lot of people forget when they go to a museum and see these great Roman or Egyptian sculptures in white marble or patinated bronze, that in their day they were actually painted very gaudily. I went to Knossos and was quite shocked at the colors. I purposely leave all these scores and indentations in the wax. So when I cast the glass and polish it, then paint the whole thing, I let it dry and then finally polish away the surface paint again. Basically I am aging it quickly, and the paint only sticks in the cracks.

JB: When you were doing the head where did you get the form itself?

CR: I was very lucky. There was an exhibition of such objects at the Royal Academy in London. Basically I just modeled the thing up. I tried to do it in a way where it's close but it's not a copy. Again the idea was if a lay person came into a gallery they would be fooled, but if an expert walked in they would know immediately there was something wrong. It's borrowing but doing it badly, on purpose.

JG: I have noticed that one side of the head is definitely off.

CR: I did that in the wax. Many of the heads were used for ceremonies in Nigeria. A lot of Europeans, who were missionaries, purposely damaged them. Worshiping idols was against the teachings of the church. So I have accentuated that by pressing in the wax. Every head has a mistake. I drilled the holes in quite mechanically. Originally the holes were to hold on beards and hair.

JG: You also are working with a skeletal animal head, reminding me of the work of Georgia O'Keefe. Was that something you were aiming for?

CR: I had a show in Chicago five years ago, and the whole show was on Cu Chulainn, one of the Chieftans of Ulster, in the Northern part of Ireland. I wanted to do something with Celtic art, which is in my upbringing. When I was reading about some of the myths about this guy, I found out he was an incredible warrior. He was vicious. But at the same time he was a poet, he had a gentle side, so there was this conflict. I try to think about the people today who finance opera and ballet and tend to head corporations. So it is very much the same again: they are the new warriors. So at this opening I met this woman who wanted to write to me in New York. This book then arrived in New York from Canyon de Chelly at the top part of Arizona. I looked at these photographs (of the canyon walls) and they were Celtic drawings. I literally jumped on the next plane and when out to look at these pictographs. There is a parallel again with the Irish myths and Native American myths. The philosophy and spiritualism is very close.

JG: Do you think there was a Celtic infiltration at one time?

CR: As a matter of fact there is an archaeologist here who believes that. One of the things that I study is W.B. Yeats, the Irish poet. He wrote in his book on myths and magic about the collective subconscious. It doesn't matter what part of the world you go to people have this sort of consciousness. I really do believe that. Then I also read "Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee" and "Trail of Tears, the Cherokee Movement." The one thing that kept coming to the fore was the bison - the buffalo. The people that I was brought up to believe were vicious, from old John Wayne movies, were actually very intelligent in their way of using the land. The skull series is based on Native American imagery up to a point.

JG: The images you are calling Celtic and Southwest Indian are also Aboriginal. You are Northern European and there are some people, in Detroit especially, who have a difficult time letting people outside of their own culture deal with its themes or projections because they haven't experienced it. Have you run into people from an African background challenging you because you are not from that background, and they think you are trespassing on their territory.

CR: When I had the New York show it was purely these Nigerian heads. One day I was actually in the gallery and there were a couple of black guys who came walking in. They came in and looked around and wanted to be introduced. I was very nervous, thinking, "What do I say here?" when actually they were very complimentary. They recognized that I was an outsider, treating it (the theme) as an outsider, so I wasn't being Romantic, I was just using it in a literal way. A lot of people did think I was black. To me it was a compliment. It meant I was doing something right. I have been careful with this new series with the Native American because I know there is a touchiness there, especially this year. That piece over there is called "Three Ships". I'm trying to sort this thing out. I don't want to be insulting. I'm hoping to come up with this installation which uses the idea and philosophies of the Native American, but in a totally contemporary way, so therefore I'm not trespassing on their imagery. Their imagery is not a Western imagery, it comes from inside. I'm starting to understand the way they think or do things.

JG: I ask, because as an artist you sometimes can be wounded easily, reaching out, learning and finding out about other people. And trying to explore their culture. Some people will come forward and say you don't have the right. I find that bizarre in terms of that possessive feeling. Ironically some of these people have never been through some of these experiences they are claiming to have. People just don't realize that we have all been through it in our own mind. We've been through our own problems and our own difficulties. You're from Northern Ireland. What have you been through in your life that has brought you to a more sensitive stand about other people?

CR: I'm from the Six Counties in Northern Ireland. In my politics, I consider myself British. I'm part of the United Kingdom. I was brought up in a Presbyterian situation. So therefore, being Protestant, I was part of the majority. I went to London for college. Then I was meeting Celtic, Jewish, Muslim: it was a massive influx of different cultures. I was at the eighteen/nineteen-year-old stage where I was open to influence. That kind of thing changed my life. My parents still live in Belfast, but when

I go home now I am totally an outsider. It is a divided society; there are Catholics and Protestants. I don't recognize the differences. As far as I am concerned they are human beings. There are two choices I didn't have in my life. I didn't choose my religion and I didn't choose where I was born. Now I make my own decisions: where I want to live and what I want to believe in. It's my decision, whether it's a spiritual thing or an intellectual thing.

JG: Were you raised with the concern of fear or did that happen since you left?

CR: I can answer that in two ways; the present problem didn't start until I left. A lot of the conflict is confined to small areas of Belfast and some of the border areas. I have just moved to Oakland, California, and that's the first time I've ever heard gunshots. I've never heard gunshots in Northern Ireland.