

work in the Biennial. Though he may be one of the oldest exhibiting artists, Serra nonetheless illuminates the power and possibility of political action in contemporary American culture. By exploiting new technologies and investing current political quagmires with a simple sense of urgency, Serra resists the alluring backwards glance, over the shoulder and into the past, to focus on the present and its possible futures.

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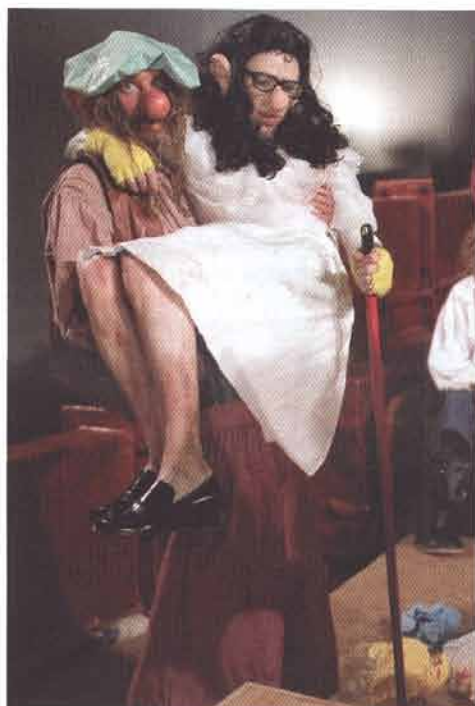
LONDON: WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY

PAUL MCCARTHY: LALA LAND PARODY PARADISE

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McCarthy's exhibition 'Lala Land Parody Paradise' at the Whitechapel is his largest London show to date, its title identifying his central theme – the subversion and ridiculing of American culture's



Paul McCarthy: *Caribbean Pirates*, 2001-5. Courtesy: the artist and Whitechapel, London

banal fantasies, anodyne values and the hypocrisy and extreme brutality at the heart of them all. The bleak nightmare (with its terrible global implications) that the old cliché of the American dream has spawned has been entering the wider cultural consciousness for a good while without having the slightest effect, political or otherwise – American values continue to be exported worldwide as their bland, homogenising products become ubiquitous. Since his groundbreaking, cross-dressing and foodstuff-smearing performances of the early 1970s, McCarthy has relentlessly subverted masculine stereotypes, attacked traditional American family values and sexual taboos, and transformed the cutesy anthropomorphic animal characters of Disney et al into monstrous pop icons of the American nightmare, without ever thumping the

table didactically or naming any names. We are all implicated in the push-pull of horror and desire at the core of his work.

'Lala Land Parody Paradise' is spread across two venues: the Whitechapel Gallery – featuring sculpture, drawings and photographs – provides a kind of formal, solid, quantifiable ground for the carnivalesque madness encountered at the huge beaten-up warehouse space off Brick Lane, where kinetic sculptures and video projections disorientate and hypnotise the viewer. This work is collectively titled *Caribbean Pirates* (2001-5) and it explores (in a generously explosive sort of way) the romanticised and heroicised pirate of the 17th and 18th centuries – the time when North America herself was being colonised and huge amounts of booty were sailing the seas back to that corrupt old world the founding fathers had so admirably hoped to improve upon. McCarthy and his son Damon (also an artist) based their project on the well-known Disney ride *Pirates of the Caribbean*. In a now familiar McCarthy trope, the warehouse installation hosts the props used in filming the video performances screened on the walls next to them; the viewer is invited to peer into every architectural form of orifice to see the spattering of blood and faeces (ketchup and chocolate sauce), the prosthetic limbs hacked off the pirates' torture victims and sundry other terrible remains. At the rear of the space, a gigantic boat heaves lasciviously back and forth on a mechanised structure, calling to mind copulation, sea-sickness and other types of piratic fun. In *Houseboat Party* (2005), another accompanying video performance, a demented Liz Taylor type and an evil blonde Barbie doll-babe smear themselves with foodstuffs and cackle with glee as their male companion empties his chocolate sauce diarrhoea through a hole in the ceiling. It's all filthy good fun, as cathartic as Viennese Actionism with the added bonus that no animals have died to make this work. Upstairs on the mezzanine, in some broken down small rooms, is a video projection of a group of unnaturally clean, fresh and wholesome people singing Christmas carols (*Newport*, 2005). Or, rather, they would be singing carols but they've been stopped, reversed, slowed down and otherwise distorted. Mouths wide open and eyes goggling with sincerity, their arrested expressions reveal the theatre behind the clichéd image.

McCarthy is a master of materials – the figures mounted at intervals in the clean, white space of the Whitechapel gallery are resin casts of piratic monstrosities that combine the tactile sensuousness of chocolate with the inevitable recollection of piles of shit. Hybrid humans with plastic masks, they ooze phalluses in various forms, ranging from the realistic penis emerging from the unfortunate *Dick Eye*, or the horrible long, pitted nose of *Jack*, to the thick severed member hanging over the face of *Pothead*, and the huge trunk-like organ curving over the head of *Captain Dick Hat* (all 2003/2005). Sitting on humble, bare wooden trestles and boxes, the busts have a comic-tragic appeal enhanced by the presence of a persona in progress – the plaster cast of a man's head and shoulders wearing the green remains of a mask, half destroyed, like the human face discernible beneath it, in the process of casting. Lengths of wooden dowel stuck into his closed eyes exacerbate the horrible brutality of the sculptural process, which is again referred to upstairs. Here we find fingers summarily snapped off plaster casts of hands, a

woman's body that looks as though somebody has gone for it with a sledgehammer and then carefully, but slightly illogically, collected up all the bits, and a group of human and cartoon-mask heads (*Heads on the Table*, 2004/05) that brilliantly intertwine theatre with the real. By displaying the processes involved in creating and wearing masks, and by putting figures wearing cartoon-masks side by side with life-casts, the artist affirms their equal status and cuts right into the fine line that divides the performative mask from the biological human behind and within. Theatrical performance is at the core of McCarthy's work; blending plastic America with primal mess, he exposes ways in which culture assists the social need to conceal horror with cross entertainment.

Affirming McCarthy's courage and moral integrity, *Dreaming* (2005) is a waxwork replica of the artist, lying on several layers of foam on a garden chaise long. He is clad only in a shirt, making his small, wrinkled penis something of a focal point and emphasising the white, naked state of his legs. The naked patriarch has been a representational taboo for at least the last 150 years in European art – McCarthy exposes his vulnerability and shows his power too, the power that comes with the ability to be fearlessly honest, which perhaps means knowing when to wear a mask and when to take it off.

ELIZABETH MANCHESTER