Robert Pruitt: *I Call My Brother Sun Because He Shines Like One*

Clementine Gallery

John Ewing

I had a hunch the title of Robert Pruitt's New York debut was borrowed verse and went on a Google snipe hunt to find out. A few blogs later I found the pun attributed to Wu-Tang Clan rapper Raekwon. Why didn't I just call the artist to verify this? Well, that's too easy and not as much fun. More importantly, most viewers don't have the option to call up artists with questions about their work.

"Getting it," therefore, can be a major problem with art that relies on puns, ironies and other appropriated material, whether it's borrowed text, images or readymades. For the average viewer, the references associated with appropriation can be so oblique, dense or personal that deriving meaning is nearly futile.

Apart from the show's title, Pruitt's work—including appropriated objects and images, as well as drawings and video—is that rare treat: his verbal and visual puns are accessible without being simplistic or derivative. The young Houstonian parlays his fresh, smart humor into visual jokes that plant one foot in the collective culture and the other in thoughtful, personal insights.

Pruitt's objects broadly critique American racial stereotypes by literalizing abstract ideas. For example, *For the Pussy MCees*—a big-headed black microphone with two disco balls strategically positioned at the base—is a sexually graphic readymade that equates a deep-seated belief about black male sexuality with the commercial muscle of pop music. The sculpture (and its shadow!) illustrate the former yet signify the latter, showcasing Pruitt's particular gift for irony.

A more art historical appropriation is the reference to Greek mythology in *I'll Fly Away,* where Mercury's fleet feet are suggested by a pair of Nike Dunks outfitted with fried chicken wings and slung over a ceiling pipe—basketball all-stars as commercially produced gods. The sharpest of these appropriations, *For Whom the Bell Curves,* depicts slave trade routes between Africa, North and South America (according to gallery co-director Abby Messitte) using simple gold chains pinned on a wall in zigzagging arcs. It's a map of bondage in bling—a complicated reality hiding inside neat abstractions, much like the controversial "race study" referenced in the work's title.

This ironic dynamic continues in Pruitt's Norman Rockwell appropriations, which achieve the unlikely feat of portraying the utterly familiar in a startling new light. Here, Pruitt has digitally inserted new material into classic Rockwell paintings, printed the hybrids on canvas and framed them "granny style" in funky old frames. In the best of these, Rockwell's beloved *Girl at Mirror*—portraying a girl's bittersweet coming of age—becomes the base "text" for a gripping and, dare I say, more interesting drama.

Robert Pruitt, *For the Pussy MCeez,* 2004
Microphone and disco balls
6 1/4 x 4 1/2 x 3 inches

Robert Pruitt, *America's Most Wanted,* 2004
Rhinestones and prop gun
3 1/2 x 5 x 1 inches

Pruitt replaced the fashion magazine in the girl's lap with a rapper rag. As a result, the girl's confused, self-doubting and pleading expression in the mirror takes on a palette of new meanings. These are charged with racial, cultural and sexual implications Rockwell couldn't or wouldn't dream of touching. Thus, Pruitt makes evident the latent politics buried in the apolitical posture of Rockwell's "American" art. He not only appropriates these images but plays seriously with their themes and emotional content, which is a much more challenging dialogue with history than a straight-on lecture.

The sincerity at the heart of Pruitt's sardonic art gives his punch lines a bite that illuminates rather than lacerates. His "Black Stuntman" cartoons (drawings turned into low-fi videos with voice narration and sound effects) are short comedy sketches that skewer race-based social hypocrisies through the guise of a superhero. In one vignette, Black Stuntman will save the cosmos...if he can just get off duty from his convenience store job. Another lists Black Stuntman's amazing powers: 1) thick skin (to block racial slurs and conversational slip-ups), 2) double identity as an American and a Negro (allowing him to exist smoothly between two worlds), 3) power of low self esteem (rendering him invisible in awkward social settings), 4) high blood pressure (keeping his black rage at dangerously high levels). This catalog of superhero powers is actually a litany of wounds and scars; interestingly, superheroes seem always to gain their powers through nearly fatal injuries.

Least successful in the show are the prop-gun readymades that conflate logo-driven commercialism and pop-culture psychodrama. Under vitrines, one gun is studded with rhinestones, the other packaged like high-dollar Nikes. Both objects trade in stereotypes that have grown too shopworn to be useful, the gangsta archetype having lost much of its allure and relevance. Even P. Diddy has gone legit, reinvented now as fashion designer and Broadway actor Sean Combs. Likewise, the conte crayon on butcher paper drawings in the Talented 10th Series—"portraits" alluding to W.E.B Du Bois' early-twentieth-century contention that 10% of the black population will lift the other 90%—are too pat and stock to offer new insights.

Yet, in general, humor is a creative and healthy way to confront and move through conflict. Pruitt's jokes do double and triple duty, skewering the culture, commenting on the self and illuminating multiple aspects of the human comedy. Uncovering the multiple references and psychological depth in borrowed images and objects gives Pruitt's work its punch and nuance.

Treble

SculptureCenter

John Ewing

Given the infinite variety of sounds, it's incredible that such abundant material consistently plays second fiddle to the visual in contemporary art. When sound isn't being completely ignored, it's ghettoized in specific media like film, video projections or spoken-word recordings. From this, might one conclude that the aural is inherently inferior to the visual? Or have artists (like everyone else) been taking sound for granted?

Curated by Austin-based Regine Basha, *Treble* addresses this imbalance by gathering the work of twenty-two artists and artist teams who "explore sound as a material and subject." The notion that sound can be both material and subject is still difficult for viewers to embrace, suggesting that the bias against sound is not uniquely an art problem. Until relatively recently, controlling and manipulating sound was left to musicians and instrument makers. Technological advances have given this ability to virtually everyone, yet manipulating sound as a fundamental form of artistic expression is still generally considered the domain of music.

The artists in *Treble* assert a much wider role for sound. Most engage sound as a physical material, much like visual art materials, that can be manipulated with precision and nuance. Likewise, many of these artists consider sound to also possess representational and abstract potentialities, much like traditional visual art media. It makes sense, then, that an exhibition demonstrating the plastic qualities of sound would end up at SculptureCenter, located in Long Island City.

The works that treat sound as a simple, elemental force are the most straightforward. Like pumping heartbeats, the suspended speakers in Stephen Vitiello's *Fear of High Places* and *Natural Things* thump with inaudible sound waves. Steve Roden's installation *Fulgurites* clinks eerily as electronic tones race up and down a string of tiny speakers inserted in a long row of cut glass wine bottles. Similarly, Jim Hodges' *Untitled (Bells)* allows viewers to ring a collection of hanging blown glass bells. Those with a more traditional bell shape produce the purer, more sonorous tone.

A number of artists use sound to sculpt space or to influence the perception of spatial parameters. The strongest example of this is Paulo Vivacqua's *Sentinels,* an atonal composition broadcast in SculptureCenter's Maya Lin-designed sculpture garden. Eight slim speakers arranged on poles around the otherwise bare garden emit loud, organ-like tones. These permeate the walled rectangular space with a hair-raising wash of energy that causes the entire area to vibrate like a solid form. Vivacqua's piece struck me with the thought that sacred chant and pipe organs must have been invented in order to "play" large edifices like musical instruments.

Steve Roden, *Fulgurites,* 2003
Cut glass wine bottles, speakers, sound composition
Courtesy of the artist and Suzanne Vielmetter Gallery, Los Angeles
Photo Hermann Feldhaus 2004

In contrast, Max Neuhaus articulates this quality in visual terms. In a colored-pencil study for *Three to One,* a work involving three stacked glass-walled rooms, the artist writes that "each room has a sound of its own, three quiet spaces colored by sound...sound images from outside pass through, re-coloring then re-exposing each in its own way."

Likewise, Neuhaus' *2002 study for Times Square* describes a project that is nothing more (or less) than "an invisible, unmarked block of sound" located on a Times Square traffic median in the middle of Broadway (one block south of the TKTS booth). By foregrounding sound, the artist shifts our attention away from the more conscious experience of visual stimuli toward the often unconscious but no less stimulating experience of sound.

Down in SculptureCenter's basement, Andrea Ray's *Inhalatorium* has viewers walking through a vaulted corridor on a bed of rock salt. With eyes closed, the crunching sound of salt underfoot varies with exquisite precision as one passes under the archways. This is a naturally occurring and much more interesting phenomenon than the recorded sounds of inhaling and chanting piped into the installation through speakers.

Another instance of less is more is Francis Alÿs and Rafael Ortega's *1 Minute of Silence,* a series of Panama City performance works presented through DVD documentation. (If not a direct reference, these performances seem to revive the spirit of John Cage's seminal, 1950s sound works featuring silence). This particular selection shows a crowded restaurant attempting the project—the small, square space hums with tension as the patrons and waitresses try not to speak or move, their efforts exacerbated by those who obviously don't understand or care. Sixty seconds later,

Jude Tallichet, *It's All Good,* 2004
Fabricated plastic, fluorescent bulbs
50 inches in diameter
Courtesy of the artist and Sara Meltzer Gallery, New York
Photo Hermann Feldhaus 2004

Brad Tucker, *Fuller's Vintage Guitar,* 2001
Nylon, wood stretchers, acrylic paint
20 feet in diameter
Courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston
Photograph: Hermann Feldhaus 2004

cheers and relaxed movement drain the tension out of the room like a balloon deflating.

Some artists treat sound like a historical repository, literally and figuratively. Terry Nauheim's *Curiously Groovy* is an archive of rubber casts made from old 45s. Viewers can play these crude, floppy objects on a portable phonograph. The recordings sound ghostly and far-off, accentuating the quasi-magical link between "old" and "new" sound made possible through technology.

San Antonio artist Dario Robleto hits this same note without making a sound. His "antique" boxes of cello and violin string—made from bone dust, meteorites and melted bullets—are reliquaries for sounds that may or may not have existed, yet are evoked nonetheless with the romantic titles *Fatalism Sutures to a Memory (A Melody)* and *The Minor Chords Are Ours (The Lost Chord).* Nauheim and Robleto also seem to be poking fun at the evanescence of sound, a romantic conceit that modern physics and contemporary technology have both thoroughly debunked.

Other artists engage with sound as a metaphor for culture. Joseph Beuys' *Noiseless Blackboard Eraser* appropriates a mass-produced felt eraser commercially labeled with the above words. Inert and silent under a vitrine, the readymade makes a punning joke out of this utterly prosaic object. Jorge Macchi's *Incidental Music* is a more unsettling play on words. Viewers don a pair of headphones while looking at huge, wall-mounted sheets of music notation paper. As a dour score of incidental piano notes plays over the headphones, a closer inspection of the paper reveals the lines to be randomly collaged newspaper print reporting details of homicides and fatal accidents.

More playful artists approach sound as a malleable, abstract, and even untrustworthy thing—both physically and conceptually. This playfulness results in works that feel the most contemporary in the show. Joseph Grigely, a deaf artist, teamed with Amy Vogel to make *You,* a clump of hanging speakers that play voices mangling the name of a famous artist. On the wall next to the installation is a print by Grigely that verifies the notoriously mispronounced name, Ed Ruscha.

Equally comic, Jude Tallichet's *It's All Good* is a pink plastic drum kit that hangs upside down from the ceiling and doubles as a fluorescent light fixture. The most abstract work in the show belongs to Texan Brad Tucker, whose *Fuller's Vintage Guitar* refers to a classic Houston guitar shop. This colorful sculpture is a many-faceted dome constructed of gauzy fabric stretched over wooden frames. Stepping into this structure might be the artist's way of taking viewers "inside the music"...or at least inside the amplifier.

Treble also included work by Grady Gerbracht, Erik Hanson, Euan Macdonald, Emmanuel Madan of [The User], Cornelia Parker, David Schafer, Mungo Thomson, Anton Vidokle and Cristian Manzutto. For all the artists in *Treble,* sound seems to be the beginning of an interesting question, not a final answer.