

Westbrook Gallery

Westbrook Gallery

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Open Monday to Saturday

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A NEW LOVE



A NEW LOVE

Michael Petry

Cover: BB61 Above: BB77

Westbrook Gallery

Essay by Eric Hormell



Deviating From the Standard

Michael Petry's current exhibition, *A New Love*, features new pieces from three of his recent bodies of work: new sculptures made of glass and found silver from his *Bare Back (BB) Lovers* series, new polished wood staffs from his *Stoppages* series, and a new carved wood installation, *Party 1*, that has emerged from his recent *In the Garden of Eden* installation. What connects all these works are themes of love and sex and associations with the human body.

The *BB Lovers* were created by pouring molten glass on or into found silver-plated objects, such as bowls, vases, and candlesticks. The shapes of the silver objects are reminiscent of mouths, and male and female genitalia. The glass seems to have the consistency of a gel and it fills the objects, oozes out of them, or drips down their sides. Unlike much of Petry's work, these pieces do not have a physical link to sexual activity or a specific human body. But they are, paradoxically, some of the most erotic works he has created; it is very difficult to look at these objects without thinking of sex.

The title of the series adds other dimensions to the eroticism and beauty of the pieces. The title is meant to emphasize the melding of the two materials - glass and metal - into one object, like entwined lovers. The term "bareback" is associated with unprotected sex and makes us focus further on the process of the hot liquid glass being injected directly into the opening of the receiving silver container, referring to passion and intimacy but also danger and risk.

In some of the pieces the clear glass fills the container, creating a cast. This process makes the interior of the object more tangible by transforming it into a solid, recalling investigations of negative space by artists such as Bruce Nauman or Rachel Whiteread. The *BB Lovers* series draws attention to both the positive and negative spaces of the human body and how these spaces fit together when two bodies become one.

Petry's work also makes references to various issues in art historical study; in this case his choice of materials comments on the high art / low art divide. The silver-plated objects, found at thrift stores and flea markets, were mass-produced as substitutes for more expensive hand-crafted silver. By working with a glass artist, these ordinary items of material culture have been transformed into the one-of-a-kind fine art objects they originally aspired to emulate.

Like *BB Lovers*, Petry's installation *Party 1* employs erotic imagery and imparts a sense of physical awareness to the viewer. *Party 1* is a large hanging slab of wood, polished to feel like velvet and carved with dozens of holes. Viewers are encouraged to touch the work and caress the holes, the oils from their hands enriching the wood. The work is related to his recent installation *In the Garden of Eden* (2007), which consisted of multiple large slices of wood displayed vertically like a forest, each piece featuring a single hole, creating an atmosphere of voyeurism.

But while the *Garden of Eden* brings to mind imagery of innocence and nature, the shapes in these installations provocatively employ subtle sexual and political inferences by emulating the “glory holes” notoriously used by some conservative politicians for anonymous sexual encounters in public toilets. This new piece is hung horizontally and the numerous holes encourage many viewers to caress it simultaneously. If the *Garden of Eden* hinted at intimate encounters between two people, then *Party 1* represents a tactile orgy in which the viewer is a participant.

Working well as companions to the negative space carved into *Party 1* are the wooden staffs of his *Stoppages* series. The *Stoppages* pieces are conceptually related to an earlier series in which he embroidered pearls on canvas or leather. In both cases each piece represents an individual, created with information relating to a specific person and working as a stand-in for a portrait.

One of the hallmarks of much of his recent work is that he uses the visual cues of abstraction and minimalism, signifying universality, while including associations with individual human bodies, signifying specificity. For his embroidered pearl pieces Petry used freshwater pearls sewn in abstract patterns on canvas or leather. The patterns are reminiscent of Barry Le Va's 1966-67 *Bearings Rolled (Six Specific Instants: No Particular Order)*, drawings based on random compositions of ball bearings. Petry, however, pushes the notion of randomness and specificity even further, by embroidering these pearls into abstract patterns re-created from photographs of the climaxes of random, anonymous men who sent him these images online, as a form of electronic portraiture in the 21st century.

Petry continues this theme with *Stoppages*. For each piece he has taken a wooden staff and polished a portion of it. The length of the staff that is polished corresponds to a specific man's claim of the distance he can ejaculate. The best way to determine how much of the staff is polished is to stroke it with your hand. By doing this, the viewer not only experiences the work of art more directly but also mimics part of the process by which it was created.

In English the word “stoppages” used in association with sexual climax brings to mind another of Petry's recent series, entitled *Tie a Knot in It*, shown last year at the Westbrook Gallery, which included works composed of knotted leather, wire, or rope. “Tying a knot in it” is a slang term that metaphorically refers to suppressing sexual desire or urination; in other words, a stoppage. But, of course, the participants in the *Stoppages* series didn't “tie a knot in it;” instead, they were encouraged to “cut loose.”

Stoppages refers to Marcel Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913-1914; Paris, Museum of Modern Art), a work created by tracing the lines left by pieces of thread dropped from a specific height; a combination of chance and planning, or “canned chance,” as Duchamp called it. The French word “stoppages” translates into English as “invisible mending.” Duchamp saw the word on a tailor's shop as he was walking in



Clockwise from top left: BB87 / BB89 / BB80 / BB84

Paris and the word made an appropriate title since he came across it by chance and since it related to his use of the thread. But invisible mending is also a good metaphor for something that is not immediately obvious; you may need to look below the surface to find the truth.

In the case of Petry's *Stoppages*, the reference to Duchamp is the clue that there is further meaning beyond the minimalist appearance of the art works. Like Duchamp, Petry employed a combination of chance and planning to create work related to measurement. And, like Duchamp, he created art that is based on the process of its own making.



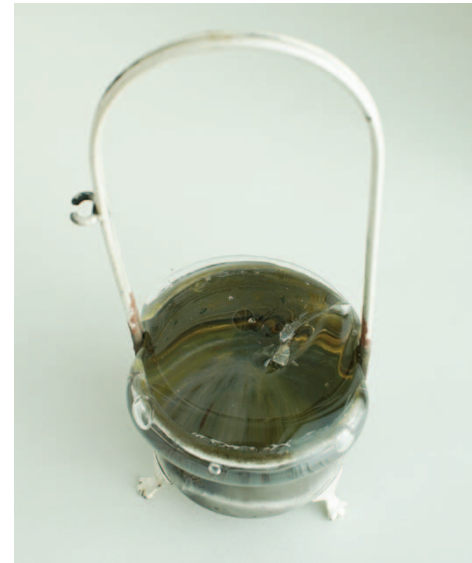
Above: *Stoppages 19"* (detail)

Duchamp's *Stoppages* was a commentary on the randomness of the standard measurement of the meter. He created a new measuring system by allowing meter-long threads to curl and bend, resulting in new lengths that deviated from the standard.

The beauty and conceptual complexity of the work exhibited in *A New Love* demonstrates that "deviating from the standard" is also a good description for Petry's art.

Eric Hormell

Editor, Bibliography of the History of Art
Getty Research Institute



Clockwise from top left: BB87 / BB89 / BB69 / BB85



BB78



Clockwise from top: BBL14 / BB91 / BBL12 (detail)



BB64



Party 1, 2007, Cedar of Lebanon



Party 1 (detail), 2007, Cedar of Lebanon



BB65

Upcoming Exhibitions

2009 *Treasure of Memory in Glasswear*, Museum of Arts & Design, New York; Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York; Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile Alabama. **2008** *Golden Rain*, Stavanger 2008 • *On the Edge*, Ha gamle prestegard, Norway • *Treasure of Memory in Glasswear*, Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim, Germany.

Selected One Man Exhibitions

2007 *A New Love*, Westbrook Gallery, London, Catalogue: ISBN 978-0-9557699-0-0 • *True Love*, Muzeum Mierdzi, Legnica, Poland • *Extract*, Camberwell Arts Festival, GX Gallery, London • *America the Beautiful*, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York • *In the Garden of Eden*, Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston **2006** *The Treasure of Memory*, Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston • *True Love*, Westbrook Gallery, London, Catalogue: ISBN 0-9552577-4-3 **2005** *The Space Between: Superstring Installation*, Art, Complexity & Technology, I.S.I Foundation, Turin, Italy **2004** *WAS: White As Snow*, Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston • *The Milky Way and other Fairy Tales*, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York **2003** *The Sound of Breaking Glass*, Prowler Project Space, London **2001** *Barely Legal*, Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston **2000** *Laughing at Time*, Ha gamle prestegard Gallery, Norway • *Contagion*, Gardner Centre for the Arts, Brighton Festival **1999** *The History of the World*, Rice Art Gallery, Houston • *The Fluid Man*, Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston **1996** *You see what I mean*, BN1 Event 3, Fabrica, Brighton **1994** *The Garden of Enlightenment*, South London Gallery • *The Chemistry of Love III*, Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany **1992** *The Chemistry of Love*, James Hockey Gallery, Farnham **1991** *The Skirting Boards*, Gallery Mangisch, Zurich, Switzerland.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2007 *Treasure of Memory in Glasswear*, Toledo Museum of Art, USA • *UNBOUND*, Contemporary Art Platform, London, curated by Predrag Pajdic • *Leben Lieben*, Rise Gallery, Berlin • *Yeehaw!*, Vegas Gallery, London **2006** *First Sudden Gone the One First Sudden Back*, Project 133, London • *Next Level*, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York **2005** *Erotic Pioneers*, Antebellum Gallery, Hollywood • *Group Show*, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York • *The Binary Tower, "Incantations"*, South Presentation Convent, ART Trail, Cork, Ireland **2004** *Hidden Histories: 20th Century Male Same Sex Lovers in the Visual Arts*, The New Art Gallery Walsall. **2003** *Sex for Sale, "Independence Show"*, South London Gallery • *The Axis, 'In the Gloaming'*, ArtOMI, Hudson New York, curated by Koan Jeff Baysa **2002** *Blood Line: Passage in 'Lysis'*, Pamela Auchincloss Project Space, New York, curated by Koan Jeff Baysa • *Zero Carat: Works from the Donna Schaefer Collection*, American Museum of Craft, New York **2000** *Nothing Changes: Stavanger, in 'UTOPIA'*, Rogaland Kunstmuseum, Stavanger, Norway **1998** *TWISTOR*, Commissioned for the '7th Papier Biennale - Electric Paper', Leopold Hoesch Museum, Duren, Germany • *The Wormhole in 'Dark Matter'*, Turnpike Gallery (Leigh), Angel Row Gallery (Nottingham), and Howard Gardens Gallery (Cardiff) **1997** *Nothing Changes in 'Partie 5'*, Brandenburgische Kunsttage, Internationales Kunstforum Drenen, Germany **1996** *Constellations*, Commissioned for Mercedes Benz • *The Wormhole*, Peterborough Museum of Art, Derby Museum, Wooster Museum of Art.

Works in the following Collections

Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The National Collection, UK; British Museum; The New Art Gallery Walsall; Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Germany; Rogaland Kunstmuseum, Stavanger, Norway; Leopold Hoesch Museum, Duren, Germany; Bellerive Museum, Zurich; Legnica Art Gallery, Poland.

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