



ARTSPACE PRESENTS

# WET WITH GLEE

**Mark Mulroney**



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Mark Mulroney

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## HATCHETS & HICCUPS: The Art of Mark Mulroney

Carefully sliced up pictures of giraffes, horses, dogs, babies, diamond rings, pickles, donuts, cake plates, and bodily appendages are just a few of the many images that appear in Mark Mulroney's inventive collages. Over the years, snippets of Dolly Parton, Tom Selleck, John F. Kennedy, John Wayne and other favorite illustrious American icons have also surfaced, along with images of those not-so-well-known including Mulroney's grandmother, infomercial evangelicals, cable television wrestlers, and underground porn stars from previous eras.

A twenty-first century scavenger extraordinaire, Mulroney extracts banal images from a myriad of media sources ranging from the tattered pages of thrift store magazines to slickly designed Internet websites, and seamlessly blends them, creating new compositions made from discordant parts. The results of Mulroney's hunt-and-gather approach toward collage, combined with his recontextualizations of found imagery, are compelling, funny, and often strangely unsettling—sentiments which are similarly elicited by his paintings, drawings, and large-scale mixed-media installations.

A prolific artist, Mulroney's oeuvre is vast and varied, and the breadth and depth of his work defies neat categorization. He moves with ease between mediums and artistic styles and as his work makes evident, approaches life and the practice of art-making with a keen eye, dead-pan sense of humor, and visceral intensity. His peculiar aesthetic is a fusion of pictorial and stylistic elements drawn from a range of unlikely sources including comics, children's book illustrations, Renaissance painting, and works by Pop and Conceptual artists.

In his paintings, Mulroney has combined the sterile, yet lush voids of color that recall the air-brushed-looking backgrounds of Ed Ruscha's flat, textual canvases, with the bold, graphic linearity and saturated colors



Fig. 1: *The Temptress*, 2007  
Ink on paper, 58 x 47 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

found in popular 1980's Saturday morning TV cartoons such as *The Smurfs*. His drawings are equally compelling combinations of figural styles that push the conceptual boundaries of high and low art. *The Temptress* (2007) [fig. 1], an ink drawing of a semi-nude schoolmarm with a come-hither glance, is rendered with the type of exquisite line work at once evocative of Rembrandt van Rijn's unidealized etchings of ordinary people, and the German artist Hans Bellmer's sketches of eroticized dolls from the 1930s. Traces of the lively, expressive lines that characterize the comics and ribald humor of renowned American cartoonist R. Crumb are also manifest in Mulroney's sketches and ink drawings.

Mulroney's works sometimes border on animation, and his densely layered pictures practically hum with vitality reminiscent of Pieter Brueghel's peasant scenes or Hieronymous Bosch's surreal landscapes. The energy that underscores Mulroney's work is enhanced by a particular attitude that blends the anti-establishment

zeal of West coast punk music with a sunny optimism and casualness that characterizes the skate-and-surfboard culture of Southern California—Mulroney's childhood home. As an artist who was raised and attended school in California, Mulroney absorbed the ethos of individualism, confrontation, and an attraction to socially transgressive imagery first initiated by L.A. artists in the early 1960s by the likes of Ed Kienholz, Wallace Berman, and Allan Kaprow who were working in intermedia and performance art. Their attitudes toward art and culture would leave lasting impressions on later generations of artists including Mike Kelley, Raymond Pettibon, and Lari Pittman, whose work continues to push the boundaries of visual art as a form of social resistance. They used perversion to reveal the false idealism of beauty and attack moralizing authorities. Despite the inherent historical and stylistic differences that separate these artists—from whom Mulroney, whether consciously or not, takes his cues—they are united in their irreverence for cultural norms and societal values and their embrace of subjects deemed marginal, eccentric, or taboo.

When it comes to exploiting the gross excesses of society and critiquing institutionalized forms of power and repression—be they political, economic, or religious forms of control—nowhere is Mulroney more unapologetically confrontational with regard to such subjects than in his collages. In the preceding pages of this book, Mulroney posits some telling visual propositions. He juxtaposes slices of ripened fruit with fragments of anonymous nude figures, verdant pickles appear alongside a young boy's face, and fingers and hands are interlocked in unusually suggestive positions. Though seemingly benign, the works elicit a kind of mild embarrassment in their not-so-subtle allusions to sex and sexual identity—topics which, despite their overwhelming prevalence in our daily lives, are not freely discussed.

It would be easy to see Mulroney's collages as art made for the sake of perversion or provocation, but to do so would be to misunderstand the work. His mish-mash of images is hardly accidental—if they seem somewhat infantilizing, immature, and adolescent, well, they are—and they speak obliquely to the vulnerable periods of transition and self-discovery that occur during puberty, a time that rarely leaves people emotionally unscarred. The complexities of understanding and accepting one's own sexual identity were made doubly difficult for Mulroney who has acknowledged his own Catholic upbringing as instrumental in shaping his views on sex, love, and relationships. Woven into the moralizing rhetoric of the Church, which deals in absolutes and binaries, such as good versus evil, sinner versus saint, and so on, is a reverence for ritual, discipline and an intolerance for non-conformity, which is ultimately met with punishment. During what he describes as the aftermath of his formative years, Mulroney has remarked, "what would follow and continues to evolve is the systematic dismantling of what I thought sex was supposed to be and the creation of what I think sex ought to be."

While Mulroney's simple yet absurd images may or may not be best explained through the lens of Sigmund Freud—who posited that the effects of trauma and shame, when expressed visually, take the forms of nightmarish or dream-like depictions—they draw attention to the basic, broader subjects of beauty, desire, and consumption. In his refusal to conform or explain, through his art, Mulroney confronts viewers with the fact that despite our higher education and enlightened intellectualism, beneath the surface we are all voyeurs, crawlers, and seekers of pleasure.

LIZA STATTON  
Artspace Curator





**Q:** You make a lot of art. You paint, draw, make collages, create installations, and write poetry and plays among other things. Can you speak about what drives you to create? Are you trying to “suck the marrow out of life” by constantly making things, and engaging in the world around you? Or, are you just fighting off boredom?

**A:** *I suppose I am always willing to suck something out of something, but I mostly make whatever I am making for reasons I am not totally sure of. I might be working on a picture just to have an excuse to look at naked ladies, or perhaps I am working to understand why I desire things that are not good for me.*

**Q:** Your art deals with themes of childhood. References to toys, cartoons, and other playthings appear repeatedly in your work. Do you think your sustained interest in the objects and entertainments that we associate with children is driven by personal nostalgia? Or is this impulse driven by something more along the lines of cynicism—that, for the most part, toys represent a false idealization of children?

**A:** *Images for kids are the first things I saw so they had a greater impact on me than everything that followed. I understood adults, work, sex, politics, and farming through cartoons, so it seems natural to use a cartoon-like image when I am working.*

**Q:** In addition to childhood, your work also deals with sex and sexuality—subjects that for many people are unsettling and not easily reconciled. And, while your references to these subjects are not always explicit, you often allude to them. Can you speak about your tendency to continually revisit these issues?

**A:** *What else is there? It is such a rich environment to play with. I'd love to be able to make work about the NASDAQ or Bio-Fuels, but those things just aren't as compelling as the complex mess we have made of sex.*

**Q:** Your work elicits some interesting responses ranging from silly laughter and mild embarrassment to wincing pain. Are these emotional and physical responses strategies for engaging viewers in broader dialogues about, say, art, politics, or religion, or are they byproducts of the unconscious?

**A:** *When I am working I am not really interested in what the viewer might think or how they might react to something. I am an audience of one, and I am working for myself. When the work goes out into the world it is interesting to see how people engage with it, but that isn't really what motivates me to start something.*

**Q:** Your drawings and paintings are like giant cartoons or children's books illustrations. Do you invent the imagery, or is it appropriated?

**A:** *Both, probably. I often find images I like and start with them, usually by the time I am done they have been far enough removed from the original source that I feel I can call them my own.*

**Q:** Historically speaking, do you think your work speaks more to Surrealism or Pop Art? You use a lot of visual strategies ascribed to these particular genres of art.

**A:** *I am not smart enough to be Pop, so I would have to go with Surrealist; but, I might be too dumb for that as well.*

**Q:** We see a lot of half-built structures, sawn off tree limbs, aberrant lines that don't seem to connect to anything, and random parts of people and animals in your work. In some ways, the pictures feel like they are a repository of things found on the cutting room floor. Can you speak a bit about the seemingly fragmented and unresolved nature of your pictures?

**A:** *I just draw the parts I like. If I like a face, but hate the hair, then I don't draw the hair. I would rather not spend my time drawing things I don't like to look at.*

**Q:** Do you believe in the idea that art is beyond moral judgment?

**A:** *I think anyone can judge anything they like and use whatever standard they want in order to make their judgment. I just don't think I am going to let that affect what I want to make.*

**Q:** You grew up in California and attended college there. You now live and work in upstate New York. Many of the artists whose work that you seem to identify with are from California. Do you think there is a difference in being a West coast artist as opposed to an East coast one? Is it simply a matter of geography or is more about attitude?

**A:** *I think there is a difference. The formal qualities of the work can be obvious. A West coast palette often reflects the quality of the light there and leans toward warm tones, and East coast palettes tend to be a bit cooler. I am sure that I am generalizing a bit, but I know my palette has changed since I moved east. I cannot say for sure that the concepts or moods are entirely different because I think you can find humor and snobbery on both coasts.*

**Q:** Oscar Wilde once wrote, “Ugliness is the only reality.” What's your take on that? Is this idea even relevant anymore?

**A:** *The name Oscar Wilde sounds made up, and I am not sure I can trust anyone with a fictitious name.*



## COLLAGES

Inside cover; pages 2, 4–15, 18, 20

17 unframed collages from the series *Wet With Glee*, 2008

Mixed media on paper, 11 x 14 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Mixed Greens Gallery, NY

## BIOGRAPHY

### MARK J. MULRONEY

Born in 1977 in Duttonsville, Pennsylvania

Lives and works in Rochester, New York

### EDUCATION

BFA San Diego State University

MFA University of California at Santa Barbara

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS (selection)

2009 *Mark Mulroney*, Mixed Greens, New York, NY

2008 *Be Generous, Stay Bloody*, National Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

2007 *What Fits in Your Mouth Doesn't Always Fit in Your Stomach*,  
Gregory Lind Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2006 *A Schizophrenic Collapse*, Mixed Greens Gallery, New York, NY

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS (selection)

2007 *Cascading Mountains of Debris*, OKOK Gallery, Seattle, WA  
Igloo Gallery, Portland, OR

*The Total Power of Such a Signal is Infinite*,  
Okay Mountain Gallery, Austin, TX

2006 *Cartoon Network*, RAID Projects, Los Angeles, CA

*F(acts)igures*, Staatsliedenburt, Amsterdam, Netherlands

2005 *Paradise Paved*, Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Sun Valley, ID  
*Circa '75*, New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA

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## WET WITH GLEE

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