

# Richard Hawkins

HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES

Liz Kotz

**OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES**, Richard Hawkins has emerged as a standard-bearer for a still-living tradition of renegade Los Angeles art. His work remains at best haphazardly known, making it an ideal candidate for the kind of elucidation and contextualization midcareer retrospectives provide. So Lisa Dorin (of the Art Institute of Chicago, where this exhibition originated) is to be commended for organizing Hawkins's first US survey—a challenging undertaking, given the extremely idiosyncratic nature of his art. But the show, unfortunately, was a missed opportunity, one that failed to provide a convincing armature for Hawkins's work. At the Hammer, three large rooms contained a selection of some sixty works made between 1988 and 2010, installed so as to intermingle time periods and media. The exhibition was organized around the artist's use of collage, and its search for a formal logic underpinning Hawkins's notoriously diverse production paradoxically stripped away his work's obsessive quality, along with any narrative or historical context that would have made it more intelligible. This effectively sanitized and normalized Hawkins's practice, since his art's deeply disruptive nature can't be comprehended in a vacuum.

Although it resists being neatly organized into chronological phases, Hawkins's work follows overlapping paths: the early book works, collages, and displayed collections of the late 1980s and early '90s; the collaged Chinese lanterns, tabletop sculptures, and dollhouses that he has been making since the mid-'90s; the paintings and the collage oeuvre would require careful editing. Though such choices are inevitably subjective, the decision to exclude painting from the exhibition, save two small canvases from 2008, seemed a clear misstep. Their elision marginalized the medium that has been the mainstay of Hawkins's practice for over a decade. It also left the show feeling oddly hollowed out, since it mostly comprised works made between 1991 and 1997 and between 2008 and 2010.

That said, ingredients for nuanced readings of Hawkins's practice were scattered throughout the exhibition. In a vitrine around the corner from the entrance, viewers found three small and rather peculiar sculptures from 1991. Titled after heavy metal bands—*Every Mother's Nightmare*, *Trixter*, *Skid Row*—the carefully shredded rubber masks, each featuring pictures of hunky musicians affixed with paper clips, were initially hung from nails on a wall, looped and draped like entrails. Ah, the paper clip: so noncommittal. Soon to become a kind of signature for Hawkins, paper clips suggest a joining that is provisional, as if, after the show, the pictures might be returned to some folder. The clips also damage the photos, subjecting them to a mundane form of bondage. The whole aesthetic is tortured and tongue-in-cheek, with the cheesy flamboyance of the metal guys playing off the dime-store theatricality of the masks.

Dennis Cooper once described the masks as being like “bunches of roses sent to the wrong address.” Lying curled and flat in a vitrine (since their decaying rubber is far too fragile to hang), they resembled preserved bouquets of dried blooms. The Hammer's presentation of twenty-year-old

artworks as, in effect, relics underscored one of the difficulties confronting this exhibition: It's nearly impossible to recapture how strange Hawkins's art looked, and how risky and poignant it was, in the early 1990s. Few viewers would be put off balance by the sight of *SJSS* or *SPP*, two 1993 collages in which Post-its are taped onto pictures of beautiful boys. But to see them at Richard Telles Fine Art eighteen years ago was jarring—these were gestures of refusal and rebellion, fuck-yous directed at art-world convention. Even in a scene steeped in “scatter art” and the abject, Hawkins's scruffy little assemblages and desultory collages, his autographed books with pictures taped or tipped in, his photos defaced by markers, his stacks of letters, all seemed almost too slight and too personal. Was this really art or just a series of glimpses into someone's

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personal life and obsessions? And yet the works were weighted with difficulty and suffering. The words on those Post-its—REGRET, SUFFERING, PAIN—may have been taken from Proust, but they weren't just about citation.

Hawkins at that time was better known as a writer, doing readings at Beyond Baroque and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, and publishing short fiction, sometimes with Xeroxed pictures of cute boys scattered throughout the text. He cocurated the exhibition “Against Nature: A Group Show of Work by Homosexual Men” with Cooper in 1988, showcasing a dark, underground gay sensibility more engaged with decadence, artifice, and pathology than with critique or activism—just as Cooper's stories of death and dismemberment explored loss and longing in disturbing ways. As the painter Monica Majoli recalls, the very personal, slight, and deeply subterranean



This page, from left: Richard Hawkins, *Trixter*, 1991, rubber mask, magazine clippings, paper clips, staples, nails, 15 x 9". Richard Hawkins, *Untitled (Slash/Twombly)* (detail), 1992, altered book, 12 x 17" (open). View of "Richard Hawkins: *Third Mind*," 2011, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. From left: *RRSPS*, 1993; *Crepuscule #3*, 1994; *SPP*, 1993; *Crepuscule #1*, 1994. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen. Opposite page, from left: Richard Hawkins, *The Last House*, 2010, altered dollhouse, lighting, table, 89 x 36 x 36". Richard Hawkins, *disembodied zombie ben purple*, 1997, inkjet print, 47 x 36". Richard Hawkins, *Scalp 1* (*Remember the wonderful days when everything could be explained by terms like "desire" and "the body"?*), 2010, rubber mask, painted paper, paper clips, dimensions variable. Richard Hawkins, *Scalp 2* (*Remember the wonderful days when everything could be explained by terms like "desire" and "the body"?*), 2010, rubber mask, painted paper, paper clips, dimensions variable.



nature of Hawkins's early works epitomized the "sleepy, distorted Hollywood, River Phoenix drifting vacant loneliness" of LA at that time.

The two felt "monochromes" from 1993 that were on view at the Hammer typify this empty, anomic sensibility: rectangular fields of fabric pushpinned to a wall, with Post-its and pictures of hot guys paper-clipped to their edges. The swaths of fabric sagged and crumpled along the floor. Yet they are works that strive to embody a set of almost classical aspirations for artmaking. In his essay for "Against Nature," Hawkins laid out a set of terms that would animate his own practice—*artificiality*, *melancholia*, *distance*, and *sublime*—noting that "[t]he sublime . . . is ironic terror. It is like pleasure but more intense than pleasure because it is based on terror." The terror invoked is hardly metaphoric—Hawkins famously wrote letters to John Wayne Gacy. Looking beyond the serial killer chic that now seems, well, so '90s, this fascination with death and violence betrays a desire for art objects with the psychic intensity of talismans or fetishes, a need to facilitate the exorcism of obsessions through a ritual staging and sacrifice of images.

The early series culminated in the artist's first tabletop piece, *Untitled (Tazio in the City)*, 1995, which places a cutout figure of a Japanese fashion model, a cereal box, an upside-down coffee cup, and other objects on a well-worn folding table. Given pride of place in the exhibition's first room, *Tazio in the City* was framed in both the show and the catalogue as the moment of Hawkins's "move into the realm of the collage-object, into the spatial realm of sculpture" (in George Baker's words). Yet this narrative seems faulty. Hawkins's images were always treated as objects, and, by 1991, the year in which the hanging masks were made, had become central elements of a fully articulated sculptural practice. In fact, one of the core logics of his early production was this inseparability of pictorial and object modes, yet the installation largely cordoned them off from each other, with "pictures" on the walls and

"sculptures" on the floor. Without contemporaneous works—such as *French Kiss*, 1995, which collects similar cutout figures in a decorated box like a child's play set—we were left without a sense of how these diverse materials generate intersecting fantasy worlds and tableaux.

Rather than teasing out such trajectories, the exhibition was organized around highly iconic leitmotifs. It included all six of Hawkins's 1997 "Disembodied Zombies"—large-scale ink-jet prints of free-floating heads suspended against brightly colored backdrops. Hung prominently in all three rooms, they implicitly framed the show. The heads are cheery and iconic; the horror they elicit feels just for play. Hawkins's equally likable haunted houses (begun in 2007) and similar sculptures were also scattered through the space. Made from elaborately altered dollhouses and other materials, and placed on low tables, they allow viewers to peek into windows to view miniaturized replicas of Hawkins's works in dark, ornate interiors. They seem to offer glimpses of Hawkins's mind—a mind evidently informed by '60s television like *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*, low-brow gothics and horror movies, macabre fantasy worlds in which the monstrous can also be sexy or alluring. They are powerful works, yet the choice to include so many of them undercut their impact.

The "Disembodied Zombies" perhaps mark a turn in Hawkins's practice toward work that is more decorative and accessible, where the repetition risks seeming motivated less by obsession than by marketability. Here is where the inclusion of more paintings might have helped us see how Hawkins continues to pull the rug out from under his viewers (and collectors). When he debuted a group of brilliant and confounding abstractions in 2000, no one knew what to make of them: Inexplicably painted on cheap, store-bought canvases with staples along the sides, they resembled low-key action painting on a small, unimpressive scale. As parts of Hawkins's production got lighter and more palatable, the paintings (which have ranged across a number of

styles and subjects) retained a perverse difficulty. Without them, we were left with one side of a conversation.

The ongoing significance of emptiness and erasure in Hawkins's practice was also submerged. Throughout the crowded exhibition, we encountered certain subjects (porn, fashion photos, cute boys) over and over, in shifting combinations, migrating from surface to surface: book pages, ink-jet prints, the lanterns. What we didn't encounter was the nonsubject. In Hawkins's practice—going all the way back to the first altered books—recurrent blank spaces clearly signify as much as the images do, but here these empty expanses were drowned out by a profusion of imagery. Emerging amid '80s neo-Conceptual object accumulation, Hawkins took something else from that idea of found material. We could compare his project to Rauschenberg's Combines: There's a shared sensibility, a moving but elusive logic that jumbles empty swatches of color with objects with images. The critical impulse to read the Combines as formal operations or random accumulations has long collided with more iconographic approaches that assemble narratives from scattered shards, and similar dichotomies structure many readings, or misreadings, of Hawkins's work, failing to account for the expanses between images, the rhythmic emptiness that is their emotional core.

Near the exhibition's entrance, one encountered two new shredded masks, *Scalp 1* and *Scalp 2* (both 2010, both subtitled *Remember the wonderful days when everything could be explained by terms like "desire" and "the body"?*), which echoed the 1991 pieces that opened the exhibition, albeit here with blank scraps of painted paper in place of photographic images. These are works about absence, and about the distance between then and now. Am I wrong to view them as, in effect, exhibition copies, standing in for the older pieces that are now too fragile to be hung? And to view the subtitle as both mournful and exasperated? □

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