



A Good Question: Marc Blumthal's The Flame and The Flower An Essay by Charles Fox

Marc Blumthal's art practice questions the role of *ego* and *id* to consider how American identity is formed. Through pairing innately personal explorations of self and family with investigations of widely known public figures, Blumthal employs a diverse range of media to get ideas across as succinctly as possible. By printing imagery on aluminum, he abandons the frame, floating his work directly on the wall. Materials used in *The Flame and The Flower*, such as a glass crystal and his cat's ashes, bring Blumthal's fascination with memorials into focus.

Blumthal depicts prominent political and cultural figures in *The Flame and the Flower* as actors or characters thrust into the role of egomaniacal American caricatures: Ronald Reagan, Kim Jong II, World Wrestling Entertainment's superstar wrestler, *The Undertaker*. Working through an aesthetic that simultaneously blocks and filters imagery, Blumthal overlays digital halftone dots to the point of an almost cartoonish detachment from their original appearance. Imagery is sourced from Google, democratizing the source and access of what the viewer sees, drawing emphasis to the ready availability of seemingly endless imagery we confront daily. In an age where information and images bombard at all times, Blumthal emphasizes his subjects' place within the eerie cultural malaise that is part and parcel of the "reality" they exist in, calling into question how individualism is constructed through a collective identity.



Left: *Untitled New Year*, Silkscreen & Archival Photograph on Aluminum, 24" x 30", 2013
Right: *Untitled Mask*, Silkscreen & Archival Photograph on Aluminum, 24" x 30", 2013

Through political rhetoric from both the USA and North Korea, American citizens have become conditioned to viewing Kim Jong II as an embodiment of "the enemy", a visible



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representative of a society whose way of life directly contradicts the American way. Kim Jong Il serves as a striking example of the effect of an unchecked id and ego, polarizing modern American identity from the outside. Reagan, conversely, is portrayed in the ubiquitous presidential image taken by White House staff photographer Michael Evans in 1980. This time, the image is lifted and obscured by Blumthal's obliterating halftone dots, providing partial clarity only to Reagan's body and face. The effect creates the unsettling illusion that he is wearing a mask and succeeds in drawing attention to (the question of) Reagan's iconic role in the drama of American lives.

Punching a Common Mistake in the Face (Mark Blumenthal) plays on the lifelong issue of people mistaking the artist's name for *Huffington Post* senior polling editor Mark Blumenthal. Blumthal relieved some of his frustration with the mix up by repeatedly punching a portrait of Blumenthal printed on aluminum. The ensuing dents divide Blumenthal's goofy grin in half and contrast eerily with the cold, inert mood of what feels like a LinkedIn avatar. Ultimately, the piece serves to skewer the artist alongside the egotistical politicians depicted in the exhibition: it is evident that the name mix up scrapes his ego.



Punching a Common Mistake (Mark Blumenthal) In The Face, Dent & Archival Photograph on Aluminum, 3" x 20" x 20", 2013

The act of exhibiting manipulated portraits both from the public domain and from Blumthal's own personal collection is a good example of the characteristic wit and idiosyncratic he approaches his work with. He finds his message in an unexpected mix



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of materials and actions. This continues to be apparent in *Halftone*, whose surface literally features the remains of Blumthal's deceased cat. By portraying a halftone, which utilizes an optical illusion to reduce visual representation to one color, Blumthal cleverly extends his avid usage of the printing device outside of the photographic realm. His pet, reduced to ash of a single color, is memorialized in the form of a halftone in the eponymous sculpture. The effect is simultaneously cold and warm, and a perfect coalescing of the means and the ends Blumthal employs in the exhibition: now the familial investigation literally *becomes* the halftone that is used in other explorations in *The Flame and The Flower*.

This willingness for proximity to his personal life amidst a body of artwork that addresses much larger themes is exemplified in *Halftone*, and also in *Crystal*. Blumthal deliberately puts the viewer in a voyeuristic position by sharing uncomfortable autobiographical details in a series of revealing titles. Referencing earlier works *My Father Had A Vasectomy* and *My Mother Had A Vasectomy*, Blumthal states that he wants *Crystal* to function "as a diamond, a commodity of a memory/thought/moment; something to memorialize, or make monumental."



Halftone, Bone & Ash on Aluminum, 12" x 12", 2013

Exploring the fact that his conception occurred after his father's vasectomy, Blumthal places an image of his mother holding his infant self, with the image of himself deleted, inside of a crystal. It begs the question, what exactly is being memorialized? Again, Blumthal's own ego is at stake, and now those of his parents are as well.



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As James Turrell points out, “Science strives for answers, but art is happy with a good question.” There are certainly some good questions raised in *The Flame and The Flower*. Ultimately, Blumthal’s artwork causes the viewer to ask large questions which seem to be increasingly difficult to answer in today’s world: How is identity constructed? What does it mean to be American? What role do ego and id play in our own lives and the lives of other Americans? Does our preoccupation with digital imagery dissolve the impact the stable printed image once held? Reality becomes a strange equation in Blumthal’s art; one intrinsically tied to one’s own ego and id, by his estimation.

Charles fox is a freelance writer and curator residing in Indianapolis, Indiana. He contributes art criticism to Indianapolis alt weekly [NUVO](#) and blogged about contemporary art for [The Hyde Park Art Center](#), [On The Cusp](#) and [Outposts From The Material World](#). He holds a BA in English and Spanish from Cornell College of Mount Vernon, Iowa and a MA in Museum Studies from Indiana University.



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