

The Serious Joke: The Objects of Jay Heikes

by *kimberly chou* 08/30/10

For the past five years, Jay Heikes' work has revolved around one big joke. In the 2006 Whitney Biennial, the artist showed stills from a video that showed him as a stand-up comic, puppet in hand, telling a joke about a pirate and its obstinate parrot. Shot in one take while Heikes was finishing graduate school at Yale, *So There's This Pirate* (2005) follows the parrot's refusal to obey its owner and the pirate's resultant identity crisis, mimicking the artist's constant evaluation of his own work.



When Heikes presented his first New York solo show, "Like a Broken Record," at Marianne Boesky Gallery in late 2007, the sculptures, drawings and wall reliefs therein took off from the original joke. The various works hinted at the pirate and parrot story, but were more concerned with the *telling* of it, and with the idea of artist as entertainer. Black wooden stalls with splattered curtains were part theater—recalling the curtains behind the artist in the video—and part carnival photo booth. Heikes' photocopied paper drawings depicted spectral images and the zigzags of television interference, a kind of channel-surfing perhaps similar to what was going on in viewers' heads as they juggled the pieces of fractured

narrative. Concurrent to the Boesky exhibition, Heikes also showed work exploring the same themes and materials at the ICA Philadelphia in what was his first solo museum show. LEFT: CONVERSATIONS WITH A BITTER PILL, 2010. COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY.

Heikes returns to Boesky with "Inanimate Life," open Sept. 16 through Oct. 23. Since that first outing at Boesky, Heikes' shows at Federica Schiavo in Rome and [Galería Marta Cervera](#) in Madrid have further explored ideas of abstraction and decay with sculptures and paintings on steel that rely as much on natural processes like rust and oxidization in their formation as the artist's hand. Heikes has continued in these media for "Inanimate Life," plus photography, painting and installation work. In this new show, one can still detect the themes that started with that old pirate joke if "so far buried," the artist said, "that it's almost something completely new."



At Boesky, the work will be divided in two spaces. "I see the show feeling like an acid-bathed landscape where you can almost see the works re-materializing from one to the next," Heikes said.

The first room will contain the "static" paintings of pigment and enamel on steel (similar to what he first showed in Rome), plus a large corroding work that resembles a deconstructed spiral staircase. The second gallery will include photography, fleshly sculptural work that Heikes calls "moltings" and cacti studded with dyed porcupine quills. The psychedelic cacti were inspired by the trees in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, which Heikes recently read to his one-year-old

son. The notion, put forth in *The Lorax*, that one must use or destroy a material to create a new product is something artists must rationalize—and in Heikes' case, he said, making the cacti have made him wonder about the provenance of his porcupine quills.

There will also be a hole cut into the gallery wall that allows visitors to see out of Boesky, past the insular world Heikes has created. Of course, the artist has placed limits: the temporary window has a Mack truck-style radiator grate over top.

"I specifically made my work about mutation and change from the beginning," Heikes said. "That I took this joke and wanted to tell it over and over, that kind of beats the beating of the dead horse—I wanted to find a way out of that. I wanted to find a way out of the look of my work, making a long arc of exploration of different materials and different bits of content."

Heikes' work captures how different materials engage with each other, especially after chemical change. The pieces in "Inanimate Life" have been constructed from, among other things, steel, gelatin, enamel, palladium metal, cacti and porcupine quills.

For his large metal-work sculptures, Heikes casts iron and bronze together. He first coats the molds with shellac mixed with iron filings; the hot bronze poured into the mold melts the shellac and sticks to the iron pieces. "The surface of the sculptures are the corrosion of two metals, rusting at one time but also oxidizing," Heikes said. "Depending on the humidity of the room, [the color] of the sculpture can go a little greener, or if dryer, a more gray, rust color."

The photo series he calls "Civilians" entails pictures of figures cobbled together from hornets nests, flannel shirts, sticks and other detritus. (Versions of these were first shown in Madrid and Rome.) Heikes goes through an labor-intensive process that involves making contact prints, coating them with palladium metal and then developing and hand-dyeing them. The result is that the materials used become twined with the content.

"About that time, on the front page of the *New York Times*, every photo was a body that didn't look like a body, ripped apart," Heikes said. With his art, Heikes said he wasn't interested in referencing war but in "putting together a fractured narrative into a body and how that's relevant for so many things."

The human touches to each "Civilian"—spectacles on the bulbous head, a pair of blue jeans—give them a sense of familiarity. But, like the news photos Heikes references, they don't perform as bodies upon closer inspection: what should be an arm or leg is canted at an unnatural angle in one photo, and sticks burst forth aggressively from the torso in another. The process of developing the photos and then hand-dyeing gives the prints a Weegee crime-photo aesthetic.



MORTALITY'S REEF. COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY.

Particularly in Heikes' fleshly, large-scale gelatin works, one sees how his interest in the photographic image translates to sculpture. What Heikes calls his "moltings" were initially inspired by the fact that gelatin "was the stuff that holds the image." The sculptures themselves look like shed skins on the floor, of some unknown creature—and skin shed for unknown reasons. Considering the actual space where change can happen, Heikes said, "the moltings are evolution of that change occurring. They end up with textures that look like the wrinkles in your hands, almost like scar tissue, burned skin."

The sheer materiality of Heikes' recent work—their *thing*-ness, in all of their physical weight and grotesqueness—reflects his dissatisfaction with contemporary art in the participatory, performative tradition, and a desire to return attention to painting, sculpture and installation. They are objects with an "inanimate life" force, in other words.

"I feel we're sort of on trend to short change the art object," Heikes said. "We're not giving it its due and I want to challenge that a little bit."