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The Many Faces of Richard Dupont

Never a 'starving artist,' Dupont still struggled to break into New York's elite art world



Artist Richard Dupont's head-shaped sculptures cast out of solid archival polyurethane resin are currently on view at Carolina Nitsch Project Room.

BY KARI MILCHMAN

You probably wouldn't recognize Richard Dupont from the many works he's done based on his own form. A collection of fleshy-pink men for his much-talked-about solo show at Aby Rosen's Lever House in 2008. "Phantom" (2007), the larger-than-life etching of his hand recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. Or his latest series, polyurethane resin castings of his head filled with the detritus of his life, which opened at Carolina Nitsch Project Room earlier this month and are on view through June 25. Since 2004—when he paid a visit to the

Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio and left with a digital full-body scan of himself—Dupont has been creating these self-portraits that have very little to do with the self.

"I've used my own body as sort of an armature for a lot of the work I've done over the last seven years," the wiry artist explains. "I created this virtual form and that became raw material for all kinds of work: print-making, drawing, sculpture." Whereas early works explore surveillance through technology, Dupont's latest series can be tied to the idea of self-surveillance: how people have taken to documenting and

recording their own lives in thorough detail.

It's an almost-warm afternoon at the artist's studio on Varick Street near Spring, and Dupont is surrounded by massive sculptures of his head. It's all very *Alice in Wonderland*. From that same laser scan, Dupont made the mold that formed these hollow canisters in which he then placed, time capsule-style, the random "junk" and found objects he accumulated over nearly a decade. There are 12 in all, each containing items ranging from the personal—photographs, his child's shoe, stuffed animals—to the generic: steel wool, a crushed beer can, Styrofoam peanuts.

"For these, I wanted the physiognomy of the face to almost disappear and be overtaken by what's inside," Dupont says as he examines his likeness.

"Our heads are filled with junk all the time. It gets fed into us even as we try to live clean lives. The metaphor is fairly straightforward and obvious, but that's what I like. It has an immediacy that I think is important."

What's less obvious is the artist's attempt to disempower himself as the creator of these pieces. "I am basically working upside down and inside out, so I can't completely control what's happening," Dupont says of his process. "Initially, I wanted to avoid any type of intentional composition. Of course, that's impossible—somehow you find a way to make choices. Even if an item is just dumped in there arbitrarily, it becomes a gesture and immediately looks like I intended a certain effect. I'm interested in that line: Where does control end and accident begin? Working this way, I never know exactly what I'm getting until the end. I love that there's always an element of chance."

The playfulness of this series belies the hard work Dupont has put in to get to the point where his art earns solo shows and a place at renowned New York museums. Heir to a chemicals fortune and plugged into the business and New York social scenes—his father is a private investor and his mother is a Frick (she remarried)—Dupont's connections didn't gain him immediate access to the art world. As an undergrad, he studied art at Princeton.

"The best thing about Princeton is it's so close to New York, so we had all these visiting artists," Dupont says. "The Guerrilla Girls staged a week of events. Jackie Winsor came and talked. One day, I was in my studio and turned around and Roy Lichtenstein was standing right behind

me—that was kind of a shock."

Then, after school, Dupont moved to New York and did what most young creative types do to support their interests: work odd jobs. "I was teaching homeless kids art. I was bartending. I took drum classes," Dupont says of his post-college years. It was some time before the art world took note. Slowly, he was able to devote himself more to his art, and began contributing to group shows here and in Europe. Then, in 2004 when Dupont was 35, he caught a break—a big one.

"Tracy Williams decided to give me a show, a large sculptural installation consisting of three figures that were later bought by MoMA," Dupont remembers.

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"After that, everything changed for me. There was a tremendous energy that came out of the response to that show."

But in all those years as a "struggling artist," was the Dupont family name a help or hindrance? The fleeting jewelry collections, the chick lit, the small film roles—social prominence can help put you out there, but success and critical acclaim don't always follow. "I don't really think about this too much now," Dupont says, carefully. "In the beginning, I wondered if this door opened or closed for this reason. If I had chosen a different career, it would probably have worked more to my advantage. The art world doesn't care—people are not interested in a 'Dupont.'"

So he, just like anyone, went the old-fashioned way: focusing on his work and hoping the right people would notice. "The major decision makers are an insular pocket—not really an economic pocket, but more of an intellectual pocket," Dupont says of the power players in his field. "The art world is more impenetrable than the social world or the business world by far. It's a tiny club, and just like any club, it has guidelines for membership and is difficult to get into. It's the same as any other exclusive world, whether it be Wall Street or Hollywood. No matter who you are and where you come from, you have to make

Photos by Sophie Elgort



Polyurethane resin casts of Dupont's head filled with different types of "junk."

a name for yourself through hard work, perseverance and hopefully hitting the right notes once in a while."

Hitting the right notes is the hard part. "Everyone comes with their own set of subjective points of view. Everyone has a different favorite piece, a different reason why. It's so arbitrary," Dupont says. "So finding support is curious. I have done shows that I thought would sell out the first day and nobody buys a thing. Then I do something else that I think is really challenging and no one is going to get, and everybody goes crazy and wants to be involved. There really is no rhyme or reason sometimes."

Despite the subjectivity, Dupont has garnered enough of a following to allow him to keep working—which, according to him, is the whole point. His success hasn't gone to his head, and although he's often seen at various parties and social functions with wife and gal-about-town Lauren Dupont, he's hardly become a regular fixture in the gossip pages. "Everyone talks about how

artists need to be celebrities, but that's just not the case," Dupont says, firmly. "There is a handful of artists whose work is about creating this post-Andy Warhol idea of the artist persona, but most artists I know don't put this caricature of themselves out into the media. They are a very quiet group who keep to themselves and are more interested in doing the work."

And in his case, the work has taken Dupont far—and will take him farther still. With a show this fall in Seoul and another in Berlin later this year, Dupont has come a long way from his days as a bartender-slash-drummer. And though he and Lauren recently left Tribeca for the East 60s, Richard has no plans to leave New York any time soon.

"It's funny how people are so territorial, so tribal and neighborhood-oriented," he muses. "It's kind of ironic because, really, it's all just the same thing now no matter where you live. It's too expensive. There aren't many artists left in the city." Well, there's at least one. ■