



Jason Rhoades, *Tijuanatanjierchandelier*, 2006, mixed media. Installation view.

## Jason Rhoades

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Monet had his lilies, Degas his dancers. If one leitmotif defines the madcap oeuvre of Jason Rhoades, it's pussy. By the time he died, in 2006 at the age of forty-one, Rhoades had collected more than seven thousand euphemisms for female genitalia in several languages. He was on a quest, he said, for “the ultimate pussy word.” This dubious grail—a satirical ode to testosterone-addled idolatry and locker-room patois—gave rise to brashly festive sculptures and performances, as well as delirious, room-size installations. His series “Pussy Trilogy,” 2003–2006, for instance, addressed the crossroads of East and West, sex, religion, and commerce in works such as *Meccatuna*, 2003, a project involving a scale model of the Kaaba shrine made of Lego bricks. Rhoades was fascinated by the history of Islam, particularly Mohammed’s destruction of false gods in Mecca, and his late works explore what we fetishize—from material trinkets to getting laid.

*Tijuanatanjierchandelier*, 2006, the artist’s last major piece, which made its New York debut at David Zwirner, deals with similar themes. Dozens of vaginal appellations,

immortalized in neon cursive, gave the gallery a sordid radiance. Some of the slang terms are gross (STENCH TRENCH); others are ridiculous (PINK SLINKY). Many are both (FILTHY HATCHET WOUND). They hung in clusters, like radioactive fruit, from his signature “chandeliers”: snarls of electrical cables, metal spokes, chintzy souvenirs, taxidermied animal heads, and suggestive dribbles of glue. With their dense tangles of baubles and hardware, the works resembled gonzo weather vanes after a cyclone.

*Tijuanatanjierchandelier*, which was presented first in Málaga, Spain, then at the Fifty-Second Venice Biennale, simulates a sprawling bazaar—the kind of open-air market that crops up near the mouths of tourist attractions. Rhoades gathered the knickknacks on display from vendors in Tijuana and Tangier, and arrayed them on striped serapes and kilim rugs along the perimeter of the space. In the center of the gallery, ten mattresses lay at random angles on an island of overlapping carpets. Piles of faded, torn-up T-shirts suggested dead leaves waiting to be bagged.

The success of *Tijuanatanjierchandelier* lies in the artist’s eye for revealing totems: dream catchers with plastic beads and acid-pink feathers, tiny sequined sombreros, cheap leather pouches stamped with camels and palm trees, ceramic bongos, trilobite fossils, bullwhips, bandolier ammunition belts, cowrie-shell bracelets, breast-shaped mugs with big brown nipples, glass margarita goblets, knockoff Prada handbags, and TruckNutz in every color. Rhoades presented them all without judgment, marveling instead at the weirdness of the stuff that sells. A video on the gallery’s website shows the artist browsing for materials in Mexico, appraising racks of fake jalapeños with the quiet, discriminating focus of an antiques connoisseur. At another point, he tells a companion which kind of leather fedoras to gather. “The ones that look worn,” says the man, assessing the specimen hat. Not exactly. “Just ugly,” says Rhoades.

Ugliness was a fascination for the artist, who delighted in the seamy detritus of suburban America and the grimier expressions of gender and sexuality that mass-produced flotsam can inadvertently contain. Like the late Mike Kelley and their mutual friend and mentor Paul McCarthy, Rhoades took a puckish approach to skewering consumer culture and macho posturing in his work. He has been hailed as a prophet of our current pussy-grabbing, wall-building, Muslim-banning political climate: an archaeologist of the contemporary moment. Rhoades was particularly adept at exposing the nostalgic fantasies

and self-delusion that attend much global travel. So many of the souvenirs the artist selected speak to our desire for the cultures we visit to perform campy versions of themselves, to masquerade in traditional dress and sell made-in-China versions of the crafts that flourished before the first tour buses rolled up. By mashing these objects together with sexist slang, Rhoades evokes the way vacationers exploit other countries as amusement parks. At its worst, tourism can resemble sexual violence in the one-sidedness of its fleeting extraction. While the work's zany humor made the show hard to resist, its more sinister content made it impossible to forget.

— Zoë Lescaze

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