

My Rules: Patrick Rock's Aesthetics of Antagonism

by John Motley

In a promotional poster for Bay Area–based Club Paint's second exhibition at Rocksbox Contemporary Fine Art in October 2013, one of the group's team-painted canvases—*Stretch Marks* (2013)—appears to hover, cockeyed, in an expansive darkness. In it, a crouching hominid from some fuzzy stretch on the evolutionary spectrum gobbles a banana with an erotic hunger, as a jungle of scribbled brushstrokes erupts around him like the externalized pleasure we imagine lighting up his half-man, half-monkey brain. With our eyes trained on the painting, it's easy to miss an important detail of the poster's composition: trapped between foreground and background, someone is holding up the canvas. A truncated pair of legs, sporting muddy blueberry Vans, appears beneath the bottom of the canvas, while a pink half-moon of forehead peeks out above its upper edge. This is Patrick Rock: artist, arts educator, and proprietor of Rocksbox, the project space he founded in 2007. Though the poster is among dozens he's produced to promote shows he has organized and curated, it contains a kind of truth about Rock's ubiquity in Portland's contemporary art scene of the past decade: he's never directly in the spotlight, but he's never far from it, either.

In the nine years since he moved to Portland and founded Rocksbox, Rock has cultivated an unmistakable identity for the space, where art's most high-minded ambitions are at once faithfully upheld and impishly undermined. Rocksbox is a place where established out-of-towners can experiment and road test fresh bodies of work; it's also a proving ground for art students and promising young locals. The openings at Rocksbox are notoriously raucous parties, with enormous crowds spilling onto the back patio, where a bonfire burns during winter months. At these lively events, veteran artists mix comfortably with young up-and-comers—a rarity in Portland's generationally stratified art scene. In the summers of 2011 and 2014, the space hosted the Conceptual Oregon Performance School—that's C.O.P.S.

for short—a free summer art school Rock created to address the dual problems plaguing more conventional models: runaway tuition costs and contemporary art curricula that lag behind the times.^[1] In short, Rocksbox, which Rock also calls home, isn't just a place where art is shown, but an environment under the influence of a fully real-



Patrick Rock, Oscar's Delirium Tremens (installation view), 2011. Inflatable vinyl sculpture, motor. Exhibited as part of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's 2011 Time-Based Art Festival. Image courtesy the artist and the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art

ized philosophy and aesthetic sensibility. The space itself constitutes an unconventional studio practice, in which the boundaries dividing art and life are fluidly indistinct.

By contrast, Rock's origins as an artist were far more conventional. While working odd jobs in his twenties along Oregon's North Coast in such towns as Arch Cape, Astoria, Cannon Beach, and Manzanita, he fabricated hulking metal sculptures, inspired by modern masters like David Smith, that echoed the monumentality of the landscape. But once he enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute's New Genres program—where he studied with pioneering conceptual artist Paul Kos and Cuban performance artist Tony Labat—his notion of sculpture as a concrete and formal object began to unravel. Through performance, Rock began to value contingency and immateriality—qualities that undermine our expectations of an art-viewing experience to be static, passive, and repeatable. Indeed, that sense of tension between what we expect and what we get has remained a constant in Rock's work since, animating every expression, regardless of medium, with a baiting smirk. A series of the artist's inflatable sculptures, for instance, seem a direct riposte to the machismo and physicality of his juvenile welded sculptures. *Simulacra Hermaphrodite* (2002) was an enormous hot dog inflated by forced air; viewers could enter and pace through its claustrophobic interior. For *Oscar's Delirium Tremens* (2011), Rock designed a Pepto-pink inflatable elephant, supine on a round bed, in tribute to the unapologetic aesthete and lush Oscar Wilde. Exhibited as part of the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's annual Time-Based Art Festival, the sculpture let viewers climb in through the elephant's vagina (enacting the Freudian regression narrative), dizzily bounce inside its stomach (simulating the nausea of a hangover), and exit through its anus (in a nod to Bataille's aesthetics of generative negativity, as described in *The Solar Anus*). In both sculptures, Rock subverts the ultramasculine virility that marks so much of the modernist sculptural canon by mimicking the ups and downs of the male sex. Once these works are deflated, they become limp and shapeless forms easily packed inside a box, reduced to practically nothing.



Patrick Rock Face It You're Hippies, 2009 (performance view). Residency and performance-based exhibition, Ditch Projects, Springfield, Oregon, August 15–September 12, 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Ditch Projects. In Face It You're Hippies, Patrick Rock spent six days living and creating in a bunker below the Ditch Projects space, and, in the artist's words: "using that time to obsessively and painstakingly construct a physical manifesto of Oregonian identity designed to turn the viewer into salt at a single glance." The residency culminated in a neo-pagan anti-potluck featuring a musical performance by cock rockers PISS.

Despite his wide-ranging, nonstop practice—not to mention exhibitions in Paris, Prague, Leipzig, and Los Angeles—Rock has never been represented by a Portland dealer, nor has he ever received a true solo show in town.^[2] For many Portlanders, including myself, the only opportunity to see a fully realized local exhibition by the artist was *Face It, You're Hippies!*, which opened in August 2009 at the artist space Ditch Projects in Springfield, Oregon. It remains one of the most unforgettable shows I've seen in the Northwest over the last decade.

At Ditch, a converted warehouse situated above a millrace in a desolate industrial park, Rock fashioned a perverse portrait of the state's legacy of idealists, utopians, and countercultural visionaries, highlighting the hypocrisy and inevitable failure that too often accompanies the struggle to transcend society as we

know it. On a clothesline outside the space, Rock hung black-and-white tie-dyed T-shirts, which swayed and twisted as they dried. Made with a toxic dye, the shirts irritated the skin of anyone who actually wore one, recasting a clichéd emblem of flower power as a kind of hippie hair shirt.^[3] Inside, a framed sheet of LSD blotter paper hung on the wall; Rock had written the word “bad” by hand inside each tiny perforated square. On the floor, grape Kool-Aid gently bubbled up through a prefab garden water-feature, generating a synthetic and sickly sweet miasma. A live video feed projected on the wall gave window to a bizarre and seedy underworld that was transpiring (literally) beneath the gallery floor. Rock, his back mostly turned to the camera, grunted and moaned like a caveman while tenderly cradling a blow-up sex doll to whom he fed Hostess fruit pies, smearing them messily over the accepting, lipstick-red O of its mouth. Later in the evening, his art-punk band PISS played a thrashing, feedback-drenched set during which Rock shaved off his shoulder-length hair mid-song, performing a spiritual rite of rebirth and transformation.

Rock, who was born in Portland in 1968, has long been fascinated with Oregon’s subcultural sects—hippies and New Agers, cult leaders and religious radicals, punks, surfers, ecoterrorists, etc. On the one hand, they’re familiar types he encountered while growing up along the North Coast and later in Portland. But his sympathy with these groups is much deeper and more personal than that. He clearly identifies with their conviction that the world, as it exists, is inadequate and must be remade according to their beliefs and values. Art constitutes Rock’s ideological core, so its denigration—whether by the corrupting influence of money, laziness, or a lack of criticality—registers as blasphemy. And as his own practice attests, he has refocused the merciless examination of the art-school critique onto the art world itself, demanding more meaning, intention, and rigor

The work in *Face It, You’re Hippies!* was unflinching in its portrayal of these groups, their contradictions and incomplete visions fashioned into strange yet abundantly legible forms: consciousness-expanding drugs lead directly to “bad” trips; the Kool-Aid conjures herd-like groupthink and the mass suicides of Jonestown; and the nihilist who shaves his head to find God illustrates an easy answer to the complex question of redemption. But it also celebrates a fecund antagonism present in every subcultural faction he references. Following the show’s title, Rock holds that artists are fundamentally bound up in the outsized ambition and inevitable futility that marks many utopian undertakings. Lumping everyone together as “hippies” amounts to a taunt pitched squarely at artists, a group that is similarly susceptible to abandoning its ideals for leisure and wealth. But the show’s title is also a dare: unless you commit fully, you’re destined to be another countercultural burnout, a relic of your expired conviction.

Much of Rock’s aesthetic is characterized by this kind of antagonism, which is frequently misinterpreted as plainly negative, hostile, even unserious. In 2010, Rock mounted the “Donald Judds Conference” at Rocksbox to coincide with “Donald Judd: Delegated Fabrication,” a one-day conference at the University of Oregon’s Portland outpost featuring critic Robert Storr and Judd’s fabricator, Peter Ballantine. For the event, Rock replicated an untitled, wall-mounted sculpture of Judd’s from 1967, replacing the bright and lustrous patina of lacquered auto-body paint that became the artist’s signature with a fleshy palette of peach, pink, and rose, collaged from the pages of soft-core porn magazine *Juggs*. While this response belies a sophomoric humor, upending scholarly seriousness with childish wordplay, there is also a weighty institutional critique at work. For instance, Rock’s “conference” seemed to ask: What is the value of holding a conference about a dead artist who had a tenuous connection to Portland when living artists in Portland struggle for critical attention, collector sales, and institutional support? How would Judd, whose work brashly rebelled against the dominant modes of his day, react to such a staid academic event? And—prompted by the collaged work in Rock’s take on Judd’s pristine surfaces—has the art market’s fetishized commodification of Judd actually cheapened his work and made it more about collector gratification? In asking these questions, Rock is ensuring that the voice of dissent remains part of contemporary

art discourse as global market forces nudge today's art world closer to an elitist monoculture.

For Rock, the artist's life is as all-consuming as a religious calling. On the one hand, this lack of division between life and art foregrounds his conviction that art truly is sacred; on the other hand, he is acutely aware that politics and money constantly threaten art's potential. For many, Rock's severe stance may seem contrary and stubborn, which he would likely acknowledge. In fact, one of his most cherished models of steadfast conviction is Henry Stamper, the hardheaded patriarch of a Union-thwarting timber clan in Ken Kesey's 1964 novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*, whose mantra of intractability is "never give an inch." That refusal to concede or compromise resonates so strongly with Rock's vision of art-making that, in 2009, he created *Never Give An Inch...*, a sculpture of the emblematic image that opens and closes the novel: a severed arm swaying from a rope, its middle finger raised in undaunted defiance.



Artists Lalek Farrell-Smith & Gabe Martin creating a mural on the front of ROCKSBOX Gallery, Portland, Oregon. Indian Land Mural was created for the *One Flaming Arrow: Inter-Tribal, Art, Music, & Film Festival*, June 2–14, 2015. *One Flaming Arrow* was supported by the Precipice Fund, PICA, and R.I.S.E.: Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment.

So much of Rock's output during the past decade hinges on ephemerality. Whether it's his time-based performances or the even sketchier work of community-building through Rocksbox and C.O.P.S., his work confounds documentation and resists categorization. It's for this reason that Rock occupies an indefinite middle ground in the region's contemporary art history, just as he does in the Club Paint poster—not entirely visible, but vitally present. This, too, seems a calculated strategy for an artist with little interest in assembling a concrete and enduring body of work. He is preoccupied not only with the visceral imminence of the art experience, which sucks viewers in with the force of a riptide, but also the aftermath of those moments, when the work itself finds a second life as memory, transmitted—or not—by those who witnessed it. He is obsessed with story, with the mythic aura that shrouds the visionary artists he most admires, from Chris Burden to Martin Kippenberger. One imagines that, for Rock, success is as immaterial as so much of his output. It manifests in ripples of varying distance: in unwashed art students emboldened to play by their own rules; in fellow artists who feed off his principled devotion; and in eyewitnesses like me, who can't help but recount some vexing spectacle of his design, years after it slipped from view.

1. For the 2014 C.O.P.S. program, Rock invited a group of nationally recognized artists to teach weekend-long sessions, including Keith Boadwee, Jennifer Locke, and Lucas Murgida (San Francisco); Math Bass and Eve Fowler (Los Angeles); and Justin Lieberman (New York City). In December 2014, Rock traveled to New York City to present on C.O.P.S. at the request of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

2. Coral Brush Node (2014) at Fourteen30 Contemporary in Portland is a possible exception, as the group show, which also included Jason Hirata, Alwin Lay, Jennifer West, and Anne Fenton, was reimagined [or "presented"?] as a series of sequential weeklong solo shows.

3. A hair shirt, or cilice, is an undergarment made with animal hair that is designed to irritate the wearer's skin as a symbol of religious repentance.

A native Oregonian, John Motley is a writer who lives in Portland, Oregon. His writing on art has been published in Art in America, Art Papers, frieze, the Oregonian, the Portland Mercury, and on Artforum.com. In 2009, he was the recipient of a Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation grant for short-form arts writing. In 2010, a collection of essays, Stay Time: A Year of Writing with Fourteen30 Contemporary, was co-published by Publication Studio and Fourteen30 Contemporary. He is currently an adjunct instructor in the MFA in Contemporary Art Practice program at Portland State University.

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