



## Rachel Harrison BY CHRIS BORS

Greene Naftali Gallery, New York NY February 23 · March 31, 2007

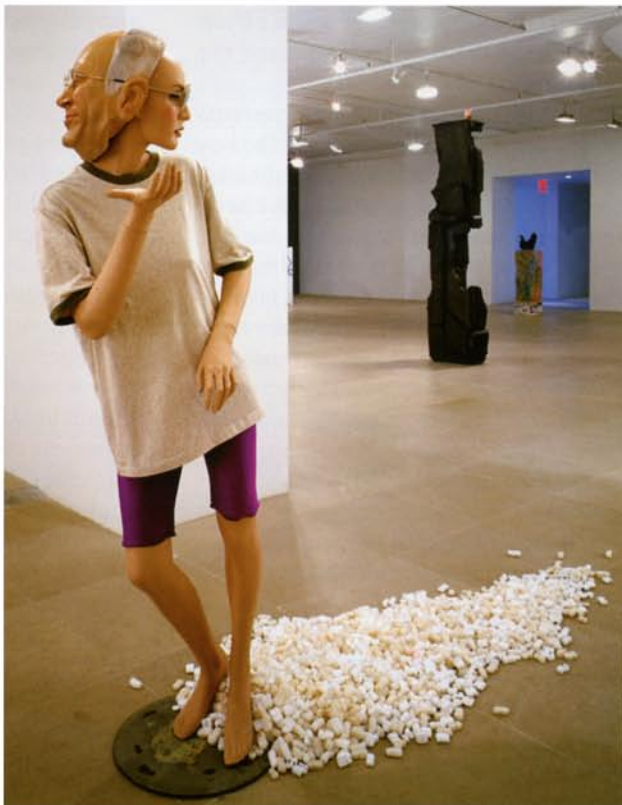
A well-known successful gallerist once told me, “The dumber the better.” I’d never refer to Rachel Harrison’s work as dumb. Just like the return of the repressed, the press release for her show “If I Did It” at Greene Naftali quotes Johnny Depp: “America is dumb, it’s like a dumb puppy that has big teeth that can bite and hurt you, aggressive.” One of nine sculptures named after famous men, *Johnny Depp* (all work 2007) features a conglomerate of gold and purple furniture and Styrofoam slabs mashed together with modeling compound to form a present-day Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Featuring mixed-media sculptures and a suite of 57 inkjet prints, Harrison’s new work alternates between political satire and pointed cultural analysis. At first glance, her discombobulated blending of references suggests that the joke is on us. In fact, Harrison has perfected her craft of blending the contradictory with an American can-do attitude, while elevating castoff detritus to a high level of formal beauty. The show’s very title, based on the cancelled O.J. Simpson book detailing how he “allegedly” murdered his ex-wife and her friend, is an ideal corollary to the prevailing attitude of many nations toward U.S. foreign policy. But it could all be explained more simply, since by combining and reconstituting found objects, Harrison ends up making them her own.

*Alexander the Great* sums up America’s current ignoble slide in world opinion. Standing on a globular multicolored mound, an androgynous child-size mannequin adorned with a red cape covered in gold stars holds up an official NASCAR metal trashcan. As with much of Harrison’s work, the mannequin’s sexual ambiguity can be related to a recent media event, in this case the hoopla over Colin Farrell’s homosexual depiction of Alexander in Oliver Stone’s film of 2004. Two cylinders resembling DayGlow sporting novelties protrude from the can, indicating that the bearer of gifts is hoping “her” intended recipient will embrace “him” as liberator. An Abraham Lincoln mask is attached to the back of the mannequin’s head, sporting a pair of cheap sunglasses. One can only assume Lincoln is in disguise, mortified by Bush’s ham-fisted reading of the Gettysburg Address. Yet the work could also be read as trash culture’s encroachment on the entire country, where there is almost no escape from chain stores or trickle-down mass entertainment.

Harrison’s Janus-faced dummy motif is also visible in *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, comprised of a female mannequin clothed in purple shorts and T-shirt, with a Dick Cheney mask clumsily stuck on the back of her head. A pile of foam peanuts used for packing fragile objects trails behind the double. Frighteningly reminiscent of Fassbinder’s *The Third Generation* (1979), the work deals with government repression, misguided terrorism, and the everyday manipulation of the populace by the wealthiest of citizens.

*Al Gore*, a tall freestanding totem or monument, is a timely reminder of America’s lax environmental policies. The predominantly green and red splotches covering the monolith represent Mother Earth, while a thermostat stuck to the side measures rising temperatures—or else acts as an “Al Gore, Hot or Not” meter. And running side by side along two walls, the series of *Voyage of the Beagle* prints only goes to prove that contradictory or purposeless bric-a-brac, like a toilet seat with a kitty on it, has become part of national folklore. Juxtaposing contemporary kitsch with tribal masks and ancient sculptures, Harrison forces us to decide for ourselves whether it is trash or treasure.



RACHEL HARRISON (ABOVE) *ALEXANDER THE GREAT*, 2007, MIXED MEDIA. (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) *RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER*, 2007, MIXED MEDIA. PHOTO JEAN VONG. COURTESY GREENE NAFTALI GALLERY, NEW YORK.