



MODERN PAINTERS

cheap thrills

Davis Rhodes's art culls imagery from commercial culture to lure and confront viewers with a spectacle heightened by tawdry effect.

by **Piper Marshall**

It was a Barneys New York spring/summer 2009 catalogue that introduced multimedia artist Davis Rhodes's work to the world en masse: in a spread advertising fashion labels Acne and Alexander Wang, the artist's series of diamond-shaped plexiglass mirrors were the source of the shot's reddish cast. Rhodes had installed the candy-colored mirrors on the exterior of Miami's Kevin Bruk Gallery in December 2008, and the on-location photo shoot absorbed the works into a commercial context. This was the perfect way for the wider public to be introduced to Rhodes's body of work, which begins with the appropriation of marketing.

Rhodes extracts images from disparate sources of commercial culture—from hip-hop album posters and neon window signs to toothpaste advertisements and store awnings. These motifs are transferred and flattened onto unconventional supports, such as freestanding foamcore, photographic paper, shaped plexiglass, and slung-cut pieces of vinyl—anything but the traditional canvas on stretcher. Visually, the advertising is reduced to angular shapes and hard lines, in pure swaths of color: matte pastels of turquoise and pink or slick primary monochromes of red, blue, or yellow.

Using cheap materials and borrowing such popular symbols

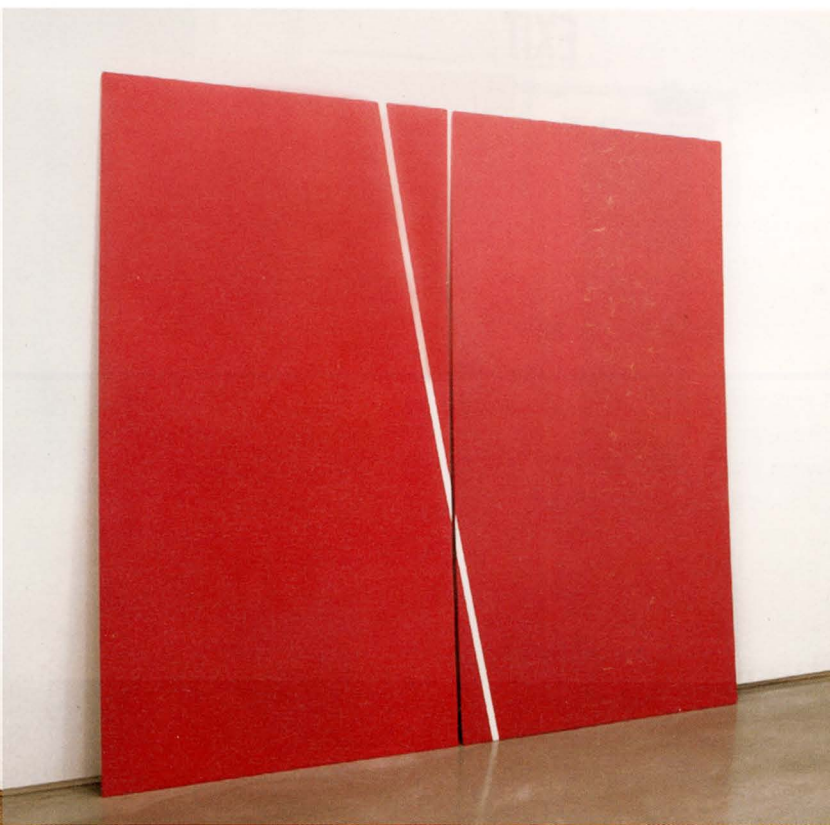
as chevrons and numbers, Rhodes amplifies the power of marketing imagery even after it has been reduced to its most basic elements. According to the artist, his works create an immediacy in the same way that Pepsi did in its January 2009 Wordplay campaign, using words and expressions such as "Oh boy," "Pop," and "Yo." His installations, like any ad, restage an encounter between capitalism (the work) and desire (the viewer); however, the twist lies in the lack of product and the instantaneity of the effect.

Rhodes arrived at his current practice while earning his master of fine arts degree at Columbia University, graduating in 2007. It was while working at Columbia's studios—located on 125th Street, just at the fringe of Harlem—that Rhodes observed an awkward visual economy that straddled guerrilla marketing and corporate aesthetics. He noticed that street teams hired by ad agencies plastered rudimentary album-release posters on telephone poles, in subway stations, and on buildings, while local industries produced and circulated vinyl banners, professionally made, to protest Columbia University's expansion into the neighborhood. Whereas the ad industry posed as guerrillas



FROM TOP: Installation view from "White Year" exhibition, Sister LA, Los Angeles, 2008; *Untitled*, 2008. Enamel on foamboard, two panels: 96 x 44 in. each. OPPOSITE: Davis Rhodes in his Brooklyn studio.

“The artist wanted the viewer to ‘not know where to stand or how to organize themselves from any fixed point in relation to the effects of the work.’”



to advertise, local businesses accessed the colors and materials of corporate power to protest. Inspired by the conflation between the two types of marketing, Rhodes created his first latex-on-foam work. He reduced the graphic design of an album-release poster to its basic elements—a black rectangle sandwiched between two white rectangles—and enlarged it to 5 by 4 feet. At the bottom, he included the album release date advertised, 9.26.06. With the original object removed, the numbers and colors were emptied of their intended meaning and rendered equal as formal qualities.

For other latex-on-foamboard works, Rhodes extracted material from popular signage—a numeral one was lifted from a McDonald’s advertisement that appeared at the corner of Broadway and 125th Street. He painted it on an 8-foot-tall board as a white number against red ground (the storefront of a vacated Kentucky Fried Chicken determined the colors of this piece). In other foamboard panels, he created diptychs that cut a thin diagonal between monochromatic boards in the same pink.

In his 2007 debut solo show at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York, more than 20 foam works were propped up against one another, against walls, and set as freestanding autonomous pieces in the

DAVIS RHODES



FROM TOP: Rhodes's Brooklyn studio; *Pink Number One*, 2008. Enamel on foamboard, 96 x 44 x 8 in.

center of the room. Rhodes's sculptural treatment of the paintings stemmed from his desire to stage an effect. The artist wanted the viewer to "not know where to stand or how to organize themselves from any fixed point in relation to the effects of the work." As sculptural objects, the paintings demanded attention, abruptly altering space and confronting viewers with their flimsy yet obdurate presence.

The artist's most recent creations use the same imagery and colors as the foam work—chevrons, numbers, and obtuse angles—but Rhodes has replaced the foam boardground with clear vinyl. In his Brooklyn studio, these pieces hang slack next to their stiff foam counterparts. A vinyl sheet sized at 4 by 8 feet is painted, then the center is actually cut out, so the pieces sag and wrinkle after they are slung on the wall. Rhodes installs these works in varied constellations, layering the vinyl on top of foam or juxtaposing two similar-looking pieces. Like the mirror pieces, the vinyl works take on the context of their surroundings—whether a white gallery space, the Miami street, or even a dusty studio floor. At each site, the works generate a confrontation between the viewer and a spectacle heightened by tawdry effects: mirrored surfaces, enlarged images, and saturated colors. ♦

"Untitled '09," Team Gallery, Inc., Sept. 3-Oct. 3, teamgal.com

