



Installation view of Craig Drennen's "BANDIT" at MOCA GA, 2018. Photo: Mohamed Jahangir.

CRAIG DRENNEN

Museum of Contemporary Art – Atlanta, Georgia

Curated by René Morales

Unwrapping BANDIT

By Brandon Woods

Craig Drennen's "BANDIT," curated by René Morales, was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Atlanta, Georgia (MOCA GA). His first solo museum exhibition, this new body of work was created during his one-year award through the museum's Working Artist Project, and included 12 large-scale, mixed media paintings, four sculptures, and one video.

Continuing his eight-year, exhaustive survey of Shakespeare's lesser-known work *Timon of Athens*, this exhibition, much like his previous exhibitions, "Poet & Awful," and "Painter and Servants," examines individual characters from the play, establishing new identities for them and blurring the line between appropriation and creative agency.¹ As the 11th, of 31 total characters he intends to cover², "BANDIT" focuses on the *Banditti*, minor characters who appear late in the play, providing the protagonist, Timon, the opportunity to espouse his skeptic view that "all the world's a thief."³

On display during the holiday season, from December 2nd to January 27th, the exhibition was loaded with Christmas-themed imagery, incorporating tinsel, artificial Christmas trees, and *trompe l'oeil* depictions of bells, ornaments, and candy canes. Blurring the line between giving and taking during the holiday season, the Christmas imagery was contextualized by dollar signs and bags of money, resulting in a satirical portrayal of Santa not as a lively and giving saint, but as a bandit. Here, however, Christmas was just the pattern on the wrapping paper. Taken at face value, the theme of Christmas tied the show together visually, and reflected the cultural zeitgeist of

the season. Used as a lens through which Drennen could reinterpret the *Banditti*, the loaded associations to exhaustion and commodification present in the work also reflected the tragic themes presented in the play. However, these associations also seemed to flatten the works' content, obscuring the more valuable concepts underneath.

Beyond the Christmas imagery, the work revealed Drennen's dexterity as an artist, incorporating a broad range of techniques drawn from diverse sources ranging from Northern Renaissance Painting, Cubism, Minimalism and Hard-Edged Abstraction, to Pop Art, Conceptual Art, Pop Surrealism, and golden-era cartoons. Here, the exhibition operated as a *tour de force* of painting, but Drennen's contextually maximalist approach to the work was a double-edged sword—in contrast to Christmas, the extent of references he included was so dense and varied that the exhibition toed dangerously close to feeling disjointed. Individually, the works had a similar effect to binging Wikipedia, taking viewers down a rabbit hole of hyperlink associations, bringing them to unexpected and disparate conclusions. However, the work maintained visual and conceptual cohesion through a number of consistent formal elements, most notably the grids incorporated into each painting.

The evenly-spaced grids, as formal, organizational structures, contextualized his work and operated as consistent visual metaphors for the concepts behind them. Taking an intentionally casual approach to his gridlines, he left evidence of expressionistic brushstrokes, inconsistent layers and textures, washes of different colors, and stippling caused by paint finding its way under masking tape. As a result, mirroring the theme of Christmas and the underlying references found within, the grid looked flat and definite from a distance but a close examination brought its complexity into focus. Further, by emphasizing the grid in some areas while partially or fully obscuring it in others, as if seeking to defeat it, the conceptual value of this body of work was revealed. In "BANDIT," the grid, in the context of Christmas, Shakespeare, and most importantly, art history, rep-



Craig Drennen, *BANDIT 4*, 2017, oil, alkyd on canvas, 72" x 72." Courtesy of MOCA GA.

resents Drennen's philosophy that the "list of crucial previous moments—what we call canon—should always be malleable and under scrutiny."⁴ Here, Drennen cast himself and other artists as the *Banditti*. Through subtle and masterful execution, the exhibition is a manifesto for the artist-as-bandit, who with every new work, steals from the viewer their idea of what art is or can be, and thereby "confirms, alters, or re-creates" the canon.⁵

Taken one step further, the different rabbit holes one can take in each of Drennen's works become a reflection of the viewer performing these same actions in the gallery. This idea is promoted by the artist in the *trompe l'oeil* ornaments found in three of the works in the exhibition: *BANDIT 1*, *BANDIT 4*, and *BANDIT 5*. Reflected in each of the ornaments is a self-portrait of Drennen with an iPhone, photographing the real ornament. Here, metaphorically, the artist-as-bandit, painting himself as the viewer, paints the viewer as a bandit. In as much as Drennen altered the image in the ornament from physical to digital to virtual space, and thereby created a new, original work, so too, the viewer in the gallery, photographing the original real painting with their phone, confirmed the work's value to the canon by seeking to preserve it, and altered the work through the translation of the painted image from physical to digital space, and recreated it through

the click of a button as an original photograph, bringing into question issues of ownership and appropriation in a manner similar to Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans*. Ultimately, the viewer-as-bandit, photographing Drennen's painting, completes it, bringing it full circle, confirming Timon of Athens' view that "all the world's a thief."⁶ ■

(December 2, 2017 – January 27, 2018)

NOTES

1. "Poet & Awful," Samson Gallery, Boston, MA, 2014; "Painter and Servants," Ellen de Bruijne Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland, 2013.
2. MOCA GA. "Craig Drennen Artist Talk." YouTube, Feb. 1, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZAU5UvZ0U4.
3. Shakespeare, William. *Timon of Athens*. 1606. MIT. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/timon/timon.4.3.html>
4. Mitchell, Marc (2016). "Conversation with Craig Drennen," *Figure/Ground*. November. <http://figureground.org/a-conversation-with-craig-drennen/>
5. Ibid.
6. Shakespeare, William. *Timon of Athens*. 1606. MIT. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/timon/timon.4.3.html>

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