

Oliver Koerner von Gustorf Paul McCarthy's creepy clowns: a profound excursion into the American psyche

Born in 1945, Paul McCarthy's age links him to the Californian scene – and he's just as close to Ed Ruscha or John Baldessari, the pop godfathers of West Coast art, as he is to Mike Kelly and Raymond Pettibone. His early performances, scul-

ptures and spatial works were still very much in the spirit of concept art and post-minimalism as a reaction to abstract expressionism. Nevertheless, he is primarily viewed in the context of L.A.'s punk-influenced art scene in the late 1970s and 1980s. What's more, his work has been populated by insane, authoritarian horror clowns for four decades. They represent patriarchy, corporate culture, religion, Hollywood, the nuclear family and everything that is discussed today under the banner of 'toxic masculinity'. And they appear in various guises: as painters, pirates, cowboys or presidents. Even McCarthy's female characters are American archetypes and obscene caricatures, victims and perpetrators: Nancy Reagan, Melania Trump, Heidi, Marilyn Monroe. In 2009, he introduced the character of White Snow, a depraved, sexualised version of the innocent title character in Walt Disney's 1937 classic Snow White, which is said to be a metaphor for cocaine. Naturally, there are also sinister versions of Disney's seven dwarfs, developed by McCarthy through various media: a series of drawings, followed by sculptures, a performance and a video, all of which were exhibited together at New York's Park Avenue Armory in 2013 as part of the epic 'WS (White Snow)' multimedia installation.

The life-size 'White Snow Dwarf (Sneezy)' sculpture is made of white silicone and was created in 2010. In the Disney movie, Sneezy suffers from chronic hay fever and sneezes with gale-force capacity. That's why

the other dwarfs hold his nose when he feels a sneeze coming on. In McCarthy's work, this can be seen as an aspect of a theme that he regularly embraces: cultural and political forms of repression that manifest themselves in neuroses and perversions or are transformed into idealistic, brutal and even fascist mechanisms of social control. The head of McCarthy's satirical figure, with a bulging scrotum hanging from its chin, seems to have literally exploded with sexual de-

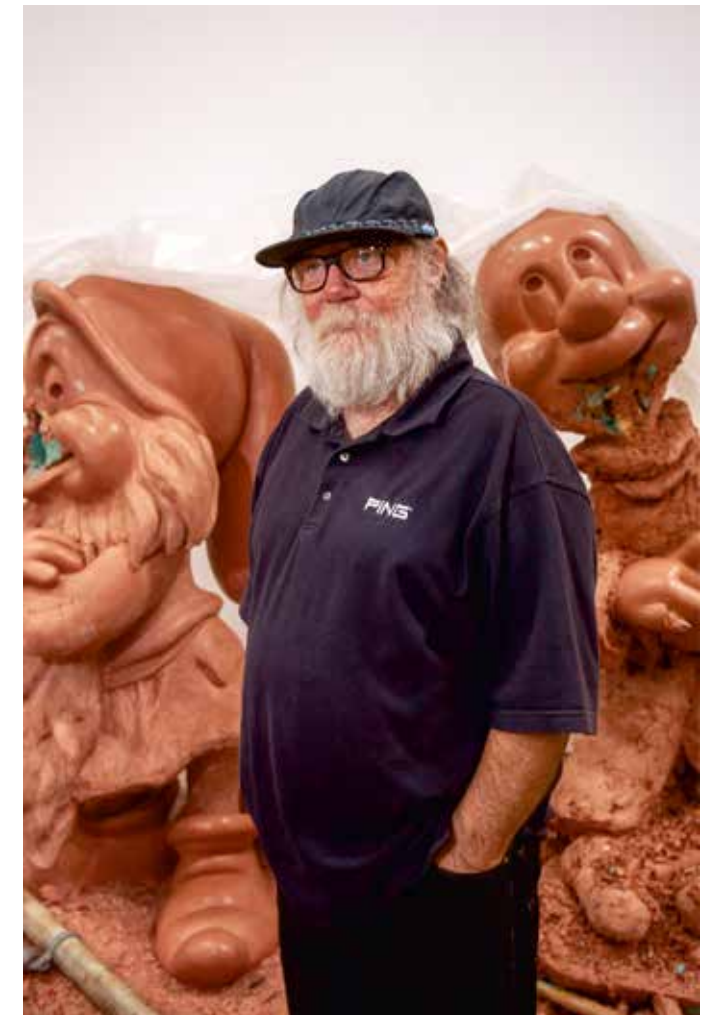
sire. In place of a dripping nose there is a masturbation phallus wrapped in a tennis sock bursting out between anus- or mouth-shaped openings. McCarthy admits that a large part of his work is about avoidance, "...about the emptiness we carry within us. We also enter this darkness through the anus and the mouth. Both are themes in my work."

The dwarf sculptures can be interpreted as a critique of Hollywood, production conditions and the media landscape at the dawn of the 21st century. They can be understood as abysmal, existential excursions into the American psyche or childhood in the bleak Cold War years. But 'White Snow Dwarf (Sneezy)', like all of McCarthy's works, is also about creating art.

Nightmarish kitchens are regularly featured in his performances and films, in which he plays a kind of clown in a horror movie in an allusion to abstract expressionist painting, splattering, spilling and squirting things, materials and liquids around. In his drawings, which are often created in trance-like states, he 'layers' different planes, one on top of the next, revises, erases and experiments with emotion and control. He even uses this radical process of abstraction when creating his sculptures. 'White Snow Dwarf (Sneezy)' is not the embodiment of a character, but a process-like lump. The brutal traces of the artist's work are evident – the modelling, breaking off and grinding – yet they are cast in a cool, almost smooth reproduction. In this regressive yet sophisticated process, a wide array of collective and personal perceptions and images come to the fore. At the same time, there are references to Jeff Koons, the sculptures of Willem de Kooning, as well criticism and admiration of the abstract expressionist heroes, alongside whom McCarthy ranks as one of the greatest contemporary sculptors.



Lot 65



Paul McCarthy in his studio in Los Angeles. 2010

65 Paul McCarthy

Salt Lake City 1945 – lives in Los Angeles

"White Snow Dwarf (Sneezy)". 2010

White silicone. 167.6 × 155.5 × 157.5 cm (66 × 61 1/4 × 62 in.). Signed on the accompanying certificate by Hauser & Wirth. One of 3 numbered copies from a total edition of 3 + 2 AP. [3143]

Provenance

Private Collection, Europe (acquired in 2011 at Hauser & Wirth, London)

EUR 100,000–150,000

USD 112,000–169,000

