Maurizio Cattelan Is the Art World's Greatest Prankster. But Is the Joke on Us?

By Ben Davis

Gallery

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Figure 1Figure 1Credit: Installation view: "Maurizio Cattelan: All," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Nov. 4, 2011-Jan. 22, 2012. Photograph by David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim.

"Maurizio Cattelan: All," at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Even though it's attracting big crowds at the Guggenheim, I'm not sure that "All," the massive retrospective of work by Italian art star Maurizio Cattelan, is the best introduction to the man, unless you're already a fan. The show is less a survey of his work than a big-budget joke about the very idea of the career-summarizing survey. With the help of curator Nancy Spector and a team of crack engineers, Cattelan has suspended almost all the works from his two-decade career—about 130 in all—from cables in the center of the Guggenheim's famous atrium. It's a flashy but also oddly cold gesture, presenting his collected works in a way that is devoid of order, context, or, you know, pedestals. What does it all mean?

Figure 2Credit: Maurizio Cattelan's "Novecento" (1997) hung in "All" at the Guggenheim. Photograph by Cindy Ord/Getty Images.

"Novecento" (1997)

Hung lowest of all in the cloud of works is one of Cattelan's signatures, a dead, taxidermied horse, originally dangled from the ceiling of the baroque-style galleries of Turin's Castello di Rivoli in 1997. (Look close: The legs are slightly elongated to emphasize the horse's droopy mortification.) "Novecento," as the horse is called, is a head-scratching, gonzo work, and according to Spector's catalog essay, it occupies a key place in the artist's career, marking a turn away from early, scrappier art-world satires toward the show-stopping, durably outrageous sculptures that have become Cattelan's signature. Given pride of place in "All," the dead horse also delivers the unmistakable message of this show: All the art here is embalmed, ripped out of its animating context, and leeched of real vitality. This notion becomes all the more suggestive when you learn that Cattelan has announced that, at 51 and the height of art-world fame and success, he is retiring from the game after this show.

Figure 3Credit: Maurizio Cattelan ”Untitled,” (2001) Wax, pigment, human hair, fabric, and polyester resin, 150x60x40 cm © Maurizio Cattelan. Photograph by Attilio Maranzano, courtesy the artist.

"Untitled" (2001)

Cattelan famously stumbled into art at the end of the ’80s in a rather haphazard way and without the benefit of any formal training. (“I still haven’t figured out whether you really want to work or whether you’re just messing around,” his Italian gallerist, Massimo De Carlo, is supposed to have told him.) Sometimes, however, an unencumbered outsider is the best person to hop on to a new thing as it is developing. The art world was about to take a sharp turn away from the pretensions of the 1980s—which gave a lot of space and attention to big, macho painting from the likes of Sandro Chia and Julian Schnabel—to the more self-aware language of installation and ephemeral social intervention.

Somewhere in the Guggenheim cloud is a transplanted version of an untitled project Cattelan originally installed at a Rotterdam museum in 2002. It consisted of a hole cut in the floor of the institution’s painting gallery. Peeking out of it was a life-sized, life-like replica of the artist, as if he were a thief. It’s a fine metaphor for the basic mentality that Cattelan has honed, sneaking into the art context to see what he can get away with.

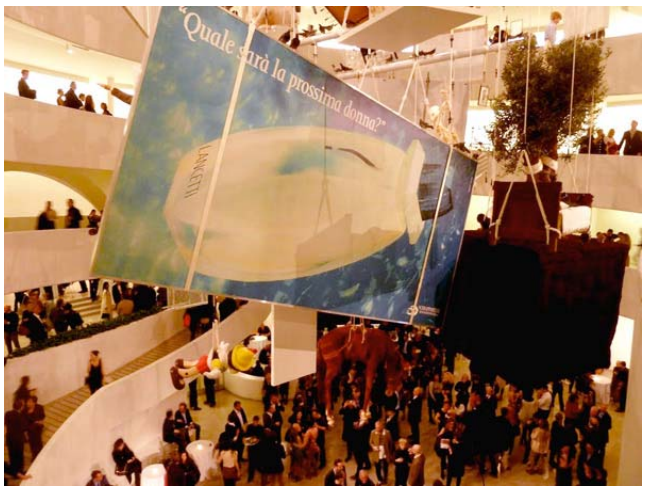

Figure 4Credit: Billboard from Maurizio Cattelan's "Lavorare è un brutto mestiere" project (1993) for the Venice Biennale, hung in "All" at the Guggenheim/ Photograph by Ben Davis.

"Lavorare è un brutto mestiere" (1993)

"I found out very early in life that people tend to prefer the class clown to the class nerd," Cattelan once explained. If his clowning marks something important, though, it is because it seems directed at a very specific challenge faced by contemporary art: In a high-impact, media-saturated environment, how do you make something as humble as a sculpture stand out? One method is to embrace shock, to push buttons that allow a mere artwork to become a media event. Cattelan seems to have realized the virtues of this strategy early on. Invited to the Venice Biennale in 1993, he staged a stunt where, instead of creating any actual work of his own, he rented the space assigned to him to a perfume company to advertise itself via a big billboard.

Figure 5Credit: Left: Maurizio Cattelan "La Nona Ora" (1999) polyester resin, wax, pigment, human hair, fabric, clothing, accessories, stone, glass, and carpet, dimensions variable courtesy the artist © Maurizio Cattelan. Photograph by Attilio Maranzano. Right:

"La Nona Ora," 1999

When quizzed, Cattelan will deny that he relishes the role of provocateur. On the other hand, what he does say is that "a work of art is not complete without the comments, the words, and ideas of whoever happens to be in front of it"—which, if you think about it, implies that if it doesn't get some kind of rise out of its audience, it's not working. Consequently, the outrages that have often accompanied his works have to be viewed as fully part of the game. Among his most famous pieces is "La Nona Ora," from 1999, a life-like statue of then-Pope John Paul II, laying dead with a large stone atop him, as if struck down by an out-of-the-blue meteorite. When it appeared in 2000 in Catholic Poland, the work touched off a tizzy, with two MPs attempting to stand it upright and remove the stone, and a right-wing talk-show host attempted to cover it with a sheet. This fracas, in turn, has become part of the work's legend, a kind of calculated simulation or substitute for the actual outrages that once accompanied aesthetic breakthroughs like cubism or dada.

Figure 6Credit: Maurizio Cattelan's "HIM" (2001), in "All" at the Guggenheim / Photograph by Ben Davis.

"HIM" (2001)

Commentators credit Cattelan for tweaking collective taboos. But he arrived at a time when a current in mainstream culture was already preoccupied with trying to get a rise out of jaded, savvy consumers. Throughout the '90s, as Cattelan was perfecting his urbane outrages, Oliviero Toscani, another Italian, was making a name for himself by proving that "shock advertising" could work just fine to sell clothes for Benetton, with in-your-face ads that deliberately poked at nerves about race, religion, and capital punishment. A work like Cattelan's famous "HIM" (2001)—a pint-sized sculpture of Adolf Hitler on his knees, as if in tortured prayer—feels almost ridiculously calculated. It's hard to take it seriously as a sober reflection on "the presence and nature of evil," as its more credulous fans imagine it to be, given the sheer number of cartoonish Hitlers already occupying our popular culture. It depends for effect on the frisson of invoking a cartoon cliché of evil, rather than daring to peer beyond it. It's more "Springtime for Hitler" than *Downfall*.

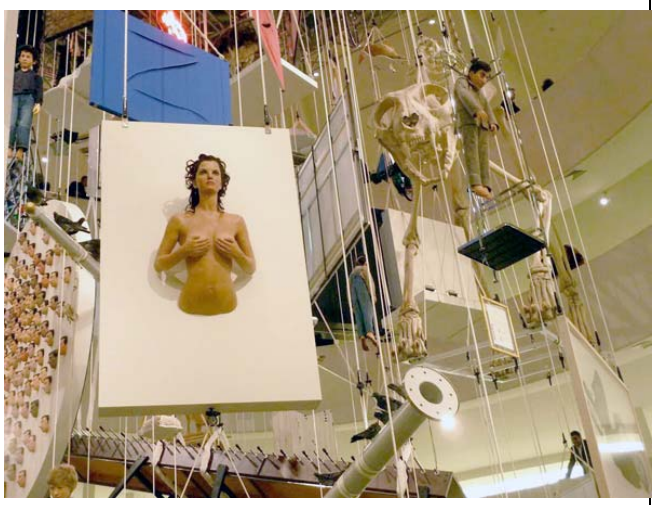

Figure 7Credit: Maurizio Cattelan's "Untitled (Stephanie)" (2003) in "All" at the Guggenheim / Photograph by Ben Davis.

"Untitled (Stephanie)" (2003)

If Cattelan is serious about anything it is about resisting even the hint of piousness about art's purpose in a world as debased as our own. The art world itself has been maybe his most reliable target. In the '90s, his stunts included forcing one of his dealers to dress in a giant soft pink penis costume as a "commentary" on his womanizing. For another gallery opening, he duct-taped his dealer directly to the wall. Yet the fact that both men went along with these gags shows how skewering the art world can easily tip over into self-congratulation.

The height of Cattelan's back-slapping irreverence is "Untitled (Stephanie)," a creepy nude bust of model Stephanie Seymour clutching her breasts that Cattelan created for her then-husband, the millionaire Peter Brant, back in 2003, when the famous art collector asked for a custom work. The piece is often referred to as "The Trophy Wife."

Figure 8Credit: Maurizio Cattelan's "Untitled" (2007) in "All" at the Guggenheim/ Photograph by Cindy Ord/Getty Images.

"Untitled" (2007)

Cattelan acknowledges that his interest in loaded imagery—from a cheerful early neon work that plays cheeky tribute to the symbol of the Italian terrorist outfit the Red Brigades, to his little Hitler, to a life-sized sculpture of a woman crucified in a box—lies on the surface: "I don't believe in history or art history. I believe in images. I eat them, I swallow them, and then I turn them into other images, that are my works." And again, here is how he describes his working process: "I don't do anything. I just keep eating things. In this case images and information. And then there's a process of selection and separation that's not really conscious." He's not the secret social critic that the art crowd sometimes reflexively expects. Cattelan is not, for the most part, concerned with morality—not in any searching way. He's concerned with the twisted dynamics of media spectacle.

Figure 9Credit: Maurizio Cattelan /Photograph by Pierpaolo Ferrari.

Maurizio Cattelan

Understanding Cattelan's basic mentality helps make sense of the current show's final puzzle: the artist's supposed retirement. Of course it could just be another prank, but I take it more or less seriously. When asked what it means, Cattelan simply indicates that he has become weary of the expectations of the art world, saying that he fully intends to continue with various other creative projects. Among these is something called Toilet Paper Magazine, a collaboration with photographer Pierpaolo Ferrari for which the duo stages freakish photo tableaux (a man dressed as a nun shooting heroin, a huge severed ear in a bowl of soup, and so on). The flamboyant pictures look a bit like "shock ads," just without any product to advertise.

Maurizio Cattelan's method has been this: He consumes the most potent images he can find, processes them into some new outrage for the fine-art context, and lets whatever reverberations he can create in the media substitute for aesthetic affect. If he retires, he'll just be cutting out the middle step, the need to produce actual objects. Now he can just leave the art in the air and get down to what he really loves best.