

"Low Life Slow Life: Part One"

*A self-curated portrait of the artist Paul McCarthy
as a young man told with a few of his favorite things*

By Matt Sussman

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REVIEW "Low Life Slow Life: Part One" is a self-curated portrait of the artist Paul McCarthy as a young man told with a few of his favorite things. It's a very personal exhibit, much of it culled from the archives of a now-grown enfant terrible, and lays out a canny narrative about artistic influence that throws the viewer more than a few MacGuffins.

Before McCarthy fully developed his taboo-violating aesthetic — which found its most abject expression in his foodstuff- and prosthesis-filled performance pieces of the 1970s and '80s — he was a Utah painting student whose first steps in using his body as a medium were guided by the action-based events of artists such as Allan Kaprow, Kazuo Shiraga, and Yves Klein. A first edition of Kaprow's canon-making *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (H.N. Abrams) is on display here, alongside paintings, photographs, sculptures, and printed matter by or related to several of the artists included in the 1966 volume.

Much of what McCarthy has chosen would slot neatly into the syllabus for one of the art history classes he now teaches at the University of California at Los Angeles. Which is to say that he is aware of how institutions inevitably shape an artist's time on Earth into a career, placing it within a historical context in relation to and often as a reaction against other artists. McCarthy's piss take on these sorts of creative genealogies starts with Dada collagist John Heartfield's swastika-shaped Tannenbaum (1934), then jumps 30-odd years to Joseph Beuys's 1962 sculpture made with fallen pine needles, whose brown color is shared by McCarthy's dead Xmas tree and bric-a-brac pileup (2007). The trees' tinder skeletons look like the survivors of a pillow fight on a paintball range. Wisely, McCarthy leaves other works out of such daisy chains of facetious art history scholarship. Mike Henderson's giant, ghoulish oils *Nonviolence* and *Castration* (1968) stand alone as apocalyptic visions of the dark underside of American life. I wonder if they remind McCarthy of his salad days of stuffing Barbies up his ass while besmirched with ketchup.

LOW LIFE SLOW LIFE: PART ONE Through April 12. Tues. and Thurs., 11 a.m.–7 p.m.; Wed. and Fri.–Sat., 11 a.m.–6 p.m. CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, 1111 Eighth St., SF.
(415) 551-9210, www.wattis.org