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An Artist Goes to Sea (And Other Stories) : Tonga, Iceland, the Vatican--Jeffrey Vallance gets around. The artist's explorations are collected in a new retrospective.

April 09, 1995 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is chair of the department of liberal arts and sciences at Otis College of Art and Design*

Many an American youth read "Kon-Tiki" with wide-eyed curiosity. Thor Heyerdahl's account of his open-raft journey to the South Pacific is prime adolescent stuff. But few have been as inclined to act out the promise of adventure as artist Jeffrey Vallance has.

Some 20 years later, still inspired by Heyerdahl, Vallance began a series of trips to exotic and remote lands. In 1981 he flew from his home in Canoga Park to the Island of Tonga where he met the king and presented him with a set of custom-made extra-extra-large swim fins. Vallance has also been received at the Vatican, and his art has been accepted into the Pope's personal collection. He is a Rubens for our time, doing portraits of officials such as the president of Iceland and District of Columbia Mayor Marion Barry--after the latter's reported cocaine use was thought to have doomed his career. Vallance is also a James Bond character who infiltrates institutions and bends them to his will. He transforms these adventures into paintings, sculptures and installations.

Vallance's career has evolved slowly, with exhibitions and sales at respected national and international institutions. Art issues Press recently published his book, "The World of Jeffrey Vallance: Collected Writings 1978-1994"--a traveler's journal that occasionally seems lifted from the annals of "Ripley's Believe It or Not," including an introduction by critic Dave Hickey. A retrospective exhibition based on the book opened this week at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.

Gary Kornblau, editor of Art issues, says that he selected Vallance for a book because he is a rare artist who writes nonfiction in an independent style with independent thoughts.

"The Press is interested in relationships between art and power--cultural power, political power, personal power. Jeffrey's works and writings have bluntly engaged with power--not by criticizing but by engaging with it, visiting the king of Tonga and so on. In that, it was a perfect match for the Press' ambitions."

Hickey echoes this enthusiasm: "Jeffrey treats the whole world as a sacred event without in any way attempting to mitigate its banality. His work is about the quotidian magic." (Hickey, associate professor of art theory and criticism at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, helped bring Vallance to teach at UNLV this spring.) During the past three years, Vallance has been traveling constantly in Europe and the United States, returning frequently to his native Los Angeles, where he is represented by the Rosamund Felsen Gallery in Santa Monica.

In town recently to prepare for his retrospective, Vallance held forth over lunch, talking in his flat Valley accent about the art projects that have taken him all over the world.

A roly-poly and ingenuous 40-year-old with wire-rims perched on his upturned nose and blond hair cropped short, Vallance looks like a grown-up Boy Scout. Dressed in a black sweat shirt and jeans, a gold crucifix on a chain around his neck doubling as a pocketknife, he discusses his enterprises with a seriousness that only amplifies the works' absurdity.

Vallance begins by confessing that he was just interviewed by the British Broadcasting Corp. for its upcoming special on "tiki culture." "There is a resurgence of interest in the classic tiki culture of California," he says. "There were two sources for it--men who were in the war in the South Pacific, and Hawaii becoming a state. Both sources converged in Los Angeles in the '50s."

Vallance's first trip from Canoga Park to the Cook Islands, in 1981, was in search of the Polynesia that influenced the San Fernando Valley in the form of tikis and muumuus, poolside luaus and Don Ho records, *pupu* platters and Mai Tais at the Aku Aku Inn.

"But by the time I got to Polynesia," says Vallance, "there were fast-food restaurants, country-Western bars and rap music. I was collecting myths and images so I became interested in the collision of cultures. It's not anthropology, because that is trying to find the pure essence of culture. I'm interested in where things mix up and become hybrids and impure."

Through this first trip, Vallance discovered the tension between reality and fantasy that would become his source material.

"The power of the work is that it's all real," says Vallance. "I really met the king of Tonga, I really went to Iceland and met the president, I really went to Polynesia. People want to believe my book is fiction because they can't believe anyone would go and do all this stuff."

"There is always some sort of meeting process involved--with officials at the Vatican or people in the Exports Office in Iceland. Everything has this personal contact and some meetings are difficult to arrange. It takes a lot of nerve and intense planning to make it happen. A good example is the king of Tonga. No one can just go and meet the king. He is royalty and thought of as sacred. I had to devise a way of meeting him. It was an extended performance piece with months of research, travel and artwork but the pinnacle is the meeting with the king. Everyone can't be there for that moment so everything else is a relic of that meeting."

In 1985 and '86 Vallance returned to the South Pacific, where he served as a member of the Samoan police force, dined on exotic palola worms, which "look like translucent green spaghetti-Jell-O and taste like crunchy seawater." He learned that the god Tiki--innocently adopted by Americans--is, according to some Polynesian legends, also a tricky, nasty old man who sleeps with his daughters and eats human flesh.

Vallance's exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art follows the art process and the book. In addition to a Polynesian Pavillion, including the king of Tonga's throne room, there is "Blinky's Relic Chamber," one of the artist's first concepts to bring him to the attention of the art public.

Seventeen years ago, Vallance bought a chicken at Ralphs, named her Blinky, the Friendly Hen, and had her buried at the Los Angeles Pet Cemetery. Little did he realize that this poignant act would generate a life quest. A decade later, Vallance found the carton liner with the bloody imprint of Blinky's carcass. (Naturally, he had kept it all those years!) That bloody stain inspired his interest in the Shroud of Turin, the cloth purported to be stained with the impression of the body of Christ. Vallance says, "I started reading about the Shroud of Turin and a miracle happened. I got a call from a gallery in Turin that wanted to do an exhibition of my work. So I went there to complete the research. I never could have planned that."

For this show, Vallance has set up a "Shroud Museum," with work inspired by the original in Turin, as well as his own replicas of holy relics like the Lance of Longinus and Veronica's Veil. Some shrouds are imprinted with the sweat of Elvis or the silhouette of George Washington, or with the faces of clowns. Also included is last year's project--images reflected in the eyes of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

With Easter coming up, Vallance's view of holy relics and the Resurrection could be seen as sacrilegious. (For example, Blinky, the Friendly Hen, is resurrected and goes to Heaven in a videotape the artist made with Bruce and Norman Yonemoto), yet, Vallance claims, "There is never any negative comment about the religious work. I never say the Shroud of Turin is fake. I'm presenting more evidence of the fact that it's real. I don't break down beliefs that exist. I'm just adding new information. This is not a desecration. It's a glorification."

Art critics sometimes read Vallance's work as ironic. "There are intended layers of meaning," Vallance says. "On the surface, there is the humor. But as you see through layers, it becomes more and more serious. Everyone enters at their own level. Some people just think it's funny. The optimum is someone who could read all the levels at once."

Does this mean the artist has gained his own measure of faith over the years? Vallance admits, "I've come full circle. I started out very skeptical but the more research I did, the more attentive I became. Of course, the more you travel around the world searching for the relics of Christ, some of the spirituality has to rub off on you."

Vallance confesses that his past had an important role. "I blame a lot of this on my church upbringing. I went to Lutheran schools. I remember distinctly a teacher who'd gone to the Vatican and described to us trying to see the Lance of Longinus. I was terrified of the Shroud of Turin. It was a gross, creepy cloth tied around a dead body. It was easy to believe in Christ but not easy to believe in the thing that looked like a dirty rag."

Is Vallance exorcising these childhood fears through the remaking of the shrouds in his art? "More like trying to understand," he answers.

"At one point, everyone in my family was an artist in some way. Especially my grandfather who was a Norwegian folk artist. He had an art studio in Long Beach and taught me to paint and draw, which accounts for my (work's) folk art look."

Vallance describes his father as a daredevil who liked to travel on adventures, to scuba dive in order to ride the backs of sharks in the Pacific. He was a Scoutmaster, as well. "My father made things that had a great effect on me. Miniature scenes of campsites with paths, trees and tents, which I was totally fascinated by," he says. A scientist at McDonnell Douglas, Vallance's father died in a plane crash in 1963.

Vallance's mother, an amateur landscape painter who died in 1984, was supportive of his art. "She saw it as carrying on the family tradition," the artist says.

Vallance is currently working on three different shows. He has organized an exhibition of Liberace portraits by contemporary artists for the Liberace Museum in Los Vegas to open on April 28. He has organized a show of portraits of Debbie Reynolds for the Debbie Reynolds Casino, also in Vegas also for late April. His clown show for the Vegas Clown Museum has no opening date as yet.

"Usually," says Vallance, "these museums are static. They have one exhibition and it doesn't change. This is a sort of layering in of unofficial portraiture in the official repository of identity."

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These projects speak to the essence of Vallance's art--the penetration of officialdom. "I've always done it. It's in all the work, infiltrating institutions," says Vallance. "Over the years, I've infiltrated politics, religion and the FBI. But I become like a double agent because once I infiltrate, I start to believe."

* *"The World of Jeffrey Vallance," Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2437 Main St., Santa Monica. Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, 11 a.m.- 6; Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Ends June 11. (310) 399-0433.*

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