

JACK EARLY

SEPTEMBER 7 – OCTOBER 27, 2012

WELCOME BACK, JACK

By Glenn O'Brien

I really liked Pruitt and Early, the art team that rocketed to the top of the charts in the late eighties. They perfectly captured the zeitgeist at a moment when “stupid” was the cool word for excellent. They were hot enough to be recruited by Leo Castelli. They knew how to get attention—they were top of their class at Warhol University, and they had an instinctive feel for pushing the envelope into the newsroom.

After being the hottest young artists around, Pruitt and Early got totally hammered by the art press and the press press for their 1992 exhibition, *Red, Black, Green, Red, White and Blue*, at Leo Castelli. It was more than the usual hammering that happens when the media senses trouble. It was sharks smelling blood. The show, which was basically a witty critique of the media's depiction of African-American celebrities, got Pruitt and Early lynched for alleged racism. It was sort of an “I can say nigger but you can't even quote it” situation. If Pruitt and Early had been black men, the show would no doubt have been a smash, but their white skin was a deal breaker and Jack Early's Carolina accent probably didn't help. The hysterical institutional reaction not only ended the career of the multiple-person “artist” known as Pruitt and Early, it ended the relationship. Rob and Jack had recently done an art event where they got married. Of course, it was just a ceremony; men did not marry men then. They were young; they were dreamers. But this was a life-changing trauma. The most promising young career became the most fucked-up career. They had been smacked with the kiss of death from the art politburo. So they got divorced. In a day.

I had met Rob and Jack back then and I didn't really know them, but I liked their work a lot. It seemed like what happened to them was

symptomatic of what was wrong with not only the art world but the institutional world and the media as well. I had this Pruitt and Early piece from *Art for Teenage Boys*, and it was a photo of stacked beer cans with decals on them. I couldn't have afforded the real beer can pyramid. Well, maybe I could have, but that would have been pushing the budget and I might have had preservationist concerns. Anyway, I loved my little can piece. It was signed on the glass over the photo. I had it in my house in Bridgehampton. One day I came home and the Mexican cleaning lady told me that it was really hard but she had managed to get that ink off the glass of this picture. She had scrubbed really hard and gotten the signatures off. I think it was then that the tragedy of Pruitt and Early hit home. How am I ever going to get those boys into the same room to sign this thing again? The art world is so cruel.

The multiple-person artist career is a tough row to hoe, but it had seemed inevitable, what with the scale of ambitious work and the division of labor manifest in the studio system of Koons, Hirst, et al. Young artists would have to stick together, and the multiple-person (or corporate) artist seemed to be the logical consequence of the studio becoming "the Factory." Corporations are artists too, as Mitt Romney might say, and now we've had the Bernadette Corporation, the collective novelist/art dealer Reena Spaulings, and the Bruce High Quality Art Foundation, but the question of two heads being better than one is still unanswered. The Starn Twins had been stars, Castelli stars at that, but their career trajectory wasn't what it might have been. There was John Dagg, but that mythic artist seemed rich and employed elsewhere. There were the husband-and-wife teams, like the Bechers, and Christo and Jean-Claude, but the husband-and-husband team was something quite new. (Pruitt and Early's nightclub marriage wasn't legal, just a prophecy of things to come.) The team had been pulled off successfully by Gilbert and George and by Fischli/Weiss, but it didn't look easy.

Somebody asked Gilbert and George if they had thought about what would happen if one of them was hit by a bus, and they said that they always walked close together when crossing the street so that if a bus hit one of them it would hit both of them. But Rob and Jack missed the bus. They had the earliest all-male Hollywood divorce in history. The picture flopped and it was Splitsville!

Pruitt and Early were over, except for their body of work, which lived on in the market. They didn't speak. It was bad. Jack drifted into other lines of work. But some redemption came in 2009 when *Red, Black, Green, Red, White and Blue* was restaged by the Tate Modern seventeen years after the disaster. It was an enormous example of "Well, on second thought. . . ." Suddenly, it seemed, the art world could see what they were actually trying to do in the first place Duh! Doh!

We're always getting tripped up by clichés in America. People get killed over clichés. Marriages bust up. Careers get flushed down the toilet. I could say, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," except that it might not be true. Big Bill Broonzy, who wrote "Key to the Highway" and "I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town," said, "Blues is a natural fact, is something that a fellow lives. If you don't live it, you don't have it. Young people have forgotten to cry the blues. Now they talk and get lawyers and things."

Jack Early, with his Carolina accent and his natural musicality, is a new sort of bluesman. When Pruitt and Early had their troubles and split, Jack moved to the outskirts of town, that is, he left the art world. He painted. Houses. He kept his hands skillful. And he started to sing. I think the singing is what brought him all the way back from the outskirts. Jack felt music in him, and he let it come out. Now he's back making art, and he's making work that reflects the lonesome road he's been on, a road that goes through Jesus, Jesus Christ Superstar, John and Yoko, protest movements, and the United Federation of Planets. I think Jack's road is the yellow brick interstate that transcendently navigates the red, white, and blue. I look forward to seeing where it takes him.

Jack Early (b. 1962 in Raleigh, NC) received a BA from Wesleyan College. Recent exhibitions have included *Pop Life: Art in the Material World*, Tate Modern, London, 2009; *Mapping the Studio: Artists from the François Pinault Collection*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2009–11; and *Jack Early Bites at John McWhinnie*, Glenn Horowitz, East Hampton (2011). Early's 2011 video, *What to Do with a Drunken Sailor*, was funded through a commission from Forever & Today, New York. He lives and works in Brooklyn.

WWJD
SOUTHFIRST

60 NORTH 6TH STREET
BROOKLYN, NY 11211
718 599 4884
WWW.SOUTHFIRST.ORG

GALLERY PEACE
MCCAFFREY FINE ART

23 EAST 67TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10065
212 988 2200
WWW.MCCAFFREYFINEART.COM