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Vallance in West Hollywood

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Lapland Shaman Drum

Margo Leavin Gallery

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For the last six months, Jeffrey Vallance has been asking me (along with hundreds of others) to become a member of one of various online Facebook groups. Though the groups vary in impulse and scope, many of them are marked "Organizations - Religious Organizations," and surround semi-mystical, definitively Vallancian objects: Sheep Bung, Polynesian Butt Plug, and the Noid Drum, to name a few. Though the Polynesian Butt Plug may be my favorite of these semi-mystical objects (Sheep Bung falling under the heading "Common Interest - Dating & Relationships"), the subject of Vallance's current exhibition at Margo Leavin Gallery is the Noid Drum, or dubbed for the show, *Special Project: Lapland Shaman Drum*.

Before I go into the magical properties of this particular art object, the farflung legends of Jeffrey Vallance ought to be told. Vallance has traveled the four corners of the world on one adventure or another meeting with locals, high and low from the King of Tonga to the Premier of Iceland, and finds (or creates) mystical objects: the Clowns of Turin, the Holy Lance, extra-large flippers for the plus-size Tongan king. Dating back to his own youth in faux-tiki environs crafted by his father, the work of Vallance has been marked by the commingling of the imaginatively fake and the exotically real taking the form of exhaustively researched objects.

The Lapland Shaman Drum is one such object. If Vallance's account is to be trusted, the drum is a real Lapland Shaman Drum, though the figures that dot the stretched reindeer skin were composed by Vallance himself, which according to his detailed description on the Facebook group, include:

numerous cryptic symbols that have special personal meaning including noids, the reindeer spirit guide, the sacred bear, Storsjömonster (Swedish lake monster), Snömannen (Lapp yeti), the prophetic ravens Huginn and Muninn, the Martyr Hen, the Shaman's Snake, the Devil Dog, the Horseman of Death, Defecating Man, a female noid with feline familiar, the Royal Tongan Bat, a Polynesian surfer, the Relics of the Passion, the Saami Wind God, the God of First Greening, and located in the diamond in the center of the cross-tree is mythical reindeer Mandash-pyrre that is said to have golden antlers that shine like the sun.

The role of the artist, broadly defined, is to transform seemingly banal materials into something special: oil paint and canvas into Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Pollock's *Number 1*, a urinal into Duchamp's *Fountain*, etc. If one were to stretch it, one might be able to apply a similar

meaning to relics: remnants of saints, holy objects, venerated icons. There are likely enough fragments of the true cross to build Noah's ark and there are at least six locations that claim to own the head of John the Baptist (if only he had six heads to give). Vallance's work plays with this mixture of the real (or alleged) spiritual object with the interminable play of the artist with meaning. The Drum was made by a real Saami craftsman, even if it does include a Polynesian Surfer, a Royal Tongan Bat, and the Relics of the Passion, none of which likely feature in traditional Saami lore.

Vallance's play can come a little too close to "zany": the action on the verge of being one-liners, readily placeable in the ten o'clock news broadcast under kooky local characters, each deserving of their own dodgy micro-museums on the edge of tourist traps. But my personal allergy to zaniness is admittedly perhaps a singular disinclination towards the sometimes fantastically unbelievable visions and obsessions on the fringe, too easily made into demagogical farces and cheap sideshows. But this impulse of turning individual spiritual experience into viable commercial venture is about as American as you can get. In this, Vallance captures (democratically, smartly, and without kumbaya or sneer) this distinct strain of the national character. Jeffrey Vallance's roadside attractions take the humor of Californian Conceptualism one step further away from its origins in Duchampian European pranksterism and into the weird, sometimes crass, often earnest heart of America. It's likely that at the little museums that dot our wilderness that a painting by Pollock would look more like a dubious relic than Vallance's Lapland Shaman Drum, Polynesian Butt Plug, or Clowns of Turin.

And for this particular exhibition of this roadside attraction, you don't even have to pay for admission.

