

Drohojowska, Hunter. "Artists the Critics Are Watching." *Art News* (May 1986), p. 81.



Jeffrey Vallance.
BELOW Rarotonga
Surfboard, 1983,
enamel, duct tape and
plastic tape on
surfboard, 56 1/4 by 21
by 13 inches.

JEFFREY VALLANCE

JEFFREY VALLANCE has cast himself as the unofficial cultural ambassador of the United States. Over the past four years, he has made visits to small islands in the South Pacific, and to the islands' polar opposites, Iceland and Switzerland. His art incorporates the experiences and mythologies of those places, how they have been affected by encroaching Western culture and how, in turn, our culture has assimilated their influences. All of this is manifested in drawings, objects, paintings and installations that are painstakingly detailed yet unrefined, like observations in a traveler's notebook.

"The artists who traveled with the early explorers are a big influence for me," he says. "The difference is that when I got there, most places already had snack bars and heavy industry. They had been explored, commercialized, but I explored them anyway. You find the same symbols as in primitive cultures, but they no longer belong. So discovery now is in the incongruities."

Vallance, 31, looks the part of the cultural anthropologist. His wire-rimmed spectacles give him an owl-like appearance, his blond hair is combed tidily to one side. He carries an attaché case. He grew up in Canoga Park in that much-maligned section of Los Angeles known as the Valley. He inherited his artistic proclivities from his family. His father made models of campsites, and his grandfather and mother also made forms of folk art. Vallance's slightly out-of-sync world view was established at the age of five, when he started drawing the reptiles and wild dogs that still populate his art.

At the age of ten, Vallance built an accurate replica of the spooky mansion from the mid-'60s TV series "The Addams Family." He sent a photograph of it to the cartoonist Charles Addams, whose thank-you note contained a sketch of the character Wednesday. It was the first incident of art-as-communication, the leitmotif of Vallance's art.

Throughout his career, he has used the old-fashioned mail service to reach culturally symbolic popular figures. He corresponded with Colonel Sanders and Oscar Meyer, sending them souvenirs to autograph and return. He asked Senator Strom Thurmond, a Democrat, to sign a statue of the Republican elephant. Through this process, Vallance excavated the recent cultural past of his own country, and this led to his curiosity about foreign lands.

Vallance graduated from California State University at Northridge in 1979, and by the time he finished his M.F.A. at Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design in Los Angeles two years later, he was already con-

sidered a working artist, pursuing the links between the mediated imagery and myths of this country as connected to other cultures in a project called "Cultural Ties."

Vallance corresponded with heads of state around the world, sending them a necktie and asking for one of theirs in return. The neckties—or headdresses from some nations—and letters from the various presidents, prime ministers, chieftains and kings were exhibited, to acclaim from critics and the mass media. The seeming simplicity of the project was paradoxically revealing, humorous and poignant. Vallance had broken through the diplomatic barrier to the men and women behind the titles. "You read about these people in the newspapers and magazines," he says. "I wanted to bring out a different side of their personality. It helps me understand who they are. It has more to do with humanism than politics."

Vallance considers "Cultural Ties" a "passive exploration." In 1983, he set out on his first "active" voyage, beginning where Gauguin did, in Tahiti, and visiting other islands in the South Pacific.

On the island of Aitutaki, Vallance researched the origins of Tiki, the Polynesian deity who was brought to America by sailors after World War II and translated as a whimsical decoration. Tiki torches for backyard barbecues, Tiki decals, Tiki statuettes in Hawaiian restaurants all became popular, especially in Southern California. On the island, Vallance found that Tiki had been a potent fertility god, the subject of legends and lore. He found older islanders who remembered the original power of their gods. "Symbols in the society have lost their power and been corrupted," he explains. "Polynesian gods became just a motif. In Switzerland [where he traveled in 1984] the heraldry that identified soldiers in battle now exists in modern graphics or on license plates. I bring those symbols out where they have a new meaning."

Vallance's exhibition of work inspired by his first journey was titled "Aitutaki" and included a written explanation of the Tiki myth. He showed island Tikis alongside his own invented Tikis. He created a surfboard Tiki and a Kontiki that was shown with his *Connie Chung Tiki*, named after the NBC anchorwoman.

Last year, Vallance returned to the South Pacific to meet the king of Tonga. With a letter of introduction from Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, Vallance chatted with the king and presented him a pair of super-extra-large swim fins. Apparently, the king, an avid swimmer, had trouble finding his size. Vallance says, "He put his huge hand into one of the fins, smiled and said, 'Ah, these will fit very nicely.'" We'll see the result of this cultural tie in Vallance's next exhibition.

—H. D.



COURTESY ROSAMUND FEISEN GALLERY

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