

ARTINFO

Artist William Powhida Discusses the Outrageous Misbehavior of That Notorious Art-World Wastrel, William Powhida



by Ashton Cooper

Published: August 1, 2011

William Powhida is a Brooklyn-based emerging artist known for his satirical critiques of the art world. "POWHIDA" is a [recently-opened exhibition](#) at **Marlborough Chelsea** that takes a swing at the ironies, hypocrisies, and imbalances of the blue-chip art world. As the fake Powhida performer parades around New York turning into a contemporary art enfant-terrible, **ARTINFO** spoke with William Powhida the artist, currently at a residency program in Wisconsin.

How are you?

I'm a little frazzled. I'm in Wisconsin so I'm trying to keep an eye on things and direct this nonsense from Wisconsin via Twitter and the phone. I'm an hour behind everything so it's sort of crazy.

Yeah, the opening last night of "Powhida" at Marlborough was a pretty entertaining affair. What have you heard? Do you feel that it went well?

This isn't like a very good critical method, but my friend Jen Dalton went and she had a really good time ... She had a kick ass experience and thought it was awesome, and that was the one thing I was really nervous about. You know, there's so little art. It's just sort of the set up for the performance that's going to go on for a week and a half, two weeks. She had a good time and it was sort of an experience for people to have.

Jen was like, "it was sort of like going to the petting zoo for a while and looking at the sad artist behind the ropes. You took away everything that's usually at an art opening and left all the bad stuff." There was that notion that people go to art openings and they say "well I didn't look at the art. It's just talking. Oh you can't see the art at art openings." That was kind of one of the running jokes about it. A kind of exorcism of the Chihuly's and the big sculptures that Marlborough tends to stuff in the Chelsea space. The reports from people who kind of know my work, sort of knew what to expect, they were good. I just finished reading a New York Observer article where the guy was like everyone was bored, this was bored, I'm bored, they stole the

cigarette out of my mouth. Obviously I think there's some different points of view. I got a call from a friend who just said "It's pandemonium" and that's basically what I was hoping for. I think the worst case scenario is no one showed up and the actor was just hanging out by himself.

It was interesting because I overheard a lot of people who clearly didn't know it was an actor, didn't know what was going on, so their reactions were really great. People were very confused.

[Laughs] We've been sowing the seeds of the confusion for a while just through Twitter. I'm out here doing this residency in Sheboygan and I've been writing dispatches for Hyperallergic, and then slowly turning the Twitter feed fully over to the character and kind of directing that, getting some feedback. I had my sometimes-assistant Warren show up and kind of tweet for the actor, so we've been trying to make that division.

Did you choose to be absent from the opening on purpose or did it just happen that you were doing this residency at the same time?

It sort of worked out. Initially. Marlborough approached me a little over a year ago to do this project. It was too complicated, so I just said no thanks, and they came back and sort of changed the criteria for how long it would be and what they would need, because I just don't really want to have too much of an entanglement with the commercial side of their gallery after this. It's just they're a big blue chip gallery and I feel much more comfortable at Postmasters, with their program, and their history, and the kind of work they show.

When you were working with Marlborough, how did this idea come about? What has the gallery's reaction to the show been?

They just wanted something a little bit crazy, over the top and I thought it might be a good opportunity to do a kind of riff on performance art with this kind of fictional character. Up until this point I made a short trailer, it's been the subject of a couple of shows, but really existing in film or video and just paintings, so I had to create all the situations. They're all fake because I had no access to anything of that world. I would just fake those setups and then make paintings about them. They were offering the context for the satire ... it sort of worked out. I had never planned on being there, but when they gave some of the dates for the summer it just seemed like a great opportunity to really highlight the divide or separation that I'm not there to hang out at the opening and party.

Tell me about this guy, this actor, this Powhida persona. Who is he? Did you know him from before?

The actor's name is Rick Dacey. I met him probably ten years ago in New York when I first moved here. He was a musician; I knew he was an actor and a musician. He left New York about three or four years ago and moved to LA so I introduced him to the work we talked about it, he agreed to act in the two and a half minute trailer that we ended up making in LA and when I proposed the idea of using the actor like the character of

character that we ended up making in LA and when I proposed the idea of using the actor like the character of Powhida in the space at the gallery and showed them the trailer they were like we want this guy, we want that character, we want that gallery.

So the gallery specifically asked for him in person?

WP: I wasn't sure that they would be willing to fly him out and put him up and take care of him. It seemed to be a big ... a bit of a layout on their end, and it would have been easier to cast it in New York because there's really not much for sale in the show.

Right. Is the work for sale?

You know, I've been trying to explain this to Rick and even Marlborough that potentially someone could commission Rick to recreate this performance. I don't know where anyone would ever want this but if there was that idea they would have to negotiate it with Rick a la Tino Sehgal. It would be a private conversation. Rick would have some guidelines. I haven't even thought about it because it just seems so unlikely.

Well when I spoke to Rick earlier today, he told me that for a lengthy conversation it would cost me \$100.

[Laughs] He is a character, he has a script and there's a kind of arc that he's following and he has a daily thing that he has to try to hit, but pretty much he's sort of autonomous in the space. He also has a background as an improv actor and that was really important to me to allow him to kind of do that. So he knows the character from the paintings and the drawings and the character that we created for the trailer. He's doing a lot of improvisation and the fact that he doesn't know much at all about contemporary art is fine. You know, because it keeps all the jargon out of it. He's reacting to people and kind of reading them. The Sanford painting is technically for sale. It's a Powhida as long as the context of the exhibition is up.

Tell me about this script. How did it come about? Can you give us any previews of what's to come?

If you wanted a preview you would only have to go read any of the paintings about Powhida. Things start on a high note and go from there [laughs]. [The show] will be through the 12th, I believe. In terms of the script there are points that he's trying to hit ... There will be nods and attempts at satire of the things that were mentioned in the press release.

About the press release, did you write it, and is it meant to be somewhat satirical?

It is meant to be somewhat satirical. Gleason, the director, sent me the press release and it was pretty jargon heavy and the reference points were not necessarily where I was coming from so I rewrote it and added the language of stripping the gallery to its essence and laying it bare. I tried to make the press release subtly allude to the things that are going to be dealt with in the show on some level by complete opposition or the negation of expectations. He's present in the gallery like Marina but he's not going to stare at you,

necessarily — although he will engage in some prolonged staring. He's not penitent crawling around a pile of salt on his knees, but his demeanor is obviously part of his mental state. Instead of the kind of punishing physical performance through some kind of physical act, it's kind of the chronic party [laughs]. The 24-hour cocktail party of the art world.

When I was there, he offered me a mimosa.

[Laughs] I think those are some of the things that I'm just trying to address through it, in obviously not incredibly serious ways. Talking about this with any super-serious message does make me feel a little fucked up because on one hand it's a joke, but it's a very elaborate joke that I've spent a lot of time making work about, for like five years.

You know, Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz were both there last night.

The one text I got about that was "Roberta just left shaking her head," so I'm sure she's probably not going to be sullyng herself with a response to this.

Your work has largely been about being critical of the art world and addressing taboo topics. With this show at Marlborough and your solo show at Postmasters in October you are taking a huge step into the spotlight. What are your thoughts on coming to Postmasters and the attention it will potentially bring?

Going to Postmasters ... it doesn't seem like that's a huge leap into the spotlight. What I respect about Postmasters is their artists are respected, that their work is respected and taken seriously. It was their critical reputation that drew me to them not any sense of having like a spotlight or a bigger platform. Schroeder and Romero was really great to work with and they really get the humor. They were having fun last night engaging with this character that they spent a lot of time working with. Postmasters, what's really great about them is that the work that I'm doing for that show is a little more political, about the futility of political debate, which doesn't seem to have much substance anymore – just a lot of yelling. They [Postmasters] have some more politically minded artists and I don't think that this kind of character-based work, I certainly wouldn't have done this project anywhere else besides Marlborough.

It's just too perfect.

It was sort of a perfect storm of what they wanted out of it. They were looking to hit the reset button, or show that we can try to do things that aren't Chihuly corporate glass sculpture or big bronze thingamabobs that no one really knows anything about. In terms of spotlight, after that New Museum drawing, that didn't require a gallery, it was just a drawing that was in the Brooklyn Rail, and it probably brought more attention wanted or unwanted than any show or any gallery that I've ever been associated with.

You said the show at Postmasters is going to be about political debate. Is it going to be related in any way to what is going on at Marlborough?

There will be some character-based work, but it's kind of a what happens next after this Marlborough thing so I don't want to give too much away about that.

In your work, do you see yourself as a provocateur trying to stir things up, or are you just trying to tell the truth?

I definitely use provocative elements in the work or try to sensationalize things so that people will look. There's so much to compete with in terms of trying to get your choice out there but it's also just trying to understand how different things work. I have sort of a cynical viewpoint but I try to be a little bit funny, use some humor to figure it out so that I don't go insane...With the character Powhida, he's just this over the top douchebag. There's no way around it.

Powhida said they were organizing a poker night and also a punk rock concert?

Yeah, I did a show in Seattle where Powhida decides the financial market is about to collapse and he's sick of the art world and so he decides to start a band. It's sort of like here's a parallel ego. The music industry has the VH1 special that's always the same: get famous, do drugs, fuck up, you either die or you survive and maybe have some revival or not. The entire show at Platform Gallery was called "Sell Out the Bastard Tour." I was able to get bands and some friends to record and make up songs based on song titles and lyrics that were art world references, from Pollock paintings to Full Fathom Five or Lucifer, Andy is Dead. In that narrative, Powhida does have this kind of experience as a musician, which is a horrible one, but Rick had a punk band back in Virginia and plays in LA, so it's like a perfect merge. And I just thought it would be fucking spectacular to see this band Tournament, which plays the loudest darkest metal, insane, you need ear plugs, in Marlborough Chelsea. It's so incongruent that it really ... I think it will be kick ass.

I know the Powhida-persona has been around for a while. I remember I was at a David LaChapelle opening last summer and he was wearing this flowing white robe and was clearly modeling Jesus or something and kept saying these ridiculous things to the media. That's what this reminded me of. Did you have any specific characters in mind when you were coming up with this?

Well I always think about the way Jeff Koons will talk to the media like he says I'm trying to make art that's without moral judgment. I just want it to be heaven, the purity of a child. Whether he's talking about his porn star actress wife's asshole, it doesn't matter. There's these kind of canned responses and this kind of divinity, and with Abramovic posing as this kind of like deity that doesn't even have to take a piss. Staring at people, kind of elevating herself. She had her lips cast in chocolate and then dusted and patina-ed with silver leaf at the afterparty dinner. The artist is treated like this divine being that doesn't shit, that doesn't breath, that doesn't fuck up, that's not human anymore. I was actually sending Rick all these text messages before the opening, like you know we're not just doing a performance at Marlborough, it's kind of like an exorcism. This idea that he's there to cleanse the maligned spirits.