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## Artist Jason Villegas casts animal logos as invasive species

By DOUGLAS BRITT Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle  
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COURTESY THE ARTIST AND McCLAIN GALLERY, HOUSTON  
Third World Textile Spirit, 2009, at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

In the wrong hands, art that takes “unbridled capitalistic consumption” as its subject can come across as strident, preachy and just plain dull — a public-service announcement you can’t fast-forward through quickly enough.

But a pair of exhibits by Houston-born, Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Jason Villegas reveals an artist using his observations about consumerism as inspiration for a wildly creative body of work, not fodder for a lecture.

The works in *Perspectives 167* at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and *Botched Simulacrum* at McClain Gallery draw on Villegas’ long-held affinities for stuffed animals and thrift-store scavenging as well as an awareness of where his second-hand finds fall in the economic food chain.

“As the global market creates opportunities for more goods to be produced cheaply, these goods travel the globe, invading various levels of social classes,” Villegas tells CAMH curator Valerie Cassel Oliver, who organized his *Perspectives* show, in the catalog. “This is true of actual luxury goods, which are often created in ‘global markets’ such as China, where goods are manufactured more cheaply, then placed in markets in the United States and Europe, where they are sold at top dollar, only to end up in thrift stores, landfills, or at relief agencies, which often return them to the very same countries where they were made.”

The key word above is “invading.” Viewing “consumption as a natural function, an ecology that has varying degrees of brutality, more biological than political,” Villegas re-envision the animal logos on clothing, such as the Lacoste alligator, as invasive species whose spread wreaks havoc, throwing the world out of balance.

Because he’s also inspired by indigenous cultures’ use of animals and their characteristics in religious constructs, “the animals function within a complex and absurd blend of capitalism and spirituality,” he says. “And the logos serve as a pantheon of gods whom those who worship unbridled capitalistic consumption serve.”

*Third World Textile Spirit*, an 8-foot-tall sculpture in the CAMH show, is molded from vast quantities of used clothing and seems to sprout a Hindu-inspired god. It’s a character in *Saleslot*, a four-minute video featuring multilogo brand gods, as are the animals featured in a suite of fabric-collaged self-portraits depicting Villegas as the Lacoste alligator, the Fox brand and so on. The McClain show features related self-portraits, including the witty, odalisque-like *Gluttonous Conjuring of Textile Spirits*, in which the artist, plump and clad only in underwear and an animal mask, lounges in a seductive pose, leaning on a pile of polo shirts for support.

Polo piles — painted in some cases, assembled in others — figure in both shows as symbols of endless waste and consumption, but Villegas executes them with a formal rigor that makes them oddly beautiful.

If, like me, you’re a newcomer to Villegas’ work, it’s worth picking up a copy of the *Perspectives* catalog to learn more about where the CAMH installation of wall drawings, collages, sculptures and videos fits into his ongoing epic narrative of the fictitious

Ultrabastard brand. But the work in both shows is engaging even without the benefit of the back story.

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#### PERSPECTIVES 167

- **When:** Through Nov. 1
- **Where:** Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose; 713-284-8250 or [www.camh.org](http://www.camh.org)

#### BOTCHED SIMULACRUM

- **When:** Through Sept. 26
- **Where:** McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond; 713-520-9988 or [www.mcclaingallery.com](http://www.mcclaingallery.com)

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