

‘Afterlife’ @ San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art – DAVID M. ROTH

Posted on 05 December 2009



Scott Oliver, "The Valley", 2006, found chair and hardboard, 60.5 x 91.75 x 38.5"

Now that "re-purposed" has officially replaced "eco art" and "green art" as the preferred term to describe objects filched from the trash to make art, one wonders: do we really need a new word to denote a practice as old as Duchamp? Don't answer. Just see "Afterlife", a show built from recycled junk at SJICA. In 2008, guest curator Kathryn Funk (a former SJICA executive director), mounted a similar show in vacant San Jose storefronts that included three of the nine artists on view here. Her goal, then and now, wasn't to make a political statement; it was to showcase artists who were deeply engaged with their materials. That such engagements light up social, political and environmental themes without being swamped by ideology demonstrates how really good, socially relevant art can spring from relatively narrow (and often highly idiosyncratic) personal investigations. As such, *Afterlife* may be the perfect antidote to another credit-flexing, landfill-breeding holiday season.

Appropriately, Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor's giant rag figures – which function as poster children for this event — greet visitors at the entrance. Built from every fabric that can be scavenged from thrift stores and garage sales, they appear like macabre Kachina dolls; their slouching posture and distorted countenance seem to cry out for anti-depressants, as their elephantine legs buckle beneath the weight of so much overstuffed cloth. More isn't better, Higgins O'Connor seems to be saying; it's grotesque.

Sculptor Mark Fox-Morgan, who spent his formative years working for his father, a real estate speculator, became obsessed during graduate school with finding a way to turn paper into building material. He did it by concocting a slurry that, when poured into molds, yields surrogate 2 x 4s. The result, *Paper House*, is a cage that resembles the ones circuses use to display performing animals. It looks sturdy, but a mild breeze could blow it apart, says the artist, who also noted, at a recent panel discussion, that he conceived the idea well before the housing crisis struck. Still, parallels between his flimsy structure and America's mortgage-backed financial mess are readily apparent. It's life imitating art.

Conversely, when Scott Oliver rips the stuffing out of a chair to make a "painting" based on a photo of Hetch Hetchy Valley taken before Congress, in 1913, allowed San Francisco to flood the region for water and electricity, he shines light onto another piece of the national character: our readiness to sacrifice nature at the altar of civilization. In addition to activating the cliché about the painting over the sofa that matches the décor, Oliver's work also references how photography and painting were used in the 19th century to glamorize the West for armchair travelers. Thus, it's noteworthy that the flooding of Hetch Hetchy, which John Muir fought, was a pivotal loss that helped shape today's environmental movement.

High praise also goes to Claudia Borgna, a Hamburg-born, London-based installation and video artist who takes plastic grocery bags — the very symbol of urban blight — and uses them to create a haunting Bergman-like vision. Mounted on branches, the bags are displayed in a darkened room before a video of an outdoor installation in which similarly arrayed bags sway in the breeze, like hormone-fed poppies below a clear blue sky. Lurking beneath this installation (and everything else here) is the question of what it means to aestheticize garbage. And further: What happens when the line between art and garbage dissolves to the point where we no longer realize what we're looking at?



Ann Weber, who began her career as ceramic sculptor, responds this way: She replicates (volumetrically, at least) the large figures she once made with clay by stapling strips of cardboard together in forms that recall those inflatable, self-righting punching bags. Set into cantilevered positions, they behave like neither clay *nor* paper, but as hybrids. In another transformation, Lisa Kokin pulps books and turns them into convincing river rocks. They probably wouldn't survive a hard rain, and therefore wouldn't be practical for landscaping, but as credible illusions they demonstrate the alchemy made possible by artistic imagination. Beverly Rayner creates wall-mounted sculptures made of turkey basters whose bulbous ends, outfitted with miniature glass-encased snapshots, give physical form to the surveillance systems that snake through the architecture of our post-911 state: the things that spy on us (like CCTV cameras) and invade our privacy through unseen

Ann Weber, "Topsy", "Turvey" and "Miss Priss", 2009, found cardboard, staples and polyurethane, each approx. 40 x 26 x 37 inches;

electronic networks (like the GPS system embedded in iPhones). Charlotte Kruk's steel-frame "mannequin", wrapped in toothpaste tubes and orbited by tooth-shaped angels clothed in gum wrappers, is a laugh-out-loud poke at sugar addiction and its consequences.

Elsewhere, more cerebral works hold sway, but not with much force. Raynor, with her 2-D composition of inside-out window envelopes (of the type used to deliver checks and bills) tries to convey something about a false sense of security, but I can't tell what it is. Likewise, Robert Larson's assault on Big Tobacco, in the form of 7,000 cigarette warning messages affixed to a wall-sized canvas, is an amazing testament to obsession; but it isn't likely to make anyone quit or even question smoking. Forget about striking a meaningful blow against the industry.

Thus, the challenge facing re-purposed art, eco-art, green art or whatever you care to call it isn't to merely grab attention. It's to change consciousness on a scale large enough to avert the calamities that science tells us are just around the bend.

Afterlife, for the most part, does its part by holding up a mirror to the way we live now.

– DAVID M. ROTH

Afterlife at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art through January 23, 2010.

Contact the author: art@squarecylinder.com