

Rites of possession

New Image Sculpture at the McNay digs into consumer culture
by Scott Andrews

New Image Sculpture at the McNay brings together the works of 13 artists and collectives in a survey of sculpture that realistically portrays the often unnoticed world of mass-produced furniture, packaged food, and designer ware that is consumer culture. But the way this baker's dozen goes about their tasks diverges from fanatically realistic craftsmanship that indeed tricks the eye, to buffo funk that belies the artist's mastery with its apparently sloppy construction — but this, too, is *trompe l'oeil*.

If there is a shared agenda, it is the exuberant, excessive handiwork on display. Though at first blush one might think these artists are elaborating the stance taken by Andy Warhol half a century ago with his Brillo Boxes, this is not factory work. While Warhol celebrated popular culture by replicating its method of production in his aptly named Factory, the pieces on view at the McNay come directly from the artist's hand, are never contracted to fabricators. Is this renewed emphasis on the handmade a retake on the Arts & Crafts movement of the 19th century? Perhaps.

Two of the names presented are familiar to Texas gallery goers. Okay Mountain, the Austin-based collective, has constructed an over-sized exercise machine, comically fabricated, it seems, from rustic hewn wood and wrought iron. Their *Stationery Machine* conjures memories of the "dens" of suburban men in the 1970s. Like most of their projects, it is big and made just for this show.

Margarita Cabrera, born in Monterrey, Mexico is based in El Paso. Her work, which has been exhibited widely, explores Mexico/US relations, especially border issues. Her takes on pop art often are realized in soft vinyl, but her work here moves closer to Folklorico Mexico in *Arbol de la Vida* (John Deere Model #790), a full-size clay tractor adorned with little cast birds and flowers, the sort made in villages for domestic and tourist trade. It is sweetly rendered, only quietly questioning romantic preconceptions of manual labor.

Some of the pieces seem to point not to the past, or commercial production, but to other artists working today.

Mark Schatz's *I was going to make a model of the earth but it won't stop moving* recalls Gregory Euclide's eco-meditations on landscape. Like Euclide, Schatz uses the props of architecture maquettes — tiny trees and the like — but instead of musing on possible ecological disaster, Schatz fixates on the world of communication, perhaps on surveillance, with his terrains filled with cell phone towers, crashed planes, and satellite dishes.

Kaz Oshiro's fanatically realistic constructs seem to house an insider's response to Haim Steinbach's pristinely constructed boxes and shelves that hold purchased items



Courtesy photo

Above: Margarita Cabrera's *Arbol de la Vida* (John Deere Model #790) (2007); Left: Chris Hanson's and Hendrika Sonnenberg's *Soap Box* (2004)



like hunting rifles or cereal boxes. Oshiro has out-finessed the famed Israeli artist (who contracts his works to fabricators) with his own craft. Painting enters here, as what appear to be cheap white Formica cabinets, poorly hung with misaligned doors, and smudged with the remains of a squashed fly, are actually constructed of painted stretched canvas. Also by Oshiro, a simulated vintage Fender guitar amp and depiction of fake-wood plastic trash bin. The contrast between Oshiro's fanatical perfectionism and the anonymous malaise he evokes is one of the high points in the show.

Tom Burckhardt has reversed Oshiro's formula, with his sculptures of paintings. They lean against the museum walls, warped and abandoned — an ode to failure. Underneath is, it seems, a can of "RONAN Japan Colors," and another can of signpainter's "1 Shot Lettering Enamel." Delightfully realistic, they are almost hidden out of view. Again, a plastic packing crate — all are made of cardboard, perversely real illusions.

Leaving the often-sad obsessions of the show are Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg's blue tangle

of press microphones. Relishing their materials, the pair constructed a twirling mass of foam confetti, unabashedly painterly.

Several artists work in tableaux. Jean Lowe's cardboard and *papier mache* construct of an entire room, *The Loneliness Clinic*, is replete with table, couches, and bookshelves. In expression, the work recalls the clumsy cartoonish funk aesthetic made popular at the Kansas City Art Institute in the 1980s by artists who spread to New York and L.A., where the funk mutated into lowbrow. The contrast between the subject and the zany way she has imagined it follows the tendency of the artists in this group to exalt in contradictions.

Dennis Harper's oversized cinecamera is paired with two videos that mash up the artists' work on view with a fictional persona — a jilted filmmaker in Japan. In a giant bathroom his face talks back from the mirror in recriminations, a buffo take on early morning regrets, scrambling belief using several vectors, not as bipolar as much of the work on display.

Tucked in the back of the exhibit is *An Allegory of Taste: Between Here and There*, a masterpiece by Jade Townsend. An erupting house, walls airtight like the lid of a gift box, it reveals a trophy of excess. Filled with chairs, a piano, lamps, the room brims with too much, too many things. On the top of the pile is a crowned gloating figure clad in bathrobe and fuzzy shoes — the king of hoarding. It is hard not to see the piece as a comment on art collecting and the agoraphobic world of the museum, obsessed with taking all the world's riches into itself, but going outside? Never.

Also on view are works by Conrad Bakker, Libby Black, Kiel Johnson, and Kevin Landers. *New Image Sculpture* was organized by René Paul Barilleaux, Chief Curator and Curator of Art after 1945 at the McNay. The exhibition is accompanied by a book surveying the artists' work with profiles by Barilleaux, and an introductory essay by noted critic Eleanor Heartney. •

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