



Contemporary artists get crafty and subversive at Reskilling

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Publish Date: December 18, 2008

At the Western Front until January 10

Reskilling juggles lots of postmodern antagonisms: art and craft, beauty and grotesquery, facility and ineptitude, idealism and banality. Curated by Luanne Martineau of Victoria and Shannon Stratton of Chicago, this small show covers a lot of territory, both visually and geographically. It also reveals how many contemporary artists are interested in addressing and subverting craft values and techniques.

In their exhibition statement, the curators chart the recent emergence of “reskilling”, a kind of antidote to the deskilling of studio practice and the degradation of labour that they see as having taken place before the turn of the last century. Their survey highlights work by eight American and Canadian artists, both young and established. Best known is Vancouver’s Liz Magor, who is represented by Hunter’s Sweaters, a totem-pole-like stack of neatly folded knit jackets. They’re found objects of the iconically Canadian variety.

The motifs on these Mary Maxim sweaters—beavers, elk, thunderbirds, crossed rifles, snowflakes—speak to the ways in which Canadians have imagined an outdoorsy aspect of themselves. (The creatures depicted both iterate and appropriate crest figures on Northwest Coast totem poles.) Masculine national identity—bound into notions of northern wilderness, First Nations cultures, and hunting big game—is wittily undermined by the creature lying on top of the sweater tower. Here, Magor’s representation of a very relaxed house cat, ironically covered in leopard spots, points up the comfort and domestication that are the reality behind our wilderness myths.

An investigation of craft, folded into a critique of modernism, characterizes the exhibition. Devon Knowles’s sculpture Goldenrod Balls pitches stained-glass traditions and their ecclesiastical connotations against the forms, media, and atheist declarations of, say, constructivism. Vladimir Tatlin’s abstract assemblages of industrial materials come to mind. Damian Moppett’s Untitled (Stabile B) juxtaposes bisque-fired, wheel-thrown ceramic bowls (of no particular distinction) with an Alexander Calder-style painted metal sculpture. Again, devalued craft techniques mock modernist traditions.

More odd and offbeat are Anna Sew Hoy’s crooked ceramic wall plaques, bedecked with youth-culture paraphernalia and an assortment of electrical cords, asymmetrical orifices, and up-thrusting phallic forms. Hoy establishes her place by smacking gentle craft forms together with the aggression and testosterone of the street. Also unexpected is Captain’s Chair by Michael Dinges, in which the artist has applied the antique art of scrimshaw to the most banal and ubiquitous of moulded plastic lawn chairs. The maritime meets the landlocked and the intensely handmade meets the mass-manufactured. In her three-channel video work Black Phase, a deadpan institutional critique, University of Victoria student Megan Gregory kneads red and black dye into white polymer clay, applies mounds of the resulting sticky mess to a white studio wall, then scrapes it off again.

Although skill and the well-made object are preoccupations here, a few poorly made objects make their points too. A conspicuous example is William O'Brien's *Untitled and Untitled*, two crudely painted wooden shelves bearing crappily made objects in clay, wood, and mixed media. In a recent telephone interview with the *Straight*, Martineau described the ways in which O'Brien explores "the strength inherent in weakness"—in the intentionally inept and anti-virtuosic. One object particularly draws attention. Suggestive of a severed head lying on its side, it is wrapped in long, messy strands of dark hair and string, with grungy bits of tinfoil, putty, and feathers. Its significance, Martineau suggests, lies in its very repulsiveness.

O'Brien's head echoes its technical opposite, mounted at the other end of the gallery: Scott Fife's beautifully constructed and highly realistic Mies Van der Rohe. This monumental head, painstakingly composed of papier-mâché-like layers of grey cardboard, portrays one of the deities of modernist architecture. At the same time, it consciously evokes the toppled and decapitated statues of Cold War-era political leaders and Gulf War-era dictators. Fife catches Reskilling's determined mood of deconstruction. How the modernist mighty are fallen.

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