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Ceramics That Make the Afterlife More Fun



A ceramic kitchen mixer, milk crate and gas can.

By RIMA SUQI | June 19, 2013

“Hereafter,” a show opening Thursday at Salon 94 Freemans in New York, features the sculpture of Matthias Merkel Hess, who makes ceramic copies of (mostly) household objects. Among the roughly 250 pieces are a Bose Wave radio, a Mr. Coffee brewer, a Black & Decker DustBuster and every single spoon in his home — items the Los Angeles artist considered appropriate for a modern-day tomb, for use in the afterlife.

Mr. Hess, who at 34 is statistically several decades from confronting an afterlife situation, took time recently to walk a reporter through the collection.

Q. HOW DO YOU CHOOSE WHAT TO MAKE?

A. I’m drawn to things from the ’70s and ’80s. I like the way things were designed then. I’m assuming industrial designers spent a long time thinking about, streamlining and getting it perfect. I’m not opposed to computer-assisted design but a DustBuster today looks like the SUV version of a DustBuster, with weird paneling and parts exploded in different directions. Whereas the old one, there’s a shape. It is simpler and more elegant in general.

WHERE DO YOU FIND YOUR MODELS?

I get on eBay and look around. It’s a funny image bank. There’s a thriving market of people who collect plastic gas cans. I bought the DustBuster; a ’50s Beehive Blender; the Bose Wave, which has a tape deck, and the Mr. Coffee all on eBay. The Mr. Coffee I had to get because there was a picture of Joe DiMaggio on the box.

WHAT DO YOU DO ONCE YOU BUY THEM?

I destroy them to make the plaster molds. I didn’t care so much about the DustBuster, but I bought a broken version of the Bose because the ones that do work go for hundreds of dollars.

WHY DO YOU THINK PEOPLE RESPOND SO WELL TO THE FINISHED PIECES?

I'm copying existing design. It fools people's eyes. They walk in and wonder why a guy spray-painted trash cans and put them in a gallery. Then they look closer and realize it's clay. What I do is I mimic the form and finish it with an interesting glaze. But I don't try to mimic the writing or the logos.

DO YOU HAVE A NOSTALGIC CONNECTION TO THESE OBJECTS?

I'm a second-generation M.F.A., so as a kid I didn't think about gas cans. But my uncle had that DustBuster, for example. It was very specific. The KitchenAid mixer is a classic icon of American design. We didn't have one, because they were too expensive. But I did make a copy of the Super Soaker SS-50. I wanted one so badly when I was in junior high, but they were too expensive. So I made a drugstore cheapo water pistol, and then I made a copy of the Super Soaker CPS 2000, which I think is the most powerful water gun ever made.

I'M GUESSING YOU KEPT A FEW OF THOSE.

I did end up with two of them, but I haven't used them yet. My son is only 2 ½, so maybe when he's older. It wouldn't be a fair fight now.

TALK A BIT ABOUT THE THEME OF "HEREAFTER."

There's a very rich history of pottery not made as art, but made for ceremonial or ritual use, like funerary items. The things left in tombs are often made of precious metals and ceramics, whether in China or Mexico. I was looking at all these different traditions and making my own version of that. For the show, I tried to stick with reproductions of plastic things, but I'd done the KitchenAid mixer, so I added the DustBuster and the Oster blender and also a Mr. Potato Head. It fits in with my previous work but pushes it in a new direction.

We don't have this tradition of burying people with stuff anymore, but in a weird way each artist is making their own version of that. These are things that, if taken care of and not smashed to pieces, will outlast me.

"Hereafter" runs through Aug. 2 at Salon 94 Freemans, 1 Freeman Alley (Rivington Street), (212) 529-7400, salon94.com.