

New Image Sculpture McNay Art Museum, San Antonio

Through May 8
by Wendy Atwell



The first gallery of *New Image Sculpture* evokes the set of a Monty Python movie. The work of Okay Mountain, an Austin-based collective of ten artists, fuses medieval torture methods with exercise equipment in *Stationary Machine*, *Multi-station Machine*, and *Dragging Rock* (all 2011), made from dark, rough-hewn wooden beams, rope, lead, leather, hardware and steel. This Pythonesque humor, both surreal and absurd, pervades *New Image Sculpture* at the McNay, which includes a papier-mâché psychiatrist's office, an elegant but useless chandelier sculpted from polystyrene, a life-sized ceramic replica of a John Deere tractor, and a *trompe l'oeil* painted

trash bin. Through the artists' choice of media and subject matter, these sculptures don't so much mimic as mock reality, or transform it from mundane to discomfiting. Throughout the exhibition, a post-apocalyptic atmosphere and a sense of civilization existing on the precipice arrest any blithe enjoyment of art for art's sake.

The exhibition features thirteen contemporary artists and is organized by René Paul Barilleaux, the McNay's Chief Curator and Curator of Art after 1945, with an accompanying catalog featuring guest essayist Eleanor Heartney. In his introduction, Barilleaux explains that the show's title is adapted from a 1978 exhibition at the Whitney Museum entitled *New Image Painting*, curated by Richard Marshall. Marshall wrote that the paintings' recognizable subject matter that "the image becomes released from that which it is representing." According to Barilleaux, this release from signification may also be applied to the sculpture in the exhibition. With poststructuralist thought came the destabilization of meaning and the death of the author, muddying the supposed transparency of representative images. When Richard Prince re-photographed advertising images, such as Marlboro cowboys, the effect was to expose the mechanisms at work behind the myth. *New Image Sculpture* takes this a step further, where two-dimensional images are not just appropriated, but are cleverly recreated in the round.

Heartney works from a definition of art inspired by Arthur Danto's meditations on Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*. As she writes in her catalogue essay, "Something becomes art when it contributes to the ongoing discussion about art's place in the world and the way it shapes our understanding of the meanings and purpose of life." Exactly how these meanings get parsed out varies widely, and the art reflects this disparity, ranging from installation-based, conceptually driven works to sculptural objects with formalist roots.

The art in *New Image Sculpture* shares a compulsive, manic energy, as if the artists return to their practice in an almost neurotic manner. Kiel Johnson fabricates a survival vest from cardboard. Kaz Oshiro successfully tricks the eye as he replicates, with paint and canvas, a trashcan, guitar amp and laminated cabinet. Kevin Landers works from memory to make by hand a chip rack and case of watches. The handmade quality of Landers' reproductions endows the work with poignancy like in the TV show *Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer's* "Island of Misfit Toys," the home of objects that fall short of the dreams they are supposed to fulfill.



Okay Mountain, *Stationary Machine*, 2011

Wood, rope, and hardware

Courtesy of the artists

This melancholy differs from the work of Libby Black, who also works by hand to reproduce luxury objects from paper, paint and hot glue. Prada, Gucci, Chanel and Louis Vuitton labels flag the viewer's eye, while simultaneously sending up the shallowness of their status symbol qualities. With her colorful pastiches Black hilariously exposes how retailers exploit unfulfilled desires, the sculptures' vapidness rendering the branding as fruitless and ineffective as a broken toy.

In *I Was Going to Make a Model of the Earth But it Won't Stop Moving* (2011), Mark Schatz creates haunting futuristic images of civilization. Installed just above eye level, white iceberg forms carved from foam are topped with model train-sized foliage, cities and plane crashes.

Dennis Harper and Tom Burckhardt satirize the art world's seriousness and the over-inflated egos it produces. Burckhardt creates amalgamations of slumped paintings, crates and paint cans made from enamel paint on Variform, cardboard and wood. In Harper's *The Japanese didn't think much of me at first, and they never liked my films* (2011), Harper mimes an interview of a famed Japanese filmmaker purportedly based on Akira Kurosawa. Wearing a hat and black paper glasses, Harper plays the filmmaker speaking with an offscreen interviewer who speaks with a funny-accented, garbled voice, a little like the adults in a Snoopy cartoon. A gigantic foam board and paper film camera sits on a podium nearby, riffing on the aura and mythmaking of renowned *auteurs*.

The power of the works in this exhibition stems from complete absurdity, when the humor is so deadpan that the viewer is almost tricked into thinking it's the real Chanel box or a real documentary. These techniques bring to light the viewer's trained responses to images and inspire a critical reexamination of what's normally taken for granted. Yet while irony reigned as the overriding mechanism in poststructuralist days, this work uses ruthless satire. Instead of the dullness of '80s appropriations, these sculptures are lively, imaginative, and strangely authentic.

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