

Petzel

David Matorin, "A Machinery for Living," *Modern Painters*, October 2014, p. 82.

MODERN PAINTERS

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"A Machinery for Living"

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MARX WRITES THAT a commodity object owes its mystical nature to the illusion of being cut off from the relations that produce it. His famous example is of the wooden table that presents itself of its own accord and manifests a will of its own by means of entering a realm of abstraction that obscures its origins in the labor of human hands. In "A Machinery for Living," artist Walead Beshty curates a collection of objects that reveal themselves as part of a network of things operating in tandem with human activity rather than apart from it—like a parallel society of the inanimate that is fully powered by our borrowed energies and desires. Artworks rooted in architecture, design, fashion, and industry map an intimacy between people and the things that know us best, and they vibrate with a secret knowledge of our material lives.

With over 100 works ranging from Francis Picabia's 1915 spreads for *291 Magazine*, to Kelley Walker's silkscreen pedestal, *Pioneer PL-518 Series (I Hate the Capitalist System)*, 2014, the scope of the show is ambitious, to say the least, but not complete in the way of presenting an authoritative survey. The most intriguing inclusions introduce a slippage between objets d'art and objects of utility and commerce. Photographs of 1960s fashion designer Rudi Gernreich's sketches for unisex bathing suits inject an ambiguity of classification between creative design objects, like his pieces of avant-garde fashion, and Conceptual artist projects that assume modes of the applied arts, like Lucy McKenzie's architectural drawing *Project for an Objectivist Hallway*, 2012. Atelier E.B., McKenzie's collaborative

Rachel Harrison
'69, 2014. Wood, polystyrene, cement, acrylic, shopping cart, copper, telephone, hula hoop, beer can, and toy gun, 7 x 3½ x 3½ ft.

project with designer Beca Lipscombe, focuses on this blurring of commercial and cultural production. Their four couture-clad mannequins lend the gallery a showroom air, albeit one of disorienting casualness. The figures recline and posture in gestures of not-quite-presentational repose, communicating more a restless distraction than an aspirational self-containment, and then a distinct undertow of the uncanny. (Are they aping us?)

Perhaps modeling outfits for bored gallery workers and listless reception attendees, the figures loll about on modernist furniture by Joaquim Tenreiro and BassamFellows, pieces that ordinarily live in the space albeit tucked away, busy with more practical matters. They're Friedrich Petzel's own office furniture that Beshty has moved to the front, making room in the back for the single appearance of the artist's own work, a suite of copper tables that the staff casually uses to work on.

In his first project at the gallery, Beshty manages to announce his presence with highfalutin modesty. Even if a bit overcrowded, the show displays an adroit sensitivity to the space and the context of Petzel's massive 18th Street interior. The interests and themes of Beshty's work, the movement of objects and the traces of human hands that propel them, are reflected onto contemporary practice and art history in a projection that illuminates volumes.

—David Matorin