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Paying Extraordinary Attention to the Ordinary, for Profit

by Michael Swellander

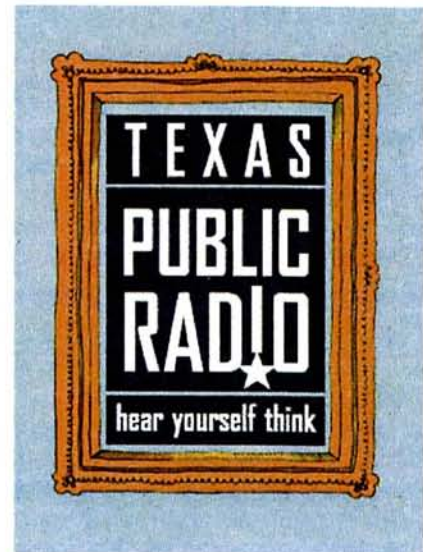


From "arbol de la vida" by Margarita Cabrera. Photo Courtesy the Sara Meltzer Gallery.

The McNay Art Museum's exhibition *New Image Sculpture* inspires a lot of questions about art, value and authenticity. What does it mean if an artist painstakingly handcrafts an object usually associated with mechanized mass production, like a plastic water bottle, and then sells that object to a collector for thousands of times what the "real" bottle is worth? Do these objects undermine capitalism while simultaneously participating in it? Or are the artists just selling out?

San Antonio art-goers should be used to these questions by now, just a month after Joshua Bienko's *Painted Louboutins* tried to start a conversation about art and consumer desire.

Instead of manipulating readymade objects, however, the 13 artists and art collectives of *New Image Sculpture* "manufacture" (with an emphasis on the Latin root *manus*, meaning "hand") their imitations of ordinary objects like luggage, potato chip bags and trash cans from scratch. Their materials are just as ordinary: cardboard, cheap wood, clay. The results are physically



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ephemeral representations of the throwaway objects that surround us.

The show's diversity is one of its strongest qualities. The Austin-based collective [Okay Mountain](#) undertook a hilarious carpentry project, constructing exercise machines out of wood and rope. The Mexican artist Margarita Cabrera built an actual-size tractor out of pinkish clay and metal hardware, covering it with little clay birds and flowers like the kind you might see hanging from a wind chime. The result is one part socialist realism, another part curios shop.

The Brooklyn-based artist Jade Townsend filled a corner of the space with her installation *An Allegory of Taste Between Here and There*, which features an suburban home exploding for all the junk stuffed inside it. The figure of a king wrapped in a flannel bathrobe sits atop a heap of hoarded junk trying to steer the wreck with a pair of reins. The piece incorporates more narrative than most of the other work in *New Image Sculpture*, and the image of ephemeral, household objects piled up works well as a culmination of the show in its position at the end of the exhibition.

"I think of these pieces as challenges to collectors," says Townsend regarding the art's perishability as well as the sheer amount of it, "I *dare* them to collect these."

In the beautiful full-color book accompanying the show (co-authored by curator René Paul Barilleaux), the critic Eleanor Heartney tries to link the work of *New Image Sculpture* to the Dutch and Flemish *vanitas* style of painting. These 17th-century works feature exacting likenesses of the things of the world, like food, jewelry and other symbols of human pomp and prosperity, and set them next to skulls or in shadowy rooms to emphasize their "emptiness" (translation of the Latin word *vanitas*), transience and the unavoidability of death. *New Image Sculpture* isn't quite so moralistic in its ambition, exploring more the ambiguities of value and commerce, but I guess there might be a connection.

Ultimately, the works of *New Image Sculpture* fill their space more skillfully than Bienko's *Ever So Much More So*, which leaves the WindowWorks space at Artpace looking kind of undone, like a retailer during a liquidation sale, although Bienko's installation is much sexier and cooler than the work at McNay. The questions posed in both shows, however, are so similar that their proximity seems a little unfortunate. The questions of value and authenticity Libby Black raises in her piece, for which she builds cardboard replicas of Louis Vuitton, Hermès and other designer luggages seem very close to those Bienko asks with his manipulated designer high heels. As a result some of the ideas in *New Image Sculpture* feel a little tired. One wonders if there aren't questions to ask in art about things besides the mysteriousness of the market.

New Image Sculpture runs through May 8 at the McNay Art Museum.



Categories: Jade Townsend, Margarita Cabrera, McNay Art Museum, New Image Sculpture, Okay Mountain

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