

The belief behind belief: New Image Sculpture at the McNay

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REVIEWS

Obsessive, compulsive, and hyperactive, the McNay's *New Image Sculpture* exhibition presents a mighty spectacle. You'll find multiple dazzling large-scale works, you'll smell pine and varnish and register the sounds of voice and machine. You may find you walk circles around the 3-D sculptures, wanting to touch all the very cool stuff, caught up in the giddy interplay of object and technique as you travel through the cheek-to-jowl kingdoms of their makers.

The 13 emerging and mid-career artists in *New Image Sculpture*, according to some of the show's official text,

freely appropriate from art history, ethnographic artifacts, fashion, folk art, hobby crafts, popular culture, and the world of do-it-yourself... transform[ing] widely available materials ... into fanciful re-creations and interpretations of ordinary and mundane things.

This movement has been afoot for a while, and has particular resonance with San Antonio. Check out this Venn diagram: William Cordova and Mario Ybarra, both Artpace residency alumni, employed many of these elements in their works for the 2008 Whitney Biennial, and both Ybarra and *New Image Sculpture* contributor Margarita Cabrera (another Artpace alum) were included in the seminal show *Phantom Sightings: Contemporary Art After the Chicano Movement*, curated by LACMA's Rita Gonzalez and in residence at the Alameda in March of '09. I noted then, in a [review](#) for the *San Antonio Current*, that the artists engaged

DIY forms of artmaking that make use of materials of no commercial value. This rough-hewn sensibility, of course, is also fundamentally rasquache, a term connoting 'quick, crude, and cheap,' and which originally bore a negative connotation, but was reinvented by artists of the Chicano art movements of the '60s and '70s.

Cabrera's *Phantom Sightings* entry, "Vocho (yellow)," dazzled me with its technique and message. Her *New Image Sculpture* works took a little longer to grow on me, which has mainly to do with their earthy, clay-slip pottery poetry in contrast to the instantaneous ka-pow! vinyl impact of "Vocho." But her "Arbol de la Vida Tractor" has all the major Cabrera (and *New Image Sculpture*) hallmarks: arresting scale, impressive veracity, but with essential details which belie the irregular and handmade, a preoccupation with the products and equipment of labor, and a regard for handiwork and its subversive use in "reproducing" functionless portraits of the mass-produced.

In the Stieren Center's front gallery, Austin collective Okay Mountain takes the ubiquitous forms of exercise equipment — the stationary bicycle, the weight bench, liberates them from their chrome and plastics, and constructs massive versions in timber and iron — the aluminum weights replaced with buckets of rocks, the bicycle seat a wooden pike, the lats machine wed with ominous, iron-maidenly spikes — re-imagining them as medieval torture devices. It's not a far stretch, and it's a funny idea, one which somehow conceptually recalls to me (as does much of the show) that chestnut Gary Larson one-panel, "Cow Tools."

Unlike the fictive bovine creators of "Cow Tools" though, Okay Mountain demonstrates dedicated craftsmanship and even credible engineering; their exercise equipment of the Spanish Inquisition looks like it could actually work. Yikes.

Nowhere near even theoretically functional, but heart-flutteringly beautiful: Mark Schatz's installation of tiny floating islands, each complete with tiny narrative architectures, and the soft blue and green tendrils of carved Styrofoam created by Canadian duo Hendrika Sonnenberg and Chris Hanson to evoke "Chandelier" and "Soap Box."

The viewer of *New Image Sculpture* gets access to disparate but cohort artifacts, each stylized into physical being by the fastidious handmade minutiae. The net effect feels exciting and generous. "Generous" doesn't connote "sentimental," here. Simply put, *New Image Sculpture* isn't a department store of clever hipster in-jokes and manipulative childhood nostalgia. I was a little afraid it might be, right up to and through the press and members opening on Tuesday night; the show looked great, but I couldn't get a grip on it. My scattered attention gathered

impressions but didn't linger long enough to perceive depth. Some of the pieces seemed heavy on punchline, and as a result I churlishly wondered if *New Image Sculpture* wasn't armored by hipsterism's deliberate, noncommittal opacity, its jokey withdrawal and skeptical gamesmanship, its cool refusal to commit or to believe.

I returned midday Wednesday, when the Stieren was relatively quiet and the lighting made softer by daylight. I spent an hour and a half examining objects and parts of objects, taking in sightlines and vantage points, and puzzling over and startled by detail after thoughtful detail. My mind changed. *New Image Sculpture* turned out not to be a facile, good-looking wit in nerd glasses, but instead revealed itself to be an actual, unregenerate nerd, working on its science-fair project late at night in the garage. It's suffused with purpose, its sculptures not functional as what they portray, but in their regard for the meaning of those real-world things, touching on what a poet once termed "the belief behind belief that we believe in."

Through his curation of *NIS*, the McNay's René Barilleaux exposes you to the myriad consciousnesses of multiple narrators. I'm not just talking about the artists' voices, but the constant babble of a schismatic American culture which asks you to recycle, reduce, reuse even as it pushes you to desire, consume, and discard — and not just objects, but experience. Memory. History. *New Image Sculpture* makes jokes but takes a stand. Our value and authenticity are at stake, and the work of each of these artists takes a stab at just what that means, nowadays.

Two of my favorite artists in this show are women who create engrossing props from a slightly alternate universe. Libby Black painstakingly crafts European luxury items, some of which are "real", such as cardboard replicas of Chanel No. 5 boxes and Louis Vuitton trunks, and some of which are entirely imagined, such as an ice axe by Prada. Black manages to relish the harmonious color palettes and elegant patterns of a Gucci trunk or Burberry logo while undermining their value. In a conscious gesture of excellent, non-knee-jerk irony, Black's sculptures of exquisite rasquachery retain more preciousness than their manufactured counterparts.

An immersive tableaux by Jean Lowe, "The Loneliness Clinic" (2004), depicts a shrink's office gone fantastically, hilariously, touchingly awry; there's a modernist couch, accent pieces which reference exactly the kind of bric-a-brac found in such places, classical pottery replicas, a ubiquitous tree-like houseplant I've seen everywhere but can't think of the name of, leather-bound books. But upon closer inspection, the diplomas on the wall are for the restoration of a suspended driver's license, a certificate from a halfway house, the diagnostic tomes have titles like "Intellectual Laziness Disorders," and "Living With a Sports Injury," and there's an outsized bottle of wart remover among the Paxil, Xanax and Zoloft. I wish the exhibit installation allowed the viewer to get closer to this work; there are some legal tablets replete with notes on one of the office walls, tantalizing and too far away to be readable.

These 13 artists, 11 of whom are American, and most of whom — with the valuable exception of Dennis Harper, whose extra-large movie camera and accompanying video work are by turns hilarious and sad — were born in the 1960s and '70s. They grew up aware of a post-Cold War American identity crisis. This anxious American self-concept, particularly as illustrated by media coverage of the economy, posits that we're no longer a nation who makes things. We're post-Industrial, post-agrarian, postmodern. America deals in the deal, transmits information and money in 0s and 1s. Our plants and factories have closed, our money is suddenly devalued, we're told the prosperity of our parents' generation is unobtainable, China makes our stuff and India answers the customer-service lines, and the American Empire may be foundering. We're aware of our national failures, we feel guilt about war and the environment, and are working in an era in which artists are either superstars or underdogs. Meanwhile, during the lifetimes of the Baby Boomers, Art as Object was extensively re-tooled too — abstracted, de-emphasized, made conceptual, or else outsourced and/or made into extreme, untouchable consumer fantasies.

Given the givens, it's remarkable that *New Image Sculpture* is such a joyous experience. Even in its darkness. Brooklyn-based Jade Townsend's enormous installation at the back of the back gallery, which was commissioned specifically for this show, is a looming nightmare and a brilliant evidence of a solid makers' movement, combining woodwork, automation, materials durable- and non-, and a cultural critique of excess. It recalls David Foster Wallace's observation, made during a commencement address for Kenyon College in 2005, that Americans can behave as

lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it ... [but] the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.

Replace "other people" with "art" or "studio practice," and you've got *New Image Sculpture* — though some of the artists might suggest that the attention, awareness, discipline and effort devoted to art does reflect care for other people. If you wander out of the Stieren Center for Exhibitions unfazed, hell, I don't know what to do with you.