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December 2007

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Exhibition Review: Ephraim

"It is if you like it"

Tracy Featherstone: *Domestimation* & Roscoe Wilson: *Waste Not, Want Not* at the CUAC
by Geoff Wichert

Back in the twentieth century, the meticulous, pedestrian questions of art criticism were swept aside by a racy substitute that captured the public's fancy in a way academic discourse never could. In a foretaste of what was about to happen to art itself, the response "But is it art?" came to be almost as well-known as "Sock it to me" or "Where's the beef?" Now each new season brings not just subtle variations on last year's art, but new flavors: characteristics that had not previously been thought appropriate to art, but which once noted become necessary reference points. Escalating provocations require an ever-more jaded insider audience. Concept -- a quality inherent in the work -- replaces content, which would link it to the external world. Beauty is like the drunk uncle at a wedding: its presence a cause for caution, its absence an unspoken relief. A nearly interchangeable pair, performance and installation, have become a shell game to hide the missing pea of quality. The entertaining and the ephemeral have trumped the grave and universal. Perhaps the saddest development is that the rapid, welcome proliferation of new materials and techniques has been used to justify the disappearance of craftsmanship. After all, how can an entertaining artifact in a shiny new material absorb the same skill as those elevated by longstanding tradition, like marble or oil on canvas? One gallery that enjoys exploring the dilemma of present-day art is the [Central Utah Art Center](#) in Ephraim. Interested readers may want to check out their website and view the slideshows on the current shows before reading further.

If you fed your childhood games of danger, adventure, and shelter through a shredder, then taped those long strips together in random order, some bottom to top and some inverted to show a blank side, the rudely assembled resulting page might suggest the [current installation at the CUAC by Tracy Featherstone](#). [1-3] A closer match would come from using only those strips that refer to occasions when your home became your imagination's laboratory: not formal events designed by grownups, but the games you and your siblings invented on rainy days when you couldn't play outside, or when you stayed home sick from school, or nights you slept on the floor, your improvised sleeping quarters lit by the eerie light of the TV. If, like me, you lived among houses under construction, or your home was extensively remodeled while you were living in it, and either way the framed wooden skeleton and metallic or plastic internal organs of domestic construction were your playground, you won't need labels to identify Featherstone's cannibalized furnishings with fantasy constructions grafted onto them.

Featherstone's idea of installation is less monumental and more episodic than installations were during the heady decades following the art form's invention, usually credited to Marcel

Found Art . . . from page 1

The Artist-in-Residence Program at San Francisco Recycling & Disposal, an organization established in 1990 to address a new global crisis, began in the pivotal environmental concerns of the Nineties and now is seventeen years old -- which might make it seem to be another chapter in the history of art. Not so. The global crisis of depleted resources and gluttonous energy use and the demand for efficiency make recycling a primary concern of a globalized economy. Recycling not only reuses resources but also reduces the energy used to create new products. Using found objects in a new aesthetic is the obvious way to address this crisis artistically. However, it is the eight artists themselves, each with a unique contribution to the project that, along with their ability to transcend the limits of the found art tradition and their approaches to ephemeral concerns that makes this exhibition work.

These artists, working in collage, sculpture and installation, were chosen by curator Jim Edwards for the current exhibit. While owing a debt to the past of found art and while maintaining the tradition of the SF Project -- keeping environmental awareness and responsibility in the forefront -- these artists make bold contemporary statements which push the trajectory and aims of the project into an optimistic future.

Artist **Andrew Junge's** sculpture "Pandora's Box," 2005, is a contemporary Brillo Box. [0] He, like Warhol, uses familiar objects - here, a discarded toolbox and a neon sign reading "Hope" -- in the direct manner Warhol addressed his own sculpture. Like Warhol and much of the ideology he raised, Junge makes a statement on "capitalistic/consumerist culture." Warhol, the Modernist Pop Idol, attempted to bridge the gap between "high" and "low" art by using celebrities, familiar objects and inventing the "pop" in popular culture. His art was the definitive break, which freed art to be whatever art needed to be. Junge is indebted to Warhol but his aims are entirely different. Unlike Warhol, he does not use commodity to his advantage, glamorizing it, but faces the "capitalist/consumerist culture" directly through his recycled objects. Where Andy Warhol stopped, Junge begins.

Another exceptional artist in the show is **Mike Farruggia**. His "United States of Whatever" recalls the Post-painterly abstractionists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. [1] Where they used found-art aesthetically, to create fine art, Farruggia goes beyond to address contemporary political issues. According to Farruggia, reusing recycled objects "recalibrates the synchronicity of its path and therefore everything." As the title of this collage implies, Farruggia uses the recycling concept to investigate the deductive tools inherent in recycled relics on a much broader scale. In his overtly politicized use of the concept, the artist opens the gulf between what has been and what might be. In this work, more than the others, the idea of waste comes into play -- we use, we consume, we throw away. His logic is a forecast of the moment, a vision of the future with respect for the past.

The associations of the Dada cannot be avoided in this exhibition; theirs was the genesis of the future of found art, and their work has the strongest formal similarities with the artists in this show. The Dada, in Post World War I Germany and other cities across Europe, seemingly gave up hope in politics, society, spirituality, and even art and culture -- all the things their predecessors had sought -- and tantalized the viewer with ironic statements in what they found in their found art.

Ninety years later, artists **Daphne Ruff** and **Mark Eisenbaum** appear to have found the utopia that the

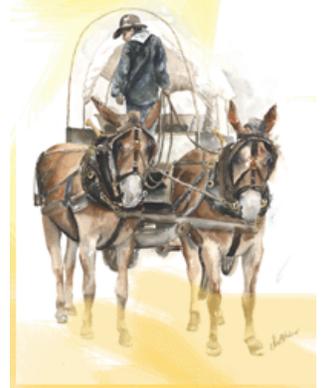


SF
RECYCLED

thru Jan 26, 2008 



Lisa Huber
watercolors



Duchamp. Rather than fabricate a unique reaction to each environment she's invited into, Featherstone carries a number of set-pieces with her from venue to venue, assembling, arranging, and slowly evolving them in response to conditions she encounters and her own deepening understanding of what she's doing. For her, "installation" mostly means the opportunity to remodel and fine-tune a work—not quite an assemblage—each time she shows it, making the process less like a visual artist's and more like that of a poet, who can present a new draft at each reading.

Upstairs, **Roscoe Wilson's installation** envisions the alter-ego of modern society's one-use-only, throw-away economy. [0, 4] His is the one where bright colors and catchy design are used to make the environment attractive to live in, instead of creating dissatisfaction in the name of cash flow; and instead of everything being wasted, nothing is. In a flash, an instant of voluptuous visual surprise, visitors to this fantasy landscape will see, and better yet feel, how a strong design sense can transform modern detritus into intellectually intriguing and sensually pleasant surroundings. It's not just that our garbage accumulates until it blinds and poisons us; we waste our potential to do great things with the same resource, including ourselves. After seeing the dream landscape Wilson and his crew of volunteers have created, we may well wonder if our dumps and transfer stations don't contain more aesthetic treasure than the mercantile palaces and pasteboard castles that overwhelm our senses while feeding nothing to our hearts and minds.

Like Featherstone, Wilson trucks the modules of his art from place to place, but his lids and tubes arrive loose in boxes -- sorted only by color -- and the pristine arrangements that he lays out take shape in the intersection between simple geometry --round lids suggesting circles, cubical boxes building crystals --and the component parts' family resemblance to larger modules, like outlying dwellings and downtown towers in a futuristic city (one that has solved the problem of waste?) or tones in a musical composition. In a new development, Wilson has turned his clustered boxes, resembling Cubist portraits and Sci-fi space stations, upside down and hung them over the bas-relief sculpted and patterned floor, so that these crystalline stalactites hover like mother ships, building down to touch the floor like raindrops falling on a pool, the energy spreading from the contact reflected in a plangent change of radiant color. For all its sensual excitement, though, it's closer to the visionary social text-end of art than to an experience reflected in tranquility.

Nothing about present day art has erased the venerable facts of human nature and enterprise. As a species we do our best work against the grain. Competition between us, each trying to better the others' performance, forces us to collaborate on the larger project of quality: to achieve our best collectively. It's when taking on the past masters directly—on what we like to call "their own turf"—that our best emerges. Featherstone's tableaux owe their easy acceptance to installations that went before and that achieved the same aesthetic unity that a sculpture needs to possess: either through narrative, or poetic compression, or visual rhetoric, or a combination of such elements, they generated an experience in their audience that was identifiably present in the life of the artist who created them, and clearly consonant with his or her intention. Despite their being unfamiliar and possibly ugly, they achieved the same response among viewers that they are used to having to beautiful things. Featherstone's installation is rich in her biography, but what comes across lacks the specificity necessary for us to feel what it means to her. On the reverse of the coin, Wilson's work is certainly beautiful, and possessed of a power and impact no photograph can ever do justice to. But it's a fantasy, perhaps even a diversion, that lacks a means to capture and channel the emotions it releases in us. We feel great looking at it, but we don't know what to do with the feeling.

Meanwhile, it's an illusion that somehow the artist who invents a genre all his or her own, where no known standards apply, will make a larger contribution than one who humbly and vaingloriously strives to do better against the challenges of the genres and standards, the canon and the pantheon we have. Instead of asking why we don't have the geniuses the Renaissance or the early twentieth century had on tap, we might ask how those eras nurtured the talent they had into greatness. On the basis of the evidence on hand, Tracy Featherstone and Roscoe Wilson may well be capable of greatness: all they may need is to have nothing less demanded of them.

Tracy Featherstone's *Domestimulation & Roscoe Wilson's Waste Not, Want Not* continue at the Central Utah Art Center December 26. Visit the [CUAC website](#) for a full slide show of

Faigenbaum appear to have found the utopia that the Dadaist and Modernism had given up on. Both of these artists, Ruff with her Fräulein Maria waltzing in mid-air over the Danube in the work "Spring Sing," [2] 2006, and Faigenbaum with his excruciatingly articulated collage "Unfolding," [3] 1998, reveal the extent to which the recycled object can be taken aesthetically. In splendid constructions, both regenerate what was once called degenerate. The aims of *SF Recycled* are fully manifest in these two collages: Faigenbaum's "ephemeral quality . . . of outdated technology and mechanisms," and Ruff's statement of similarly ephemeral themes such as fashion and apparel using that which has been discarded. These establish the subject and relationships between past, present and future. Such performative qualities add the post to Post-postmodernism.

The other represented artists, in like-manner to those above, all address topics dealing with temporality, a reassessment of value systems, and an investigation of the priorities of the human species. Artist **Nomi Talisman** is "concerned with memory, how we interpret and understand our collective and individual histories." Her Hockneyesque photographs document an ideal while questioning what is actually real. The ideal and utopian are common threads in the work of these artists. Bessie Kunath, whose "thrift store sculptures" are a pastiche of reinvention, states "When I first started working at the dump, the idea of having access to everything at the public disposal area was dreamlike." Says **James Gouldthorpe**, whose sculptures [4] bring out subtleties of the artifact in a concept of visual relationships and puns, "Most of the images I use are found in magazines and books...that seemed desperately to want to simplify the intricacies of human relationships, and each other with the natural world." Finally, **Dee Hibbert-Jones** says "I untangle and examine the complexities of need that exist within human relationships, and our relationships to the earth itself." Her seemingly sterile installations, recreations of a "homelike environment," are haunting in their lack of the human element, a poignant reminder of mortality. [5]

Such implications give this art the strength to disassociate itself from the hackneyed reuse of found objects that has become widespread among many contemporary artists. As the eight artists now showing at the Art Center illustrate, amidst the multitude of art that expresses similar aims the San Francisco Recycling & Disposal Artist-in-Residence Program has survived successfully because of the unique caliber of many of the artists that have participated. The sum of each individual artist's aesthetic focus on various aspects of the ephemeral makes these found objects, and the Project itself, a powerful statement.

Today, with the growth of a globalized world and the resulting possibilities and challenges, an artistic investigation into the use, misuse and reuse of the things we make speaks to an urgent political need. The artists in *SF Recycled* may owe a debt to the Modernists for opening up the garbage bin and showing the way to an aesthetic treasure trove, but the *SF Recycled* artists have also managed to do what the Modernists could not do. They have not merely used found art for art's sake, but by emodying their messages in recycled refuse have used history to challenge the state of the present and forecast a utopia of the future. If only Andy could be around to see this show.

SF Recycled continues at the Salt Lake Art Center through January 26. A related exhibit, Masters of West Coast Assemblage and Collage was reviewed in our November edition. For more on the SF Recycling Artist in Residence Program, go here.



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