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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 glutinous 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. [10] 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 are 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 transcended to view with ironic statements in what they found in their found art.

Ninety years later, artists Daphne Ruff and Mark Faehrenheim appear to have found the irony that the
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. Her, "installation" mostly means the opportunity to remodel and fine-tune a work—not quite an assemblage—even 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 a disconnection 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 hear a strong bass, how a strong design sense can transform modern detritus into intellectually intriguing and sensually pleasant surroundings. It’s not just that our garbage accumulates. 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 and suggestions of 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 tons 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 center collected in a plangent change of radiant color. For all its sensual excitement, though, it’s closer to the visionary 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 turf”—that our best emerges. Featherstone’s tableaus owe their easy acceptance to installations that went before and that achieved the same aesthetic unity that a sculpture demands: either through narrative, or poetic compression, or visual rhetoric, or a combination of such elements, they generated an experience in their audience that was indelible and 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 the channel the emotion it generates 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 Nikki Giovanni & 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

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