

Afterlife

GROUP SHOW
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by Lea Feinstein

Why make treasures out of trash? Since Schwitters made his collages, Duchamp his readymades, and Joseph Cornell his boxes, artists have been panning the streets for “gold,” and reconfiguring it for gallery walls. Like the rest of us, they are repulsed by waste and trash, but in it they encounter poetic possibilities and a jumping off point for content-laden work.

“Afterlife” is a handsome compilation featuring artists who work with recycled materials. Sampling the techniques of architecture, quilt making, sculpture, painting, and couture design, the best of them acknowledge the origins of their materials and transform them into something new. The viewer relishes the visual double entendres.

Many of these artists employ labor-intensive, additive methods—the whole assembled from parts. In her piece, *Homeland Insecurity Blanket* (2008) Beverly Rayner steps beyond the world of craft quilting by selecting an atypical source material: those ubiquitous security envelopes with patterned interiors and translucent windows. Her piece poses questions about citizen security in a world of surveillance and identity theft, and gives it a homey twist.

Elisabeth Higgins O'Connor reconfigures derelict bedding, zippers, and fake fur to fabricate the large-scale soft sculptures, *No Name (Scrap Foot)* and *No Name (Trash Fists)*, both from 2009. A giant weird chihuahua and a sagging cat with dripping eyes, they are fearsome but snuggly, the characters of nightmare and costume. Suddenly, we are Max, and these are the Wild Things.

Charlotte Kruk's Tooth Fairy extravaganza, *An Even Exchange and I Left You Some Change—The Tooth Fairy* (2009) is an outfit for another denizen of the night. Offering a glib nod to her candy addiction and dental concerns, Kruk fashions a dress, wings, and numerous attendant mini-fairies from gum and candy wrappers stitched and sealed in plastic. The craft is solid, but the underlying ideas about consumerism, addiction, money and fashion remain tenuous, and it seems like a conceptual first pass.

Robert Larson's powerful *Twelve Titles* (1995-2002) is a humbling example of committed trash picking. Scavenging hundreds of gutter-tarnished Marlboro cigarette packs, Larson carefully excised the surgeon general's dire messages from each one, gluing them in a meticulous grid onto a triad of massive linen-covered stretchers, to create a monochromatic minimalist canvas reminiscent of Agnes Martin's peaceful geometries, with a bite. Up close, the warnings intone a relentless catechism that overwhelms the viewer with evidence and enormous scale. His smaller works are decorative sketches by comparison.

Mark Fox Morgan's *Paper House* (2008), a shed-sized, stick-built frame with four walls and gabled roof, is like a drawing in space. Yearning for home after moving into a dorm room,



Scott Oliver. *Loop*, 2003; found table, steel cable, light fixture; 66 x 40 in.

the artist cast junk mail into molds, yielding two-by-fours of buildable length, afterward stained to look like wood. At first glance, it seems a rickety relative of Cornelia Parker's exploded shed, *Cold Dark Matter*. Upon closer inspection, a viewer can decipher the writing on the “wall”. What constitutes home? What is permanence?

Scott Oliver takes a completely different approach to recycled materials. His technique is not additive, but subtractive. Like a stonemason, he confronts his chosen object—a vintage upholstered chair, a 60s round laminate table—and seems to ask, “What can I do with this?” The transformative act is foregrounded. In *The Valley* (2006), he performs surgery, flaying the chair's upholstered skin to reveal its innards of foam stuffing and skeleton of springs and frame wood. Then, Oliver builds a landscape from the guts, attaching it to the wall and to the tradition of landscape painting. The effect is a bit Ho-gauge, like the miniature train scale, but so are the paintings it mimics.

I have always maintained that the difference between art and craft was that art asked questions, while craft aimed for the perfection of technique. Oliver's work asks questions that are shaped by his objects, but not limited to them. In *Loop* (2003), a round 60s laminate table with an illuminated globe light suspended over it, he may have intended to choose “Hoop” as a title, for the “ball” is certainly aimed at the “net”. Or he might have asked, “How can I change a round flat plane into a 3-D hollow vortex?” as his *Loop* feels like a sketch for the topology of a black hole. Meticulously dissected into tiles and seamlessly reassembled to form a curved web, the table reveals its anatomy in miniature cross sections. The lamp, like a sun, is a light source in *Loop*'s solipsistic world, casting shadows of the table-turned-web onto the floor below. It is a loop, and seems the embodiment of a mathematical formula.

Getting beneath the surface of recycled materials requires artist-archeologists who not only catalog the flotsam and jetsam of our current world, but investigate the culture they reveal. Like miners' canaries, they draw attention to lurking dangers and open new worlds—like Oliver's wormholes, they look backwards to tradition or forwards into the physics of the universe. One of them should tackle the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Paten.