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"Fool's Gold"

by Paul Schimmel

It is richly colored and lustrous, rich in its possibilities and potential. Its beauty sparkles with a complexity of meanings. But it is not what it seems to be. Like fool's gold, the art of a new generation emerging in the United States calls into question what we think of as beautiful and valuable. This generation of American artists is pulling the rug out from under the earnest fervor of a generation of socially charged, conceptually-based art that has dominated recent American art. In much the same way as the Pop generation was able to deflate the vanity of the academy of abstraction, this generation of artists has found that it can renew the potential of art through devalued elements such as decoration, craft and obsessive fabrication.

One of the most gnawing issues and longstanding difficulties in the history of twentieth-century art, of art in the modern era, has been to define art's relationship to issues of decorativeness, craft and beauty. What Matisse confronted in the first part of the century is more recently addressed in the work of Lari Pittman, with his richly textured pastiche of decorative flourishes. Beauty and decoration are a nasty, double-edged sword. While immediately attracting the uninitiated viewer, they simultaneously put off those who associate beauty with vacuousness. A similar response greeted the emergence of Pop art in the early sixties in the United States; soup cans and comics appealed to the casual viewer but struck the art establishment as lacking in profound implications. Some critics interpreted Pop art's incorporation of popular media, commercial techniques and design, as an attempt by a younger generation to wrestle media attention away from the serious intentions laid out by the abstract expressionists who preceded them.

Like the Pop artists before them, artists emerging in the midnineties have taken up visual means that ignore the lofty aspirations of their forbears. Today's artists embrace aspects of "handicrafts" - ceramics, weaving, fashion design and illustration - parallel to the way Pop artists employed commercial printing techniques, popular media and modern design. "Commercial" and "reproduction" were dirty words then, just as "decorative" and "craft" have been unacceptable in any vocabulary of serious or important art. Yet serious young American artists today are heading into these very areas, whether in response to a perceived academy or as a recent offshoot of an ongoing but ignored tradition of interest in decorativeness and popular media evident in American art throughout the twentieth century.

Some of the brightest and the best artists today bring an intellectually wry command of conceptual art to their explorations of beauty and craft. It is wondrous to visit studios where artists feel free to sidestep political issues and to concentrate instead on creating fervent narcissistic identities out of the hermetic experiments in their own fabricated and fictionalized worlds. This is studio art, not art in public places, and not for social research. Artists of the new generation are not necessarily resolving the tangled issues of art versus decoration, but they're certainly taking a good whack at it, and they are doing so in the most unprogrammatically aloof manner, aloof from the perceived mainstream.

Like fool's gold, the art of this new generation seduces us with its visual beauty. Taking our perceptions and turning them upside down, like Alice peering through the looking glass, today's artists reveal more about what we don't see than what so richly manifests itself in our gaze. It comes as no surprise that a generation that produced tough, visceral, politically charged work has been succeeded by a generation that finds the possibility for aesthetic revolution in opposite qualities. Clamoring screams have been replaced by hope, a sweet desire to enrich and ennoble all things which have been deemed trivial or irrelevant.

When Julie Becker reentered the California Institute of the Arts in 1993, ostensibly to study for an MFA degree, she really had only one thing in mind - to enter a situation that would allow her to pursue her obsession with and research into the subject of residence, a place to rest. The youngest artist in her exhibition and the only one who has had no previous public exposure, Becker is extraordinary in her single-minded focus on creating a structure to support her melange of public and private fantasies.

In the eighties, empirical models of all kinds experienced a resurgence, evident in the art of Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, and Thomas Schutte, among others. Becker has gone further in overturning the previous decade's intellectualized manifestation of the model. She uses the "collectible" dollhouse as a

stage for narrative fantasy in an update of the Victorian passion for miniaturized make-believe. Fusing her own psyche with the subjective states of fictional characters, Becker builds environments on the edge between dream and nightmare.

Becker, whose family moved frequently when she was a child, finds kindred spirits in the characters of Danny Torrance (from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*) and Eloise (from *Eloise* by Kay Thompson and Hillary Knight), the storybook child who lives alone in the Plaza Hotel in New York. The rooms Becker creates for her fictional friends are specific renderings of altered states of mind, tinged with the artist's own psychological uneasiness. They turn the banal dollhouse into a plaything of psychotic intensity, rupturing our comfort and shattering our expectations.

Becker places her miniature homes between two full-scale, walk-in tableaux, one an entrance-room/office and the other an anteroom/staging-area, further unsettling anyone's notions of real and fictive. These tableaux settings serve as bookends to the play worlds of the male and female characters. Made with obvious obsessiveness, these works reveal the artist's direct connection with the fears and follies of Danny and Eloise.

The entry/office/receiving area connects with the real world as a point where mail can be dropped off and information can be disseminated. The anteroom/staging-area is a tableau of process consisting of every paper scrap, each concept sketch and documentation of each place in which Becker lived and worked during the intensive period of realizing the installation, and is here for the viewer to interact with as a platform for Becker's roles as real-world artist and as architect of a disturbing fantasy residence.

If Pop artists believed that anything could be used as the subject of art, no matter how banal, Tom Friedman shows that anything can be used as the material for art. Friedman makes art from things that one would never see even in a craft project at a county fair. From bubble gum, toothpaste, pubic hair, soap, aspirin, feces, masking tape and flies, this artist creates things that we might be mistaken in calling art. Working obsessively, he alters the most abject materials from the real world, including things that we sit on, eat, chew, and sleep with, and re-creates in three dimensions the profound banality that we have come to associate with Pop art's two-dimensional image exploitations. One can't imagine Friedman not making art: one is compelled to imagine how naturally, like breathing, his fingers must incessantly manipulate anything and everything that passes through his hands.

Just as Lichtenstein's portrait of Mickey Mouse may have seemed absurd in the early sixties, Friedman's obsessive manipulations of dust, feces, and toothpicks may seem highly suspect today, but in Friedman's sculpture we find a fusion savvy with historical notions: a reverence for elegance from late-sixties minimalism, a passion for process from the postminimalists, and a sense of irreverence and irony from Pop. Like Katy Schimert, Jim Hodges, and other sculptors in this exhibition, Friedman's forms follow principles of organic growth, yet this growth seems influenced by an extraterrestrial logic that finds order in the absurd. Friedman shares with Jennifer Pastor a sense of extravagance. Whereas Pastor's is on a heroic scale, Friedman's is microscopic. When one takes his works apart, breaks the code, so to speak, one is left with nothing.

Hodges's best work is over-the-top pretty. He has taken decoration to an obsessively heroic scale by covering the walls of a gallery with 565 slight and wispy pen drawings, or doodles, of flowers. He has knitted together thousands of artificial silk flowers, turning them into curtains, architectural scrimms of decorative patterns that question beauty and taste and challenge the sublime with the "triumph of American prettiness." The tangible tension between subject and form, material and scale, is the source of this work's potency. Making a spider web out of silver chains, a rose out of tape and tar paper, Hodges inserts a sense of the ironic into objects that on first sight we might interpret as being wistful and poetic. In that respect, there is a diabolical side to his prettiness. Not unlike Friedman, Hodges combines postminimalism's obsessive object-making practice with a craft aesthetic that, in its delicate appeal, questions the validity of setting boundaries between art and the traditional handwork of women, including knitting, crocheting, and quilting. The poetic sentimentality of Hodges's titles temper the obsessive extravagance of the objects he transforms.

One is never quite certain with Jennifer Pastor's work whether her love of the materiality of things is sincere or ironic. Although she explores a classic theme of traditional art -the Four Seasons - her use of extravagantly kitschy materials on a scale bordering on gigantism inject the work with a humorous, transformative quality. It is not so much that the works are ironic, but that their poetry questions the nature of irony and the absurd. Even the title of her first mature work, *Bridal Cave*, reveals the doubled-edged nature of her best work. Pastor sets up a tension between sheer beauty and a sickeningly sweet absurdly rich, and nauseatingly ripe materiality. It is not surprising that as a student she embraced baroque and rococo forms yet sustained a reverence toward postminimalist process art à la Eva Hesse. Pastor traverses the boundaries between the baroque and kitsch, between classical good taste and the good taste of classicism and their displacement from contemporary life. Pastor tends to

beat one with nostalgia in sculptures such as Untitled (also known as Christmas Flood), taking the fond remembrance of a flocked Christmas tree and embellishing it with ornaments of an absurdly heroic scale then resting this on top of an impossibly exquisite splash of water fashioned out of plastic. This artist's mind seems to have been permanently impressed by the possibilities of Hollywood's special effects. Untitled (Christmas Flood) convincingly knits together the kitschy absurdity of Jeff Koons with the expressive materiality of Hesse. Pastor makes truly complex, monumental sculptures that honor the traditions of baroque statuary as well as contemporary art and popular culture. As earnest as Pastor appears in her reverence for the source materials which inspire her art, one can't help but see a twinkle in her eye as she speaks of her inspirations. In an expression of extravagant humor, she represents the fall season through a fusion of a burlesque dancer and a cornstalk; her description of Fall as a "corn babe" speaks volumes about her Mobius-strip approach to the sacred and the profane.

Elizabeth Peyton, the only painter in this exhibition, dares to bring nostalgia, fashion illustration and painterliness to her beloved subjects -friends, contemporary musicians, and sweetly poetic remembrances of things past. She is best known for her aching delicate portraits of early-nineties antihero Kurt Cobain, the ultimate symbol of misspent and misunderstood youth. Like the artist herself, these portraits are both sly and slight in their heartfelt and questioning illuminations.

In junior high school, boys make heavy metal drawings of death and destruction an aesthetic approach the culmination of which can be seen in the mideighties work of Richard Prince and Mike Kelley. Parenthetically, girls would do drawings of lanky, Gothically attenuated figures that represent a desire to resemble popular fashion models. Peyton has taken illustration back from the never-never-land of advertising and popular media and adapted it to a vision of life in the late twentieth century, as Daumier did in the nineteenth century. In visiting Peyton's studio, one is reminded of the earnest sincerity she brings to her exploration of the connections between her own lost generation and that of John Lennon and Ludwig of Bavaria, all of whom had difficulties dealing with the complexities of their own time. Her longing for Cobain is countered by her remembrance of John Lennon, and as one observes her working simultaneously on a variety of projects, the most beloved of the Beatles songs play and Lennon's wispy voice fills the cluttered studio. Like the fin-desiecle paintings of the symbolist painters, Peyton's tonal compositions in richly luminous colors reveal her inner condition and her empathic connectedness with her subjects. These are not just portraits of admired friends but mirrors of the artist's emotive states.

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