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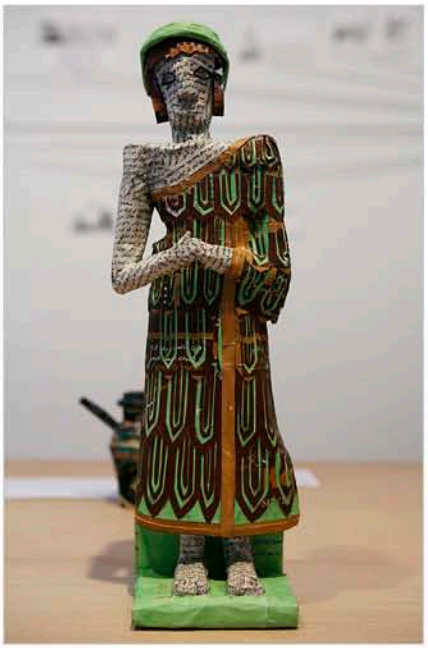
Using Old Materials to Put a New Face on a Museum

By ROBERTA SMITH, September 26, 2008



A construction by Michael Rakowitz using fast-food. packaging.

Bring on the T-shirts that read, "I survived the opening shows at the new Museum of Arts and Design."

Such garments should be available to people who make it through the four jam-packed floors of art and whatnot in the museum's new jewel-box-like home without losing an eye or their sanity. The shows resemble an art seminar-cum-food-fight — an amazing cacophony that is by turns dismaying, enervating, infuriating and invigorating. I recommend a visit.

Round 1: the slings and arrows of "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary," with masses of plastic utensils and combs, old LPs, dangling eyeglasses, syringes, ladies' pumps, pieces of crockery and spools of thread. These are just some of the things marshaled into works of art or design, most of them derivative and gimmicky, representing around 50 individuals or artist teams. Together the works broadcast loud and clear the museum's ambition to upgrade its profile and segue from its previous concentration on craft to a hipper, more wide-ranging program. The first sign was the 2002 change of name from the American Craft Museum to the more amorphous, cosmopolitan Museum of Arts and Design. You might wonder if every museum on earth has to be involved with contemporary art.

Round 2 unfolds on the remaining two floors of galleries among congested offerings of works from the permanent collection and promised gifts. That's nearly 300 objects in clay, metal, wood, fiber, glass and enamel, or some combination thereof, and another 450 pieces of jewelry. Here the trick is to remain upright during the wild swings from good to bad to ugly, between modernist and retro, functional and frivolous, understated and maniacally flamboyant. Clearly it will take more than a new name to turn this boat around.

The opening displays, it must be granted, reflect an institution that is wild with delight at having for the first time a real museum building of its very own: a small yet free-standing structure once occupied by the New York Cultural Center on little more than an XXL traffic island at Columbus Circle. (Its zeal is reflected in its overuse of its acronym, MAD.)

The building's redesign maximizes gallery space, and the museum's designers and curators have worked mightily to use every square inch. One of my favorite moments is the array of delicate glass goblets on narrow shelves sandwiched into the windows in one stairwell.

"Second Lives" confirms how thoroughly blurred the lines dividing art, craft and design have become over the past few decades. Unfortunately, its lens is a strategy that has reached epidemic proportions in the larger art world: the use of many small recognizable things to make one big recognizable thing. The idea germinated in Meret Oppenheim's beloved and far too influential fur-lined teacup, and has trickled down through generations of found-object assemblages and sculptures by artists like Arman, Tony Cragg, Donald Lipski and Tom Sachs.

Mr. Lipski is here, represented by "Spilt Milk," a large wheel-like wall piece made of bottles half-filled with a viscous white liquid. It is almost completely blocked from view by Jill Townsley's pyramid (white plastic spoons and rubber bands) and Long-Bin Chen's sculpture of an enormous face (carved books).

The basic experience with these works is: You see the thing, then you see the things it is made of. Something in the way of a punch line follows. Doh-Ho Suh's "Metal Jacket" is made from United States Army dog tags, but its kimonolike design is clearly Asian. And this is one of the show's better efforts. Considerably less convincing are Terese Agnew's large photo-based image of a textile worker made entirely of clothing labels; Susie MacMurray's white wedding gown made of rubber gloves; Donna Marcus's spheres made of dull aluminum strainers; Subodh Gupta's half-sphere (a wall piece) made of shiny stainless-steel pots. The list is long.

Sometimes the recycled materials register only in the wall label. It is completely beside the point that Carlo Marcucci's geometric wall sculpture is made from udon noodles and squid ink spaghetti; it is mainly made of Sol LeWitt and Tony Smith.

There is a simplistic political thrust to a lot of this work, but environmental sensitivity is mostly nil. Some questions for the artists here are: Thought about your carbon footprint lately? Are more iterations of this tired Surrealist idea needed? Are you really giving the objects you're using a second life, or just enabling them to last longer and take up more space? Such questions apply especially to Pablo Reinoso's pointless spiral of Thonet chairs, and also to Johnny Swing's much more amusing chaise longue of welded quarters.

Not surprisingly, efforts with a modicum of modesty or actual usefulness impress. These include an austere patchwork cupboard made of scrap wood by Piet Hein Eek, a Dutch furniture designer, and large hanging lamps fashioned from wire, light bulbs and old magazines by Nnenna Okore, a Nigerian artist living in Chicago. I also like the look of Jim Rose's cabinet, but the material — found painted or rusted steel — gives it a coldness, a heaviness and possibly a noisiness. And sometimes genuine wit and structural ingenuity add up to something more, as with Courtney Smith's slicing and hinging of an old dressing table and bench so they fold into their matching armoire.

In other instances, slight disposable materials yield thought-provoking beauty. El Anatsui's shimmering textile made of aluminum liquor-bottle caps and copper wire is the most prominent example. On a smaller scale, Yuken Teruya's delicate trees, cut from designer shopping bags, which become attached vitrines, evoke the needless products shrinking our forests. Michael Rakowitz's transformations of Middle Eastern fast-food packaging into close, slightly comical copies of the ancient artifacts now missing from Iraq's national museum seduce the eye while offering hard and hard-to-take information about the costs of war, especially the unending kind.

The challenges facing the museum become clearer on the two floors that house "Permanently MAD: Revealing the Collection" and some 60 promised gifts. Here good and bad are slightly better matched, and the continuing struggle for a curatorial vision is apparent. I'm against museum deaccessioning, but around a third of the promised gifts on view should be tactfully declined.

The works already in the collection extend from the early 20th century, when craft — with its emphasis on honest materials, self-evident construction processes and forms that follow something (function or originality) — was often a branch of Modernism. Figures like Bernard Leach, Anni Albers, George Ohr, Lucie Rie, Lenore Tawney and Wharton Esherick render distinctions among art, craft and design moot simply on the strength of their work. Others, beginning with Ed Rossbach and Peter Voulkos and including Ron Nagle, Michael Lucero, Eva Hild and a few others, are simply sculptors working in materials (fiber, clay) that the art world has only recently started to take seriously.

After 1970 the museum's acquisitions seem mostly rudderless, mindlessly following the descent of the traditional craft (for want of a better word) mediums into a hedonistic I-wanna-be-art free-for-all. Lack of utility and rarefied exquisiteness are seen as the shortest paths to being art. Astounding feats of technical skill result, often accompanied by a weakness for all things trompe l'oeil.

This is not so much art or craft as acrobatics. The works are also peculiarly hostile and festooned with jokes — whether overt, like Marilyn Levine's leather jacket made of carved wood, or covert, like Steve Sinner's vase of painted, lathe-turned maple that looks more like blown glass or ceramics.

The list of artists who aren't here but should be starts with Ken Price and includes Kathy Butterly. Meanwhile, some of the more ludicrous acquisitions are among the most recent, which is not cause for optimism.

Still, hope persists. The Museum of Arts and Design has worked long and hard to secure a new home. For that it is to be commended. Now it has its first chance to really see and know itself and define its identity. It is great that the southern rim of Columbus Circle has come to life again as some kind of bastion for visual culture. Just what kind remains to be seen.

Second Lives" continues through Feb. 15 at the Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle; (212) 299-7777, madmuseum.org.