


Subjective Objects

Totems of conflict, community, and identity in three group shows and a solo one

MARK JENKINS

NOV 28, 2024





*Misha Ilin, “(epigraph instruction or how to view unshielded radioactive specimen in the gallery)”
(Hamiltonian Artworks)*

MARCEL DUCHAMP'S READYMADES CHALLENGED THE ART OBJECT, but their invention certainly didn't stop artists from making things. While many people still fashion artworks that are meant to be beautiful, there has been a partial shift toward the creation of totems: things whose significance has less to do with what they look like than what they represent. Often, the raw materials signify the artist's individual or group identity. In a quartet of local shows, such ingredients include untranslated text, colorful glass goblets, a child's baby teeth, and a small amount of uranium ore.

That last component inspired the warning label at the entrance to "Pale Grass Blue," Misha Ilin's show at Hamiltonian Artworks. The radioactive substance is inside a ceramic pig in a mixed-media assemblage whose soundtrack is the jittery cadence of a Geiger counter. A Russian-born New Yorker who studied at art schools in Moscow and then Baltimore, Ilin likens radiation to traumatic happenings that mutate human perceptions.

Much of the artist's work has an abandoned-factory vibe, and is fabricated largely of such construction materials as drywall, spray paint, and joint compound. The surfaces appear rough or damaged, suggesting remnants from an abandoned industrial site or archaeological artifacts of a modern lost civilization. In one assemblage, a smartphone partly buried in an artificial sand dune plays a video about the world's most radioactive man. In another, the personal stories of Ukraine War victims are inscribed on long, thin hanging banners. Yet many pieces include butterflies, usually symbols of hope.

The artist's statement refers to "hyperobjects" -- substances or phenomena that pervade societies -- rather than to specific places or events. But with the beeping of that Geiger counter audible throughout the gallery, it's hard not to think of Chernobyl. For Ilin, radiation seems not to be merely a metaphor.



Installation view of "Around the Table: Shared Experiences, Open Conversations, Coming Together" (Georgetown University)

THE MOST CELEBRATED GET-TOGETHER IN FEMINIST ART, Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" is the apparent departure point for "Around the Table: Shared Experiences, Open Conversations, Coming Together," a nine-artist show at Georgetown University's Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery. Suzanne Lacy's "The International Dinner Party" documents the events held -- globally, but mostly in the U.S. and Europe -- to mark the 1979 opening of Chicago's monumental installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Beginning with this inspiration, curator Vesela Sretenovic´ has assembled work on the sometimes overlapping themes of food and hospitality. (Two of the foodiest contributions are event-oriented pieces, not on display in the gallery, by Michael Rakowitz and Philippa

Pham Hughes.) Jo Smail's collages incorporate recipes she brought to Baltimore from her native South Africa, while Monsieur Zohore's likenesses of controversial figures are hung like piñatas in the lobby outside the gallery.

Two of the entries are stage sets of a sort, open to the viewer's imagination. Adam Silverman stacks 56 ceramic bowls next to a photo-mural of clay from a corresponding number of U.S. states and territories (including D.C.). Valeska Soares covers a mirror-topped table with ornate glassware, some of which contain a few last drops of drinks, evidence of a banquet whose guests must have departed.

More specific are offerings by Helen Zughuib and Jennifer Wen Ma. The former collages news clippings about current wars onto seven glass plates set at a table; an eighth plate, blank, is placed before the only chair, inviting a visitor to join the conversation. Wen Ma's elegant chandelier, made of dozens of clear or silvery glass bulbs hung in a rough circle, encloses two things: a grove of leaf-like black-paper forms and some recordings, activated by a visitor's presence, of first-person reminiscences about "belonging." There's no literal table in this piece, but there is a sense of welcome.

THOUGHTS OF KINSHIP AND COMMUNITY also emanate from speakers placed above the gallery-goer in "We Live in the Sky: Home, Displacement, Identity," at the University of Maryland's Stamp Gallery. The featured artists are Tori Ellison, who teaches at the university, and Mami Takahashi, a Tokyo-born Chicagoan. But many others, some of them Maryland students, were enlisted to contribute to the collaborative works.

The show's title comes from remarks about the meaning of "home" by Maryland students and College Park residents, and some of the comments in the audio collage were solicited from members of immigrant communities in Austin, Texas. Much of the work is text-based and in dozens of languages. In a performance video, Takahashi writes in Japanese on clear film in front of her, gradually concealing herself with words few D.C.-area observers will find legible. In another comment on language barriers, Takahashi includes online-software-translations of haiku she wrote decades ago as a teenager.

There are some stand-alone objects, and they are, intentionally, not pretty. Takahashi's

paintings were made with silver leaf blackened by oxidation. Ellison represents the fragility of home with a small bronze sculpture of a simple house starkly divided by a geometric plane, and addresses women's vulnerability with a drawing of a burned dress executed partly with ash. The show's emblem is the swift, which can fly 30,000 miles without landing, but the artists acknowledge that not all creatures are that indomitable.



Betsy Packard, “.1145 Your Baby Teeth” (courtesy of the artist)

ORDINARY THINGS ARE TRANSFORMED, but only partly, in Betsy Packard's sculptural found-object collages. The works in the Maryland artist's Tephra ICA at Signature show,

"Ways of Thinking About Your Life," were made over 46 years, from 1978 to today, and some are clearly autobiographical. But others simply express the pleasure of reimagining and remaking everyday stuff.

Among the most personal assemblages are baby teeth that replace the face of a watch and dozens of small tan tip envelopes filled with hair, relics from Packard's long-ago hairdresser gig. Birthday candles are melted together in "33rd Year," mounted on a wax-streaked wooden panel.

Usually the materials retain much of their former appearance, but the artist can fool the eye when she feels like it: what appears to be a partly moldy loaf of sliced bread is actually a shaped block of congealed paper napkins. Less transfigured but just as witty is "Bouquet," in which the blooms are replaced by pump-dispenser tops whose plastic stalks are encased at the bottom in concrete. This mix of consumer and industrial substances exemplifies Packard's indifference to conventional notions of attractiveness. But, as Duchamp demonstrated, sometimes the idea is more beautiful than the thing that embodies it.

Misha Ilin: Pale Grass Blue

Through Dec. 7 at Hamiltonian Artists, 1353 U St. NW. hamiltonianartists.org. (202) 332-1116.

Around the Table: Shared Experiences, Open Conversations, Coming Together

Through Dec. 8 at Maria & Alberto de la Cruz Gallery, Georgetown University, 3535 Prospect St. NW. delacruzgallery.org. 202-687-8039.

We Live in the Sky: Home, Displacement, Identity

Through Dec. 7 at Stamp Gallery, Adele H. Stamp Student Union, University of Maryland, College Park. stamp.umd.edu/centers/stamp_gallery.

Betsy Packard: Ways of Thinking About Your Life

Through Feb. 9 at Tephra ICA at Signature, 11850 Freedom Dr., Reston.
tephraica.org/exhibitions/betsy-packard#tab:thumbnails 703-471-9242.

© 2024 Mark Jenkins
Substack is the home for great culture