

Aesthetic Withdrawal in the Quest for Ideas

Art objects are in crisis. Conceptualists and theorists say that there are too many of them and that we don't need them any more. Also, people buy and sell them like commodities, which devalues them as vehicles of thought and feeling.

ART REVIEW

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If you are one of those who still believe in the object, you may be annoyed by SculptureCenter's confusing and misleadingly titled current exhibition. Organized by Mary Ceruti, the center's executive director, the eight-artist show "The Space of the Work and the Place of the Object" is meant, according to a news release, to address "the status of the art object within the context of its production."

But there is almost nothing in the exhibition that you would call an art object in the traditional sense of the term — something made by an artist, more or less skillfully, that is uncommonly interesting to look at because of its formal or representational properties. The exhibition is a disconnected assortment of primarily conceptual works, none of which say anything very illuminating about the status of the object or its context of pro-

"The Space of the Work and the Place of the Object" runs through March 22 at SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 361-1750, sculpture-center.org.

duction.

Consider an arrangement of partly broken glass boxes and the cardboard FedEx cartons in which the glass boxes evidently were sent through the mail. This piece by Walead Beshty is briefly amusing, but unless you read philosophical and political ideas into it, how different is it, really, from David Letterman throwing a watermelon off the roof? At least with Mr. Letterman you get to see the object bursting.

The most interesting piece is an installation by Michael Rakowitz documenting a project in which he opened a storefront in Brooklyn to sell food products from Iraq. It is almost impossible to find anything for sale in the United States labeled "Made in Iraq," Mr. Rakowitz said, because customs agencies here and abroad make it so difficult. So Iraqi merchants ship their goods to countries like Syria and Lebanon and have them labeled as made in those other places.

Mr. Rakowitz decided to try to import a ton of Iraqi dates in boxes labeled "Product of Iraq" to sell in his store. After many complications, he succeeded, much to the delight of his Iraqi customers. It is an excellent and affecting lesson in geopolitics.

Less edifying is Gabriel Kuri's "That Runs Through," a presentation of objects on a sheet of white backdrop paper, including a bag of charcoal, a stone on a stack of Financial Times, a bag of kitty litter and a wastebasket with a mop head



JASON MANDELLA/SCULPTURECENTER

Balloons, empty frames and black crates: foreground, "Bicycle Grinder," an installation by Blake Rayne and Gareth James at SculptureCenter.

in it. A poor man's Robert Gober?

Also remarkably derivative are signs by Carey Young announcing various self-reflexive disclaimers, like "The artist does not guarantee that this piece can be sold as a work of art" and "The artist does not represent this to be a work of art." Ms. Young should know about Robert Morris's 1963 "Statement of Aesthet-

ic Withdrawal."

Another sort of aesthetic withdrawal is an installation by Blake Rayne and Gareth James consisting of big black wooden crates, a set of empty painting frames and a sheet of plastic and some balloons spray-painted green and gold — the color of money.

Perhaps the most entertaining work

The Space of the Work and the Place of the Object *SculptureCenter*

— at least during the exhibition's first two weeks, when it was performed by live actors — is a short play by Melanie Gilligan. An art critic tells of a dream she had about wildly multiplying objects, and an artist in his studio gets all riled up about the obsolescence of the traditional art object. The piece is now being presented as a video.

A less exciting performance has been orchestrated by Karin Schneider. She built a second reception and ticket-selling booth of wood-framed transparent plastic and has the gallery's receptionist shuttle between it and the permanent booth, which serves as a studio where he makes paintings when not attending to visitors. Institutional critique feebly lives on.

One work that does resemble a fine-art object is a squiggly, multi-lobed bronze sculpture by Simon Starling (winner of the 2005 Turner Prize). A wall label mystifyingly explains that it represents "a single silver particle from a vintage gelatin silver photographic print of 'Reclining Figure No. 4, 1955' by Henry Moore" enlarged 300,000 times. So it seems that here, too, the idea is the real object.