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The Happiness of Objects
SculptureCenter

Proof That Things Are People Too (Well, Almost)



An installation view, with a large wall piece by Philippe Decrauzat and a folding screen by Tom Burr.

What do objects want?

The question, immediately recalling Freud's about women, also paraphrases the title of W. J. T. Mitchell's book "What Do Pictures Want? The

**ART
REVIEW**
**MARTHA
SCHWENEDENER**
Lives and Loves of Images" (University of Chicago Press, 2005), the inspiration for an exhibition at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens.

Mr. Mitchell, a professor at the University of Chicago and editor of the journal *Critical Inquiry*, observes that "modern, rational, secular" people don't generally treat pictures like persons, yet "we always seem to be willing to make exceptions for special cases." (Most of us, for instance, would be reluctant to poke out the eyes on a photograph of our mother.) But pictures have desires, too, he argues, and a primary one is the desire to capture our attention — to "transfix the beholder" and gain some measure of mastery or power over us.

"The Happiness of Objects," organized by Sarina Basta, the SculptureCenter curator, takes Mr. Mitch-

ell's ideas and tweaks them to fit an exhibition of work by nearly two dozen artists and artist collectives. Visitors receive a handout titled "The Object's Bill of Rights," which lays out a series of demands like "The Object has the right to be claimed or forgotten, lost or found," and "The Object has the right to many lovers."

Ms. Basta moves beyond the relationship between images and the viewer to consider "what objects want from other objects," as well as how context, display, space, light and life expectancy, among other things, shape a work's reception.

Much of the art here fits nicely within that framework. Before entering the building you encounter a painting by Jutta Koether mounted on the exterior wall: an abstract black canvas with amorphous pools of dried liquid glass. Another painting by Ms. Koether — also black, but embedded with thumbtacks like a studded leather belt or jacket — is mounted in the same location on the interior wall, a back-to-back arrangement that draws attention to how important placement is when considering images.



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The most captivating and imposing work in the show is "Flatland," a four-story wooden frame structure painted black and covered with transparent vinyl that allows you to see inside, where six artists — Ward Shelley, Pelle Brage, Eva la Cour, Douglas Paulson, Maria Petschnig and Alex Schweder — have been living for the last two and a half weeks. (The artists will exit this Sunday; their experience is being recorded on a Web site, sculpture-center.org.)

Outfitted in colorful coveralls and spread out among the four stories, which are connected by ladders, the artists create a living tableau in which ordinary activities — eating, talking on the phone, working on a laptop or sleeping — become a kind of performance art. Two were doing yoga when I visited.

"Flatland" is reminiscent of a project in which the Austrian collective Gelitin holed up in a structure inside a Chelsea gallery in 2005. (Although visitors couldn't see Gelitin, everything except the enclosed bathroom is on display here.) It also feels acutely connected to Mr. Mitchell's concerns regarding the "lives and loves" of objects.

Tom Burr's "Black Folding Screen (violet)" performs a different operation, collapsing the idioms of Japanese screens and Minimalist sculpture into one object. Mr. Burr's work has often dealt with gay sexuality and public space and the violet (nearly lavender) mirrored plexiglass on one side of the screen adds a social spin largely absent from Minimalist sculpture. Reflected in the mirror is Sylvie Fleury's "Road Test," a scattering of cosmetics run over by an "American-made" car.

Haim Steinbach's shelf with kitschy collectibles, including a wicker basket with a needlepoint swatch that reads "this stuff belongs to me," also responds to Minimalism. It mimics Donald Judd's wall-mounted works, while exploring the nature of art objects as commodities.

At opposite sides of the gallery two spherical sculptures by John Miller hang from the ceiling, one covered with excremental-brown paint and tiny plastic figures, the other with daisies — creating a conversation

across the room.

Craig Kalpakjian's gray-scale inkjet prints of shapes and spaces designed on a computer question the relationship between "real" and virtual objects and environments.

Lan Tuazon's wall of photographs depicting people turned away from the camera comes with a note informing us that a portrait with the subject facing the camera has been placed in each participant's home.

Olivier Mosset's ice sculpture in the courtyard has already melted, offering an example of disappearing artwork. Bodies and objects are fused in a vitrine filled with vintage Playboy magazine advertisements, in which nude women commune with consumer products. Architectural objects include the Center for Urban Pedagogy's proposals for "Jamaica's Future" (that's Jamaica, Queens), among them a memorial for Jam Master Jay, the D.J. for Run-D.M.C. who was murdered in 2002.

"The Happiness of Objects" doesn't make it easy on the viewer. Mr. Mitchell's book is, after all, an academic tome (though quite readable) that delves into complex discussions of everything from pictures, objects and materials to their relationship with totemism, fetishism and idolatry. His theoretical touchstones (Freud, Lacan, Benjamin, Bourdieu) can be detected in many of the works here, and his references to Michael Fried's famous 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" are reflected in the show's numerous riffs on, and responses to, Minimalism.

But you can also take the easy route and follow one of Mr. Mitchell's early conclusions: Some objects want nothing — they are autonomous, self-sufficient, beyond desire. In other words, they are perfectly happy without us.

"The Happiness of Objects" runs through July 29 at the SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 361-1750.