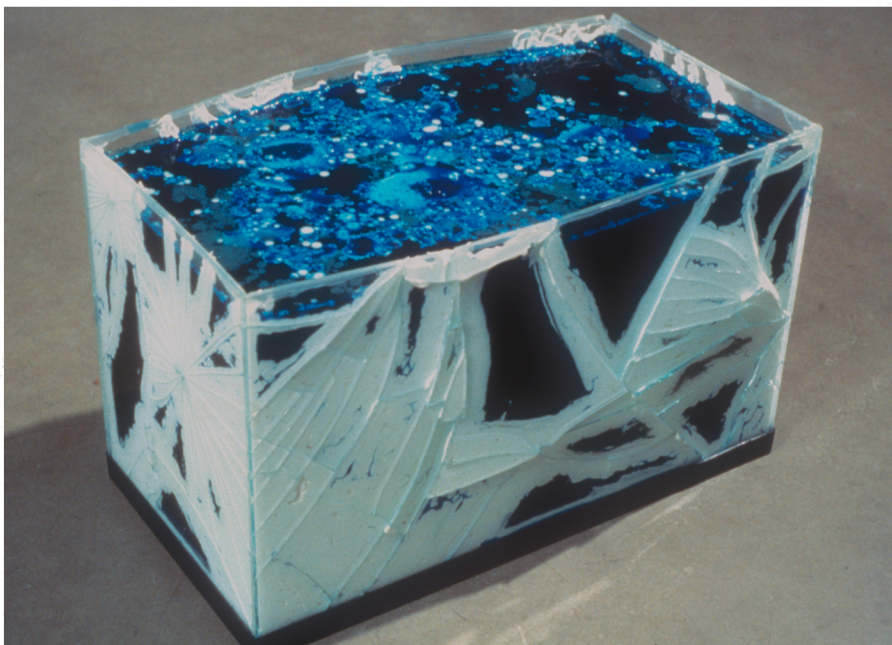


THE ABJECT AMERICA

Volume 1 No. 4

pp. 192-195

USES OF WASTE Curtis Mitchell



Curtis Mitchell, *Repaired Water and Aquarium*, 1992

Under capitalism, we never leave the environs of the new. Plato would be proud. The object on display is our ideal. The ideal in our culture is not the apotheosis of the real, but its negative. In sex, religion, and politics, in the physical, mental, or emotional—in all aspects of our existence—the ideal exists as the end point in a process of reductive abstraction. In this reduction lies repression: repression of the nonrational, the instinctual, the animalistic, the abject, the real, the human. The belief in the reality of this ideal is analogous to a soap commercial: it's not that the detergent can clean up the dirt, it is that the detergent can make the dirt never to have existed, even though it is the dirt which engendered the detergent.

As the past is absent in this rendition, so is the future. It all exists outside of time. But we don't, and commodities are us. At the point of its display, at the point of its availability, the commodity is pure. Its existence begins at the cash register. History consists of usage, time is measured by it. The duration of its ownership by us is its journey into the real, into history, and through time. We are its future.

Capitalism bludgeons us with insecurity. It does not buoy us with tradition, custom or faith, but continuously reiterates its freedom from such pretensions. In so doing, it constantly reminds us of our proximity to nature (wildness). Such a reminder does not fortify. We live in the insecurity of the continued ephemerality of culture. Salvation from the wilderness now only comes in the form of the new, for in the new we have an iconography devoid of wilderness, with the patina of pragmatism, and the comfort of consensus and conformity. In other words, it provides the minimum of meaning possible in order for a culture to distinguish itself.

It seems so simple: all capitalism asks for is conformity under the guise of salience. With conformity, there is stability. With salience, there is the look of progress. Salience is all capitalism can afford in order to retain its stability. The image of our civilization is fragile and constantly prone to dissolution. Real difference, rather than salience, would threaten stability. It would question those codes that we are taught will deliver us from the wild, and which are brittle enough to need coddling. It would mean confronting the wild, as real and viable, rather than as the negation of good. But confrontation requires strength, whereas the operative term in capitalism is fragility. It is this conditioned perspective that makes consensus politics work: everyone is insecure, so everyone will police their culture. So it asks for effort, the effort to succeed, to be sociable, to attain and keep an image that conforms and contributes to a national standard.

History is a problem here. Unrevised memory in a capitalist society would subvert the sense of change, of progress, of salvation in the image of the new. And usage is not an image. Usage is the erosion of an image. When we lose our image, we fall out of society, we disappear. When our image erodes, we are seen as nonconformist, outcast, heathen, an ignoble contribution, and consequently a threat to identities everywhere. Or we are seen as old. Or used. We identify these adjectives as what must be perpetually avoided in order to remain in society, and in order to remain in good standing with an image of ourselves. These words describe the magma from which taboos coalesce. We have an ingrained pervasive sense of guilt and self-doubt that we are never quite achieving a separation from this magma.

We live in the insecurity of capitalism's iconic pantheon: the new constantly transforming into the primitive, the savage, the abject. The new does not last long. Since the separation from wildness is so nebulous, repulsion becomes the signal emotion keeping us civilized. Repulsion creates the separation needed for a definitive self-image. Repulsion is our companion and guide through the vicissitudes and vagaries of the chaotic abyss. We are