GALLERY VIEW

GALLERY VIEW; Examining Culture Through Its Castoffs

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ART TENDENCIES ARE BORN AND art tendencies die, but rarely do they seem to attain both states within the span of a single exhibition. This is the primary distinction of "Poverty Pop: The Esthetics of Necessity," a timely yet problematic show at Exit Art/The First World in SoHo. Its focus is the widespread practice among youngish artists of parlaying found, often worn, materials and objects into art. Such efforts constitute the visual equivalent of grunge, but they also perpetuate one of the most resilient, if cliched, legacies of Modernism: assemblage, the common cockroach of 20th-century techniques.

At least since Kurt Schwitters and the Dadaists, artists have been inspired to work with things found on the street, in the attic or dustbin or at the dime store. It saves money on materials and at the same time makes a statement about materialism, both in art and in the world at large. In the downscale 90's, the art of recycled objects has been on the upswing, a symptom of the straitened economy, of growing environmental awareness and also of the decade's rejection of its predecessor. In the 80's, artists appropriated glamorous images and sparkling new merchandise, critiquing commodity culture while producing rather desirable commodities themselves. Now, commodity culture is more often examined through its castoffs.

This phenomenon merits scrutiny, and Exit Art gets credit for leaping into the breach when no larger institution has been willing. In addition to a topical idea, Jeannette Ingberman and Papo Colo, Exit Art's co-directors and the organizers of the show, have a catchy title and a generous attitude toward 16 young and sometimes talented artists represented in the exhibition.

At first glance, the 99 works in "Poverty Pop" (on view through Jan. 8) has a raucous, liberating visual energy. There is art made out of tin cans, rubber hose, pastel sponges, cardboard boxes, used tea bags. Things hang from walls and ceilings and fill corners; other things spring from the floor like weeds in a back lot, and sometimes a wry, street-weary beauty is achieved. But the show soon bogs down in repetitious, undeveloped work that is just not ready for alternative space time.

For example, Barry Hylton's "U-Haul (Trail Blazer)," a sculpture made of an old bureau drawer, a folding chair, canvas and lots of stained socks, is so similar to an adjacent work by John Drury, involving a flannel shirt sleeve and a rubber duck decoy, that they appear to be the work of the same person, an art student. Similarly, Kevin Pyle's well-composed wall pieces, most of which involve weathered window frames, could almost have been made in 30 years ago by an acolyte of Johns, Rauschenberg or Cornell.

Assemblage is everyone's first bright idea about art making. It is, for example, rather late in the century to drape a ball with pantyhose and call it "Medusa," as Nicole Carstens does, or to glue dead insects to a plate, as Joy Taylor does, or to do slightly suggestive things with stuffed long johns, as Mr. Hylton does repeatedly. Ron Baron's briefcase stuffed beyond the breaking point with shattered crockery makes one wonder how many more variations on the fur-lined teacup art can take.

One of the most tired of all Dada-Surrealist riffs is a female mannequin with a paper bag over its head, perpetrated by Mr. Drury. Much better is his whimsical parody of an abstract grid painting made of colorful sponges glued together with black rubber. (An even better version of this idea can be seen in a group show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo, another painting-like arrangement of hundreds of cakes of colored soap by Roxy Paine.)

There are a few bright spots, moments when the object is experienced as a whole somewhat before its component parts are recognized, and the assemblage approach looks less familiar. One is Ms. Carstens's "Head of Steam," a simmering cloud-shaped wall piece made of plastic six-pack holders. Mr. Baron brings an uncharacteristic sense of order and symmetry to assemblage in two large sculptures -- ironic and lavishly obsessive orchestrations of such male accessories as briefcases, bowling shirts and sports equipment.

In "Gridlock," Rachel Harrison cantilevers a small regiment of mop and broom handles, canes and a golf club from the wall using string; the result is a network of line and shadow and a sense of elegant menace. Ava Gerber also uses broom handles to good effect. Beth Haggart creates a big dome with cardboard boxes, tape and string, a kind of shantytown planetarium. Ken Butler's hybrid violins, cellos and guitars incorporate such things as skateboards, axes and guns with a refreshing terseness; their main distinction, however, is that they actually function as musical instruments.

Visitors to "Poverty Pop" may spend a lot of time considering ways to enliven and clarify its subject. One way would have been to have fewer rather than more works by the weaker artists. In addition, the larger context of work of this kind should have been more carefully acknowledged. In the show's brochure Mr. Colo cites only Duchamp, Beuys and Rauschenberg as precedent, ignoring a legion of more immediate influences like Mike Kelley, Tony Cragg, Donald Lipski, Rona Pondick, David Hammons and Jessica Stockholder (whose gerrymanderings of fabric, objects and paint indicate a subsidiary trendlet, Poverty Abstraction).

Other artists who use found objects in more formally beautiful and poetic ways include Terry Adkins, another musician-sculptor, whose elegantly evocative work was seen recently at the Ledisflam Gallery, and Jack Pierson, who rearranges the plastic letters of anonymous signs into highly personal messages.

The scope of the show might also have been widened -- in the direction of greater rawness -- with artists like Curtis Mitchell, John LeKay, Nancy Rubins and Nari Ward. These last two artists, both of whose work stood out in the Aperto section at this year's Venice Biennale, excel at creating desolate landscapes and environments that conjure up the American appetite for commodities.

As it happens, both can be seen elsewhere in Manhattan at the moment. Ms. Rubins has created a haunting moonscape of dirt-covered household appliances in a group show at the Kunsthall in the East Village. For the past month Mr. Ward has been exhibiting "Amazing Grace," an installation involving 300 used children's strollers and quantities of discarded fire hose in an abandoned firehouse at 307 West 141st Street. (It will be open on Fridays and Sundays from 1 to 5 P.M. through Dec. 19.)

The piece, accompanied by a recording of Mahalia Jackson singing the hymn that is its title, is both euphoric and elegiac, celebratory and grim. The dilapidated strollers, bound with the twisted hose, conjure up the uncontainable energy and redemptive powers of children and the joys but also the burdens of their parents, especially in a world of

increasing poverty and violence. And, as the strollers are massed into the shape of a ship's hull, they also symbolize any number of huddled masses "yearning to breathe free."

In the end, "Poverty Pop" sheds only a little light on a large and intriguing subject. It is better than nothing at all, but it still provokes more thought than it contains.

Photo: Ron Baron's briefcase stuffed with broken china, at Exit Art--How many variations on the fur-lined teacup can art take? (Ed Quinn for The New York Times)