

Trashformations

By Gary Brady-Herndon, Napa Valley Register
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Our consumer driven society places merit on items that are useful to us in our everyday lives, only as long as they serve our wants and needs. Once items deliver their potential value to us, i.e. candy wrappers, plastic sandwich bags, junk mail, empty soda cans -- they take on a patina of refuse, something dirty and vile. Our reaction -- to throw these items away and rid ourselves of their spent promises -- is learned as children and we carry it with us the rest of our lives. Indeed, ordinary objects are designed to become obsolete. Part indictment of our throwaway society and part celebration of the imaginative spirit of a collection of experimental artists, Copia's current main gallery exhibit, "Trashformations," shines a refreshing light on this ubiquitous condition of American society. Consider the revelation made in the press release for the show's opening that "Americans comprise only 5 percent of the earth's population, yet we produce 50 percent of its solid waste," and you begin to understand pervasive nature of the problem. The exhibit, however, is not about the negative aspects of trash, but its potential for art. Deborah Gangwer, Copia's associate curator of exhibitions, said the nearly 130 pieces on display from 112 contributors represents an amazing example of the mutability of art and its capacity to inspire regardless of the medium. There are works in the exhibit that inspire strong emotions. Many others will make you laugh out loud at the preposterous ways castoff articles are combined to create familiar objects. Others will simply make you appreciate the talent of these gifted craftspeople. Two good examples of the emotional aspects of the exhibit are found in Steven W. Byrne's, "I Ain't No Senator's Son," a replica of the United States flag. Made from a crippled picture frame, roofing shingles, steel letters, lead flashing and upholstery tacks, the piece is a statement about the diverse elements within our society, many of which do not share in the bounty of this great country. Slightly skewed, rough hewn, coarse and a little worse for wear; there remains an essence of the heroic and powerful forces that made this country great. Farther along the wall hangs Michelle Chisholm Leavitt's "Soldier's Calendar," a compact critique of the effects that war has on the individual and society. The image of a soldier of indeterminate nationality with accompanying text creates an eerie image that asks the viewer to contemplate the insanity of war. Intentionally difficult to decipher, the piece speaks to the larger issue: Can we ever know the damage done to the lives of young people who are asked to fight the wars of their elders. The fact that the piece is made of recycled materials never comes to mind. Many pieces have an aura of spiritualism. Steven Bradford's, "Relics and Offerings," is a compendium of found objects, and is bizarre yet oddly appealing. On the one hand, elements of the macabre are juxtaposed against a backdrop of traditional religious artifacts drawn from a variety of cultures. The flip side of the piece speaks to the harmony of the divergent elements that coursed through mankind's history. There is so much going on from the whimsical to the divine in Bradford's work that you'll want to

walk away and digest what you've seen before returning again to appreciate the work anew. On the same wavelength, but with a different focus, is Bob Rizzo's "Three Spirits." The three specters seem to have risen up from some ancient desert floor. Their unique bearing calls up images of wandering, nomadic, tribes of people. Or they could represent any one of a multitude of denizens emerging from the Black Rock desert after two weeks at the Burning Man festival. Both Bradford and Rizzo's pieces were created without altering the trash. Other artists either altered the materials to create something totally different like Sophia Ainslie's "Labyrinth of Commercial Prophets," a priceless use of junk mail, or Natasha Cohen's "Ostrich Syndrome." I have two favorite pieces. "Trashy Lingerie 1, 2 & 3" is Ingrid Goldbloom Bloch's tribute to a weaver's mind gone off the deep end. Consisting of a pair of panties, a bra and garter, any visions of sensuality or sexy thoughts are dashed immediately once the viewer realizes the fabric Bloch used is made of thin strips of Coke cans woven in an intricate mesh. Yet, despite the sheer bizarre nature of the subject matter, the attention to detail and artistry is extraordinary, making this one of the truly unique pieces in the entire show. When I saw the work of Boris Bally from across the room, I immediately thought of merchandise out of a chic American Indian jewelry store in Taos or Sante Fe -- large shiny silver pieces hung together in a massive display of ostentatious overkill that vacationing eastern retirees plunk down scads of cash for. Once I got close enough to scrutinize the piece, however, it was obvious that the "silver" was something altogether different than what I first imagined. I couldn't place where I had seen these items before. I had to read the artist's description, I'll let you read Bally's artist statement about the piece pulled from his Web site. "My contemporary necklace is made of 100 hand-gun triggers, cut and torn from the dismembered weapons reclaimed from the Pittsburgh city gun buy-back program, "Good for Guns," from 1999-2001. This urban 'Mojo' protects the wearer from the gun violence so prevalent in today's culture." If this piece doesn't speak to the truly idiosyncratic and imaginative use of recycled material, can anything? There is so much more. Some of the larger crowd-pleasing pieces speak for themselves -- and there are several. Those you'll have to go see for yourself. Taken in total, Trashformations is a truly a peerless, bizarre, playful, and ultimately beautiful exhibition. The show sets the bar for the 2006 regional art scene. Don't miss it.