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“Material Deposits” Explores the Necessity of Objects at ACAC

By Alana Wolf

In the provocatively-titled *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*, historian Steven Conn treats the evolution of our public institutions as “an episode in the history of ideas.” We instinctively understand that such a history is necessarily intertwined with the objects that museums house. The apparent supersession of the virtual in contemporary society, then, makes Conn’s titular question feel immediate and relevant. *Material Deposits*, now on view at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, illustrates various ways in which contemporary artists communicate by employing the concrete as a vehicle for the more nebulous domain of ideas. The works in the exhibit counter the logic of a world of disappearing brick and mortar by recovering the lush land of materiality.

Nature is prodded with the interceding hand of technology in the works by New York artist David Shaw. Lee (2009) recalls

the limits of human observation by capturing the fragmentary, fleeting moments recorded by the photographic eye via sculpture. In the work, a toppling tree stump balances precariously on its side in an homage to the late MIT professor Harold Edgerton, whose invention of the stroboscope made possible the now-iconic photographs in which milk drops and bullets seem fixed in midair. The lines that ordinarily indicate a tree’s age have been transformed by the sculptor’s hand into a strip-mined topographic map. A sloshing surge of water, dramatically pegged into Edgerton’s familiar corona, shoots forth from the wood as additional jets of liquid are propelled from points along the work’s lower axis. Hovering nearby, holographic laminate defines the ends of otherwise unremarkable logs suspended in rope in Shaw’s *Untitled Hang-Up* (2010).

Befitting a show which spotlights the material, nature is signaled in several more works. The organic and the man-made are poetically blurred in Leslie Shows’s two untitled works, both from 2011. Shimmeringly abstracted and elemental, they evoke imagery one might uncover in the revelations of a microscope or a lunar landscape. Shows manipulates a diverse library of materials into a complex stratigraphic amalgamation, creating surfaces alternately slick and

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Weston Teruya, *The gracious city at its neighbor’s edge*, 2011, spray paint and drawing media on paper sculpture. Image courtesy the artist.

granular. Plexiglas interrupts metal filings, which in turn abut crushed glass against a cool aircraft aluminum background. This seductive abstraction continues in Seana Reilly's *AsclepiusAtlas* (2011). Rivulets stream and puddle in a landslide before reducing themselves into mysterious monochrome fractals. A silhouetted white pedestal—absent the ancient god of the work's title—resists the riverine onslaught against a liquid graphite sky.

Meanwhile, the sensual delves into the corporeal in Elonda Billera's works. The Los Angeles-based artist wrestles with memory, consumption, and the beastly desires that reside beneath our civilized facades through that humble and human universal, food. In the video piece *breadandjam* (2008) slices of bread, slathered with jelly, are placed inside a kaleidoscopic mirrored box. But what begins as an orderly array soon devolves into a chaotic frenzy of material goo. As the food is piled higher, increasingly forceful gestures are required to keep the jammy bread towers from tumbling. Tidy uniformity succumbs to a furious struggle for control, and when the material can no longer be contained, it is squashed into itself, fulminating into an unrecognizable mess, resembling more an abject pile of entrails than a food product. The sticky site of violence is then hastily cleared, leaving only pink fragments to evince the previous ritual. Nearby, the memory of food is wittily offered as testimony and as memorial in Billera's *Plop Plup* (2011) and *After Will Have Been Before III* (2009).

One obverse response to material chaos is obsession. Using pop culture references, Moses Nornberg takes on the obsessive collector in *Two Turntables and a Microphone*. This piece, like many of Nornberg's others, uses the accoutrements of the avid listener. Album jackets, eclectically ranging from Jefferson Airplane to Anne Murray to Steve Martin to Gilbert and Sullivan, neatly occupy several linear feet. Sliced out of utility, the records mutely acknowledge the irony of trying to complete a collection of that most ephemeral of materials—sound.

Despite the fundamental uncertainty of the material world, humanity is fraught with the impulse to enforce order upon it. **Weston Teruya's** staggeringly skillful paper works affirm the vagaries of chaos even as the artist maintains strict control over his materials. His exacting renditions of suburban utopia—particularly unnerving in his paper sculptures which mimic everyday objects—betray an undercurrent of disaster which lies in virulent wait beneath real estate developers' crisp green lawns and golf carts.

Countering this material precision is the purposeful free play of Brion Nuda Rosch. Arranged in ACAC's smallest gallery, Rosch uses the entire space to pick apart how cultural moments are produced and disseminated. Henry Moore's sculptures are made vulnerable by selective obstruction in two-dimensional works; in three dimensions, Rosch is not above cracking an inside joke or two. The gallery is cluttered with objects that frequently make it difficult to discern where a pedestal ends and a sculpture begins, giving a sly charge at Brancusi. Still, these objects are unapologetic in their deliberate crudity in a way that Brancusi would find impossible to understand. And that aforementioned playfulness? Come into the gallery with a friend and walk around a bit; when your partner has placed themselves in just the right light and angle, you'll know it, because you won't be able to stop yourself from chuckling.

Steven Conn's refreshingly nuanced observations in *Objects* are a welcome departure from the distressingly clumsy analogies marring much of museum studies scholarship published over the past two decades. The pedagogical potential of the exhibition is an issue that every contemporary institution that trucks in display should take seriously; assuring it trickles down to the layman is not always a simple matter of show and tell. *Material Deposits* is deeply instructive for those willing to look. It successfully demonstrates a range of contemporary art practices, and it bears noting that featured is the work of four San Francisco-based Artadia recipients—Nornberg, Rosch, Shows, and Teruya—along with Atlanta's own Reilly (whose work can also be viewed concurrently at Whitespace through September 3rd). *Material Deposits* affords Atlantans the all-too-rare opportunity to see artistic practitioners from various points on the globe, encouraging viewers to connect those far-flung dots with what is happening in our own metropolis and

discover fresh proposals for challenging what too often seems like an ever-receding material world. It should be enough to convince even the casual observer that objects are, indeed, necessary.

Material Deposits, featuring works by Elonda Billera, Moses Nornberg, Seana Reilly, Brion Nuda Rosch, David Shaw, Leslie Shows, and Weston Teruya will remain up at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center through September 18, 2011.