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Reviews

Cris Bruch and Libby Wadsworth at Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Craft was once a dirty word. Either it refers to “Craft” with a capital C—that cul-de-sac off the art world’s main waters—or it speaks directly to the hand skill of the artist. In either sense, it suggested a certain provincial, conservative fustiness. Craft’s attractiveness has always been its mix of material, skill and physicality. However, in the past few years, the art world mainstream is full of practitioners of a certain kind of craftiness; a nod to the earnestness of church art sales, knitting circles and Saturday markets. This down-home craft can be seen in evidence in the work of artists Matthew Day Jackson and the disbanded collective Forcefield, for example. The current climate of the groovy collective that makes handiworks from thrift materials is in contrast to a certain high-minded, slicker craft from the 1990s. It is a kind of “conceptual craft” typified by Martin Puryear. Rife with biomorphic forms that allude to a larger conceptual framework, such work allows the artist to engage in the sensual business of making a thing well and making it guilt free. The hand-skill connection is manifest in the ascendancy of painters such as John Currin, Cecily Brown and Neo Rauch. Painters can now unapologetically create pictures that revel in the representational history of the medium.

The current show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery is a perfect example of this latter kind of “conceptual craft.” Cris Bruch makes Puryear-like forms out of wood, metal and paper and Libby Wadsworth creates small, tight paintings that act as visual poems and puns. Both artists are superb craftspeople. Bruch is a fine builder and Wadsworth is technically accomplished as a painter. Each artist’s strength is also his or her weakness.

One look at Bruch’s piece *Longest Shortest Distance*, a large wooden continuous double wave reveals his close attention to detail. The wood is weathered and rough, the pegs and



Cris Bruch, *Pilgrim*, 2004, paper, resin, ink, 36” x 50” x 36”, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

joinery visible. One of the most satisfying pieces in the show is *Pilgrim*, a large top-like shape made of layered paper, resin and ink. As one circles the piece, the layers of paper subtly reveal different colors. There is a real sensual joy in the sculpture. It is a thing that is made, that yields information to the viewer experiencing it in situ. There is nothing virtual about it. Bruch also creates many large-scale public sculptures and the work here in the gallery suffers because of scale. It is easy to imagine the work in the gallery occupying a larger site. And better editing is in order as some of the weaker pieces sap the energy out of the better ones. *Harbinger*, for instance, looks like a large black stalactite or giant rattail emerging from the ceiling. Likewise, the piece *Fox Ridge* sits flatly on the wall without any of the tactile interest of the rest of the work. With these out of the way, the other pieces could breathe and shine. *Cleave* is a mahogany wall-mounted sculpture. Shaker in style, it resembles a bottomless boat, a vagina or an abstracted iron maiden. Like *Pilgrim*, its pleasures exist in its physicality and brute dexterity.

Wadsworth’s pictures are concrete poems. Each painting is rendered in the umber darkness of Dutch still lifes. Images of precariously stacked household items such as teacups, dominoes and eggs dominate the show. Each painting has a set of words such

as a/trophy, do/wager or era/sing. The effect is meant to create a dissonance in meaning. In Dowager you have two meanings. “Do wager” suggests an invitation to gamble. A “dowager” is an elderly wealthy widow. The image is a teacup on dominoes. The teacup is an article associated with old women and genteel society. The dominoes are a street game sometimes played for money. When these pictures work, the pleasure of the unexpected invites the viewer back into the word and picture play. However, some of the pictures miss by being too clever or too timid. Wadsworth is clearly suggesting the drawn-curtain, dark-wood world of the drawing room. Amid the tea and paint is a series of embroidered pictures in oval frames. On an oval piece of lace are the embroidered words “sur,” “veil” and “lance.” The word clearly has overt political connotations given the current climate of government domestic eavesdropping. But the reference is too clipped. Too removed. Similarly three embroidered pieces—*a/trophy*, *a/breast* and *a/but*—play with the notion of poetry and women’s domestic craft but remain wan compared to the paintings. Wadsworth’s paints are admirably painted, wry constructions. At their best they tease out the silent gulf between word and image.

Bruch and Wadsworth share a certain conservative approach to their work. I don’t mean it in the political sense, but in the true sense. There is a respect for precedence, a slow sense of exploration. A quiet, thoughtful aesthetic permeates. Both artists however could use just a little bit of messiness, they could stand to be less methodical. In the tension between the well crafted and the chaotic a real poetry could emerge. This happens in the best works in both shows.

—Daniel Duford

Cris Bruch: Remains to be Seen and *Libby Wadsworth: Vestiges* closed in July at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

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