

# ART LIES

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## Material Culture

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(l to r) Margarita Cabrera,

*Bicicleta Negra (black)*, 2006; vinyl, foam, string, wire; 47 x 74 x 30 inches; *Bicicleta Morada (purple)*, 2006; vinyl, foam, string and wire; 47 x 74 x 30 inches



(l to r) Polly Lanning Sparrow, *Poulan (Redux)*, 2008; latex paint on birch plywood, wool; 54 x 24 x 24 inches; *Untitled (White Configuration)*, 2007; Kraft paper from lawn bag, acrylic, oil, birch plywood; 75 x 34 x 12 inches; *Untitled (Blue Configuration)*, 2008; latex paint on birch plywood; 60 x 66 x 36 inches; photos by Tom Jenkins

The raw materiality and directness of *Material Culture*, curated by Frances Colpitt, sits in stark contrast to sculptural traditions that wallow in grand ambitions of monumentality and permanence. From the marble of *Laocoön and His Sons* in Rome to the bronze of Rodin's *Balzac*—even the eighteen-and-a-half-ton machined-steel replica of a plastic man driving a toy tractor by Charles Ray—we often experience objects at a far remove from their making. As the recent exhibition *Unmonumental* at the New Museum in New York demonstrated, resistance to elaborate models of making is currently in full swing—part of a long history of collage, assemblage and the readymade that stretches across most of the twentieth century. In his essay for the New Museum's *Unmonumental* catalogue, Richard Flood makes the argument that the state of flux apparent in sculptural practices that reject the monument are a symptom of a political moment of instability and an expression of anxiety in a post-9/11 world. Though there are similarities between *Unmonumental* and *Material Culture*, I don't think that Colpitt would make such a leap into social or political explanations. Rather, I think she is foregrounding a particular kind of sculptural practice as opposed to painting or photography—media that get quite a bit of attention, either because of the art market or the historical mystique surrounding the two-dimensional image.

When materiality emerged as a defining characteristic of modernist studio practice, especially in terms of painting, Clement Greenberg repeatedly advocated for this kind of self-consciousness in painting practice. Sculptors like Jacques Lipchitz, David Smith and Peter Voulkos took these ideas into sculptural form to allow for more intuition and directness in the process of object-making. But it was Constantin Brancusi—and especially his friend and dealer, Marcel Duchamp—who gave special attention to the cultural histories of the materials that make objects.

Duchamp's ideological progeny used conceptualism to construct a sort of skepticism of material-based studio practice in favor of post-studio or post-media strategies that could address philosophical and political issues of culture. This false binary between a nexus of material, form and beauty vs. politics and conceptualism was, in many ways, the dominant modus operandi until relatively recently. Painting became the first medium to be explicitly reborn through the great pains of writers like Dave Hickey and to the great relief of art dealers, but sculpture has remained the redheaded stepchild waiting in the wings—until now. In this sense, the title of this exhibition—*Material Culture*—implodes the binary model sketched out above, allowing materiality to be looked at culturally and culture to be looked at through the material and physical experience.

The premise of this exhibition is object-making in its most basic sense. Most of the art is made from ready-made or commonplace materials and, as a result, has a directness that reveals an unmediated window into the history of its making. Each sculpture becomes a trace of a studio practice that references a semi-performative gesture, like what Hans Namuth's photos did for Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.



(l to r) Lily Hanson, *She Came a Long Way for Nothing*, 2007; fabric, foam, pins; 65 x 4 x 4 inches; *Spindrift Island*, 2005; fabric, foam, cardboard; 68 x 46 x 24 inches; *Phil's Form*, 2007; fabric, foam, wood, wire; 28 x 25 x 5 inches



(l to r) Brad Tucker, *Open Globe*, 2007; fabric, acrylic on wood, aluminum; 39 x 13 x 9 inches; Jonathan Durham, *God-shaped Vacuum*, 2006; PVC, protoplast, cinema seats, water pump, hymnal, shelves, timer, mineral oil, single channel DVD, television, player, wall mount; dimensions variable; photos by Tom Jenkins

This idea was taken even further by Brad Tucker's performance at the opening reception. Inspired by the conceptual artist Allen Ruppersberg, he explicitly constructed a performance that referenced but did not rely upon his sculptural practice. It combined a lo-fi, garage band aesthetic that was earnest, funny and complex. Using video monitors and video projection, he performed as a band with multiple versions of himself playing various instruments and singing backup. One song used phrases from Ruppersberg's 1985 exhibition *The Secret of Life and Death* like "The means of expression do not matter as much as the idea is released" and "The artist is a mysterious entertainer." The set up of the performance was kind of like a kinetic sculpture in itself, but the videos featured Tucker's more autonomous sculptures as well. Colorful, organic and mod, these objects are both playful and beautiful with occasional references like a bicycle wheel in homage to Duchamp.

Aside from the connotative connection between Tucker's Duchampian wheel and Margarita Cabrera's soft-sculpture bicycles, the two share some conceptual connections as well. They are both self-conscious about the performative nature of object-making, but for Cabrera, the performance is about the politics of labor. Her work often references low-wage workers on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border. The fabric and her evident stitching are meant to evoke the fragility of their existence. While her sad, deflated bikes obviously took a huge amount of labor to construct, they are pretty much useless other than as a sign of their own construction.

Lily Hanson and Polly Lanning Sparrow emphasize the relationship between painting and sculpture, and both artists' work has a relationship to the wall. Hanson's colorful, abstract sewn-fabric pieces reference the body and touch, while Sparrow's plywood panels, leaning against the wall, come more out of Donald Judd's minimalist engagement with industry. But at the same time, Sparrow treats the minimalist strategy of material-as-found-object with more subjective moments of physical experience, like the counterpoint of a piece of crocheted wool whose soft edges drape over the angularity of birch as if Eva Hesse and Judd collaborated on the piece.

The tension between the industrial and the handmade is something that twentieth-century sculpture struggled with, from Duchamp's fountain to Judd's boxes. Katrina Moorhead's trompe l'oeil sculpture of fireworks, made during a residency in Iceland, is meant to evoke the irony of making something to mimic something already present, in this case, the Northern Lights. The mimetic relationship between the sculptural representation of fireworks and their referent in reality is analogous to the tension between the wonder evoked by glowing skies—one produced by nature, the other through artifice.

Joseph Havel's *Drinks are boiling. Iced drinks are boiling* is a knotted twist of words made of wire and white fabric that stretches across half the gallery. These words that wind their way through the space between the other works are from John Berryman's "Dream Song #46." Originally published in 1959, the *Dream Songs* were narrated by a character sometimes called Mr. Bones. Perhaps this poem incarnate reminds us of the fact that just as painting can sit up from the grave, so too can sculpture and the crafting of objects. At the same time, the poem whispers a warning. "People are blowing and beating each other without mercy....The worse anyone feels, the worse treated he is. Fools elect fools." This is the material of culture. Whether material of cultural or cultural material, the works in this exhibition remind us that objects will always have weight in more than one sense.

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