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The Many Shades of Now, Explored in 3 Dimensions

"Make It Now: New Sculpture in New York," the title of an exhibition of work by nearly 30 artists at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, Queens, comes enticingly close to echoing Ezra Pound's famous exhortation to "make it new." But the name, like the show itself, swerves at the last second, as if fearful of overreaching.

The exhibition plays it safe with a lot more now than new. But you have to start somewhere, and it has a reasonable quota of intriguing beginnings and of promising parts not yet made whole.

Advocating the new may sound like an old modernist saw, but I suspect that the urge for newness, difference - or whatever its current designation might be ("institutional critique," for example) - is one of the things that continue to get most artists out of bed in the morning. First make your work new for yourself. Then, size up the extent to which your effort already exists in the culture. Finally, get back to work. "A poem that communicates something that's already known to a reader is not really communicating anything," is how John Ashbery once put it.

These words are germane to the Sculpture Center show, where there is too much exploring of known terrain. Vincent Mazeau and Matthew Ronay revisit Surrealism. Sol Sax's six life-size figures, which hang upside down like bats in the stairwell, reiterate the angular, rough-hewn figurative sculpture style of artists as disparate as Stephan Balkenhol and Alison Saar.

The show is a condensed, more focused version of "Greater New York," P.S. 1's sprawling survey of local art. It was culled from some 200 studio visits by Mary Ceruti, the center's executive director; Anthony Huberman, its curator; and Franklin Sirmans, an independent critic and curator. Their selections give a partial account of the art form that, since the late 60's, has been the shape-shifting medium par excellence. Call it the sculptural diaspora.

In attendance are examples of installation art, video, design, ceramics and a touch of performance. Site-specificity is superficially reflected in Phoebe Washburn's wood-scrap tiered structure "Poor Man's Lobster," which uses gravel from the center's courtyard for a rainbow-

colored rock quarry, and Klara Hobza's "Morse Code Communication (An Improved Attempt)," which fills the skylight with clip-on lamps that suggest sun-thirsty aluminum blossoms. (They were used for a session of nighttime message-sending that, on video at least, has not improved nearly enough.)

For interactive art, there's Nancy Hwang's "Impromptu," in which the visitor can flop down on a bed, pick up a red phone and chat with the artist, who is casting her next video. (I said no thanks.)

As told here, the main tale of recent sculpture is the back and forth between the old-time modernist art of assemblage and the more rigorous, concept-driven postmodern practice of appropriation. Since the mid-1980's, when Neo-Geo pushed appropriation into three dimensions, these two forces have invigorated, competed with and thwarted each other. There's little here that doesn't fall somewhere between their increasingly blurred extremes, little that doesn't result from the hunting, gathering, purchasing, arranging and titling of familiar objects and materials.

The Scylla and Charybdis along this line are mindless materiality and overly mindful scrawniness - meticulous craft at the service of weak ideas and big thoughts that gloss over a lack of attention to physical materials. File under "mindless materiality" Jean Shin's tower-like spires of discarded amber-plastic pill bottles, coyly titled "Chemical Balance"; Andrea Cohen's bricolage of wood, Styrofoam and plastic, which resembles something by Sarah Sze only much larger; and Bryan Savitz's expertly made cut-cardboard sculptures, which drown ideas about history and architecture in cuteness, technique and eye-numbing consistency. Fritz Welch's gnarly room-size assemblage made from neighborhood junk might be the remnant of an early Happening, except for the way it seems to erupt from a ganglia-like wall drawing.

The show's freshest revision of conventional assemblage is found in Nicole Cherubini's work: enormous hand-built ceramic vases, in which found objects, subsumed within a larger whole, function as fetishes and accessories. Obsessively

pinched, lathered with glaze, punctured with multiple orifices, spangled with jewelry and edged in fur, they suggest unearthed burial urns, a bling-bling take on ormolu, prehistoric pueblos and elaborately pierced bodies. Meanwhile, Robert Melee pushes his self-referential version of assemblage a little too completely toward a more anonymous Neo-Geo harshness.

To the other extreme, Gareth James writes a brilliant paragraph-long title about the role of the screw in the rise and fall of civilizations, but attaches it to an obscure arrangement of new turntables, Canal Street plastic boxes and a screw-like coil of paper, all on a pedestal of bubble-wrap. It is another twist on the current Neo-Conceptualist formula of the high-tech, the low-tech and the grudgingly handmade. Printing a news photograph of masked kidnappers displaying their hostage on sheets of plastic, Seth Price achieves a similar imbalance of brainy and slight.

Although it doesn't show her at full strength, the exhibition rightly includes the work of Rachel Harrison, an artist who has spent more than a decade negotiating raw, accessible, thought-provoking alliances between assemblage and appropriation art, using an approach informed by the work of Cady Noland and Jessica Stockholder. Ms. Harrison's "Getting Ahead" consists of a tall jumble of wood doused in silver paint, glommed to an aluminum stepladder and topped by a plastic powdered wig. Mount Rushmore's portrait of George Washington has either been defaced or has turned its back on us.

Perhaps inspired by Ms. Harrison's art, some works bring an even-handed sense of economy to the use of language and materials. Gedi Sibony achieves a distressed yet evocative formalism with a tall section of salvaged aluminum wall studs, some industrial carpet and some relatively pristine white cardboard. It is titled "Even Though Its Forms Are Constructed Completely of Things Taken From the World," and you could do worse than consider its oddly pure presentation of line and plane, mass and transparency, shiny and matte.

Starting with hairy and smooth, beach and factory, the contrasts are more suggestive in Guyton/Walker's large cluster of light bulbs seemingly powered by coconuts, currently serving as a chandelier at the center's entrance. It might also look good in the SoHo windows of Moss, the world's artiest design store; but it is one of the better objects here.

Corey McCorkle has softened Naumanesque deprivation with a family rec room's tacky glow by covering fluorescent lights with wood-grain Contac paper and stringing them the length of a long brick-and-stone corridor. Frank Benson's curving piece of four-foot-square fiberboard splits the difference between formal and found with an unpretentious, sculpturally satisfying combination of weight, shape and color.

Ester Partegàs's "Monument to the Truth," which includes a sign reading "Pardon Our Appearance While Under Construction," gives real weight to its political point by intimating an imposing possibly equestrian statue beneath wrappings of plastic and plywood. And Charlie Foos basically transforms himself into an equestrian statue on video in "Monument With Anthem," a hilarious clash of outmoded weaponry, ancient technology and ineffectual heroics. He does this using only a toy lance and shield, a mechanical sidewalk rocking horse in constant need of quarters and "The Ride of the Valkyries" played on a feeble tape recorder.

A final standout is "Like It Is," one of two works by a young artist named Leslie Hewitt. (The other, "Grounded," consists of three steps leading nowhere and is not as striking.) "Like It Is" meditates on family, historical narrative and black identity with five color photographs of what looks like the front panel of a hope chest. In each image the panel leans against a wall, resting on a copy of Alex Haley's "Roots." It seems to float, like a ship, its repetition implying a journey, or a story. Other stories are intimated in different photographs by the addition, of books like "Soul on Ice," "The Fire Next Time" and "Before the Mayflower" and snapshots of a little boy.

This improvised arrangement is reiterated by the work's plain, chunky frame, a sculpture in its own right, which leans against a wall but stands on its own boxy built-in feet. Evoking generations of chests, beds, pews and coffins, it radiates a grand immobility while validating the endurance of the various wood grains, real and fake, that fill the photographs. This promising balance of assemblage, appropriation, abstract sculpture and photography is one of the several hints of newness that make this cautious show worth visiting.

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"Make It Now: New Sculpture in New York" is at the Sculpture Center, 44-19 Purves Street, near Jackson Avenue, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 361-1750, through July 31.