

## Matt Johnson

303 GALLERY

Matt Johnson operates in broadly the same arena as his onetime tutor Charles Ray, producing highly polished work that makes the everyday strange. For his second solo exhibition at this gallery, the New York-born, Los Angeles-based artist presented an array of painted carved-wood sculptures distinguished by a truly extraordinary degree of physical verisimilitude. Reaching rather strenuously for higher meaning, the press release describes without apparent self-consciousness the ways in which “these simple moments of dispossession become the generators of their own poesis,” but somehow glosses over the work’s most striking feature—its seeming transformation of one material into many others. That the objects Johnson chooses to render—crumpled cardboard boxes, half-used rolls of painter’s tape, scuffed sheets of

molded rapidly by hand out of clay—but it remains oddly compelling, a destabilizing collision of naturalism and abstraction that also plays fast and loose with expectations of scale, surface, and function.

—Michael Wilson

Matt Johnson, *Untitled*  
(Amazon Box), 2016,  
carved wood and  
paint, 23 x 23 x 17”.



drywall—are so ordinary, and so redolent of studio life, only serves to emphasize the primacy of this technical and formal aspect.

Displayed on plain white pedestals in a straightforward grid configuration, the works in “Wood Sculpture” seemed to have only each other for context, the quasi-forensic cleanliness of their presentation lending them the feel of evidence rather than of experiment. Several of the objects do, however, appear to be caught in a balancing act, angled or stacked in simple configurations rather than lying flat. *Untitled* (Balancing Styrofoam Corner on a Tape Roll) (all works 2016), for example, represents—flawlessly—the titular action. There’s a clear echo here of photographs of similarly combined, and similarly prosaic, objects by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, of Jeff Koons’s liking for high-end craftsmanship in the creation of mass-market goods, and even of Duane Hanson’s eerily believable representations of workaday Americans. But whereas Koons, say, often focuses on gaudy kitsch, Johnson moves in the other direction, toward commonplace but unassuming instances of product and packaging.

The show’s focus on containment was striking; almost every sculpture portrayed an object designed to hold something else. There were boxes for avocados, pizza, concrete, unspecified goods from Amazon and 3M—even “plastic containers.” The subjects’ function served of course to stress their ephemerality—and thus the extremity of the contrast between object and simulacrum—but also hinted at other possibilities. Ought we to consider these throwaway items as holders of meaning equal in weight to the objects (other sculptures) in whose construction they may or may not have been involved? Rendered permanent—or at least potentially more durable than their inspirations—they take on an archaeological quality; looking at them as art, in a gallery, in the here and now, we also imagine them as artifacts on display in some future museum, haunting reminders of the fatal profligacy of a defunct civilization.

Also on display were two works in bent wood, *S shaped 2 x 4* and *Twisted Pallet*, each of which subjected its nominal item to unlikely, Alvar Aalto-esque distortion. And at the far end of the gallery, three carved wood sculptures represented abstract arrangements of broken-up drywall. Painted in the off-the-shelf pastel tints of household emulsion named in their titles (Grape Hyacinth M560-3, Crystal Rapids P420-2, and Kiss Goodnight M120-2), their slotted-together forms suggest three-dimensional doodles, rough maquettes writ large that feel rather like sculptures of generic abstract works. Johnson has employed variations on this strategy before—*Odalisque*, 2010, for example, is a life-size reclining bronze figure that looks like a diminutive model