

GALLERIES

Surveying Surveys of New American Sculpture and Photography

by Benjamin Sutton on March 24, 2015

Concurrent surveys of new American art in two specific media — New American Sculpture at FiveMyles and Under Construction – New Positions in American Photography at Pioneer Works — reinforce just how interdisciplinary their respective fields have become. New American Sculpture, curated by Dexter Wimberly, features eight US artists and one Irish, New York-based artist, most of whom create three-dimensional objects that draw heavily on other forms including sound, textiles, installation, and photography. Under Construction, the result of a collaboration between Pioneer Works and the Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam, features 10 photographers from the US and Canada whose highly self-reflexive practices test the limits and mine the history of photography, often through sculpture. Though they share a promiscuous approach to materials, the shows diverge sharply in subject matter. New American Sculpture features works that wrangle with personal experiences, cultural history, and identity politics, while Under Construction deals primarily in photographs about photography. Consequently the one can feel overly eclectic, while the other is so unified that different artists' works' become nearly indistinguishable.



Installation view of 'New American Sculpture' at FiveMyles (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)



Detail of Hugh Hayden, "Moses" (2014-15) at FiveMyles

At FiveMyles, the cavernous space lends itself well to the larger, hanging, and luminous works in New American Sculpture. Leonardo Benzant's suspended, tentacled, beaded, totemic sculptures occupy the center of the gallery with aplomb. The colorful objects that make up his "Paraphernalia of the Urban Shaman M:5 (POTUS M:5)" (2015) emanate a kind of ritual, supernatural quality before one even notices the work's title or the outline of a human head embedded in one of the dangling poles. Their elaborately sewn, beaded, and layered surfaces evoke Afro-Caribbean religious objects and folk art. Another of the show's most powerful pieces, Hugh Hayden's "Moses" (2014-15), consists of a modified arcade machine in which visitors may pilot a grabbing hook to pick up bolls of cotton. Painted John Deere's trademark green-and-yellow and outfitted with one-way-

mirrors, it likens the biblical exodus narrative of its title to the Great Migration that followed the abolition of slavery and the mechanization of the cotton industry in the US. Glowing in the corner, it's a nostalgic jewel box

infused with a charged history.

Lindsay Dye's installation of houseplants coated with spray-on tan, "Weston Hills Country Club (Light, Medium, Dark)" (2015), is also a mediation on place, migration, and authenticity, though it looks a little threadbare with just three objects on view. The plants are intended to evoke the artist's childhood neighborhood, the titular South Florida Disney community, whose American Dream appearance downplays differences in race and class between its residents. The concept is intriguing, but alongside works like Benzant's and Justin Randolph Thompson and Bradly Dever Treadaway's large-scale installation "Primer" (2014) — which takes up the gallery's rear wall — it gets lost.

One of the most visually striking works in New American Sculpture, but also its most resolutely lacking in political or autobiographic content, is Clive Murphy's "Untitled (Neon Toaster)" (2009), which, as its title suggests, is a toaster from which a red neon tube has popped. The combination of the toaster's chrome exterior and the glowing red light is very seductive, but it comes off as superficial and anomalous in an exhibition whose most compelling works, whether aesthetically loud or muted — Kate Stone's sad-looking architectural intervention "Renovation 3 (Offerings)" (2015) has more staying power than its humble construction materials suggest — articulate specific, charged, and often difficult histories.



Installation view of 'New American Sculpture' at FiveMyles with, from left to right, works by Clive Murphy, Lindsay Dye, and Asif Mian

History is very much on the minds of the artists in Under Construction, which is exactly the type of big, thematic exhibition to which Pioneer Works seems uniquely suited but which, for whatever reason, it hasn't mounted until now. Art history, and specifically the history of photography, is a popular subject, one often engaged by means of sculpture. The most obvious examples of this trend are Daniel Gordon's glorious still life and portrait photos, which he creates by assembling sculptures out of paper and glue using his own images and photos sourced from the internet. These crude, kaleidoscopic assemblages only exist as the resulting photographs, which introduce a new kind of play to two of art history's most played-out genres. Nearby, Matt Lipps's thematic groupings of famous and historic photos, printed, arrayed on shelves, and re-photographed, are fascinating for their scrapbook-like decontextualizing of iconic images. Sara Cwynar's "Encyclopedia Grid (Banana)" (2014), hanging on an adjacent wall, follows a similar line of thinking with a less elegant, more comic result.

Investigating more modern iconography, Jessica Eaton photographs small cubes painted riotous patterns against matching backdrops in her cfaal ("Cubes for Albers and LeWitt") series. The enigmatic objects, shot in large-format closeups, seem to prod our willingness to distinguish between a photograph and a photo of a sculpture. Kate Steciw pushes at a similar boundary with her two photographic works here, which could just as credibly be considered bas-relief sculptures. They feature small clusters of details cropped from stock photographs peeking out from circular holes cut into black and white plastic boards. The pieces' irregular shapes and evocative snippets of images hint at possible meanings, but the works remain resolutely abstract. While Gordon and Lipps cram their photos with as many photos as possible, Eaton and Steciw's aim seems to be in part to see how little photography an artwork can include while still being considered a photograph. Their works represent extremes on this exhibition's pleasantly diverse spectrum of formalist photographic inquiry. They also illustrate how cut off from the real world the works in Under Construction feel.

Perusing the exhibition at Pioneer Works, pieces by Gordon, Lipps, Cwynar, Matthew Leifheit and Cynthia

Talmadge, and Sara VanDerBeek (in other words, most of the artists in the show) start to look not just thematically complimentary, but also very, very similar. This becomes even more striking when considering the exhibition alongside New American Sculpture, if for no other reason than because both claim to survey an impossibly broad range of recent works in one specific medium in the same geographic region. The juxtaposition leaves the work in Under Construction feeling formally inventive but apolitical and insular, while the exhibition at FiveMyles, though at times uneven, features artists who are palpably and provocatively working through the effects of history. These shows' respective biases are surely more indicative of their curators' interests than any sweeping trends in sculpture and photography. But as parallel surveys they offer startlingly different takes on the latest developments in two intimately related media.



Installation view of 'Under Construction – New Positions in American Photography' at Pioneer Works