

WATCH
TRAILER

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/PdvvUZ>

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

A Throwaway? Not From This Angle

‘A Disagreeable Object,’ at the SculptureCenter

By KAREN ROSENBERG OCT. 4, 2012

During his Surrealist period, Giacometti referred to some of his small sculptures as “disagreeable objects.” They were “without pedestal and without value” and, as he implied by attaching the French words “à jeter” to their titles, meant to be thrown away.

Why was he so dismissive toward his own work? The trauma of war had something to do with it. So did the idea of *l’informe*, or the formless, propounded by Georges Bataille. The sense was that art making should be an act of debasement and destruction: a breaking down, rather than a building up.

The group show “A Disagreeable Object,” at the SculptureCenter, uses Giacometti’s phrase to lend some context to a present in which casual attitudes toward sculpture have become commonplace (as in Gelitin’s current show at Greene Naftali, which invites viewers to topple artworks), and plenty of value, material and otherwise, is attached to objects without pedestals. The main point here is a new-old one: what looks like cheerful insouciance about the art object is actually a deadly serious reaction to the vagaries of war, technology and the economy.

Pamela Rosenkranz’s circle of white sneakers, called “Awesome Power,” may not look sinister at first, but when you notice that the shoes are filled with silicone and plaster in a range of skin tones, you may wonder

whether the wearers have been vaporized by a nuclear attack. Likewise, Alisa Baremboym's arrangements of hardware covered with goopy, translucent gel, titled "Leakage Industries," conjure a post-technological society. And in Camille Henrot's "Objets Augmentés," humdrum instruments like golf clubs and pliers become wickedly fetishistic when wrapped in thick layers of earth and tar.

Many of the show's 20 artists are arch manipulators of found objects. And their version of Surrealism venerates Jeff Koons and David Hammons, alongside Giacometti and Duchamp. You can see that in Anicka Yi's misshapen glass bottles holding contact lenses and saline solution or in Martin Soto Climent's two basketballs ensnared in fishnet stockings.

Works in the handmade category, though scarce here, are impressive. They include Alexandra Bircken's intricate wall of magnetized steel cutouts, as well as Johannes VanDerBeek's decorative furnishings of paper pulp, metal mesh and matte medium, which brighten the SculptureCenter's cryptlike basement.

In the basement you will also find the best of the show's three video works: Aneta Grzeszykowska's "Headache," in which disembodied limbs make uncanny, violent and sexual gestures before reattaching to a torso. Shot in black and white, with the help of several dancers, it shares the elegant but deeply disconcerting aesthetic of Man Ray's photographs. (The catalog reproduces a striking Ray image of a bare-breasted woman caressing Giacometti's "Disagreeable Object.")

Recent group shows at the SculptureCenter have tended to feel clubby. But this one, organized by the center's newish curator, Ruba Katrib, ventures outside the Lower East Side-Chelsea circuit. Among the less familiar figures are the Norwegian Ann Cathrin November Hoibo, whose draping of brightly colored track pants and thread over toilet paper holders exhibits a streetwise formlessness, and the Berlin artist Alicja Kwade, whose altered wall clock (with its rotating body and second hand permanently set to 12) seems to destabilize the whole gallery.

Here, too, are some established sculptors like Sarah Lucas and Charles Long, who have the confidence and chops to make direct allusions to Surrealism; witness Mr. Long's very Giacometti-like clusters of river sediment, papier-mâché, plaster and debris on metal scaffolds, and Ms. Lucas's seated nude fashioned from a concrete block and stuffed nylon tights.

In other words, there's a healthy mix of artists here, and an intriguing dialogue between object making and object tweaking that may be one of the underexplored legacies of Surrealism. (As Ms. Katrib observes in her catalog essay, "The Surrealists imbued mass-produced and handcrafted objects alike with origin myths, erotic desire and destructive impulses.") This is the kind of show that, while short on new ideas, dusts off some old ones worth re-examining.

"A Disagreeable Object" continues through Nov. 26 at the SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 361-1750, sculpture-center.org.

A version of this review appears in print on October 5, 2012, on page C30 of the New York edition with the headline: A Throwaway? Not From This Angle.