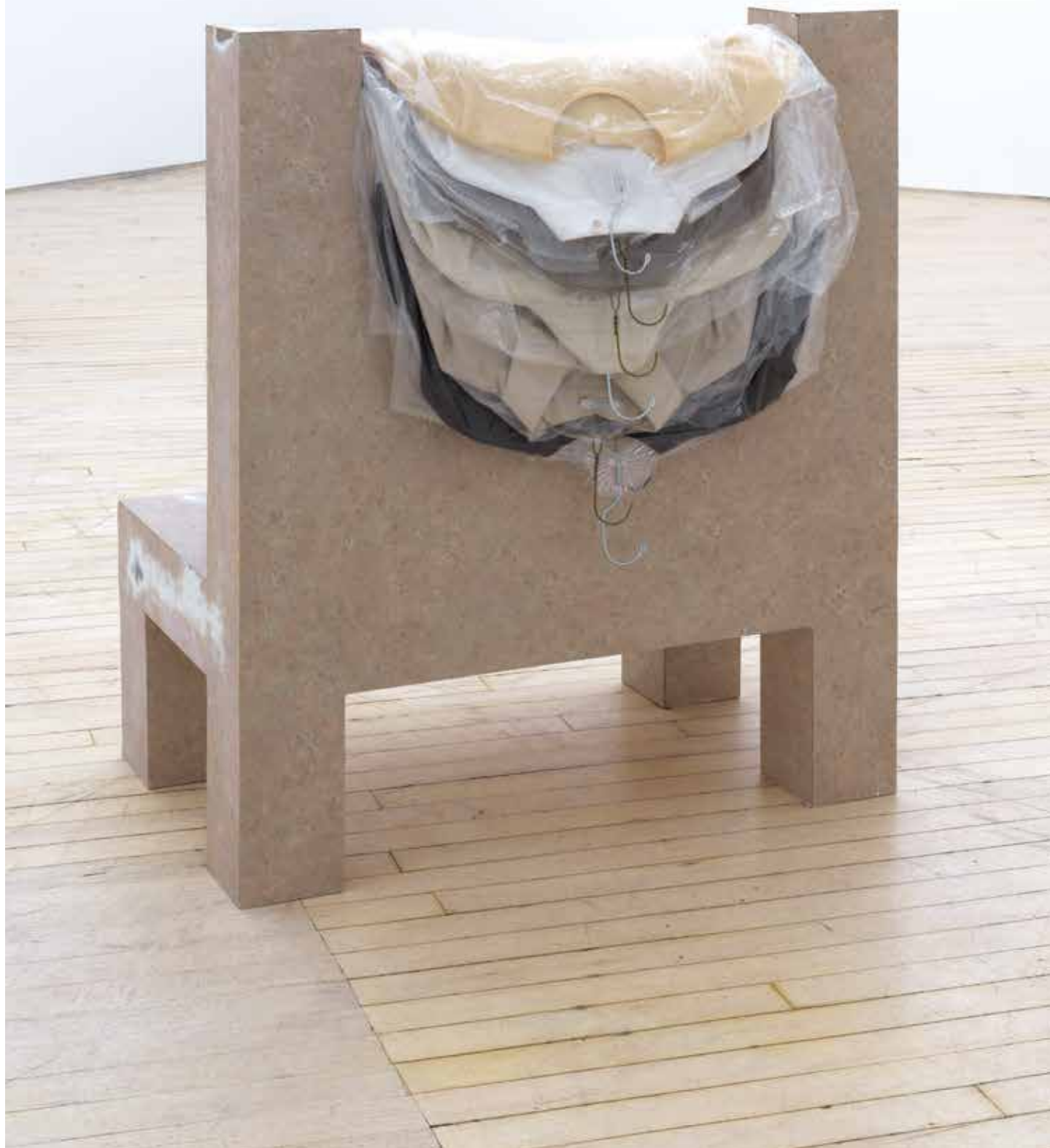


OPENINGS

LIBBY ROTHFELD

SEAN TATOL



This page: **Libby Rothfeld, *Chair/ System*, 2017**, laminate, clothing, plastic bags, hangers, water bottles, 39 × 31 ½ × 18 ¼".

Opposite page: **Libby Rothfeld, *Option #2*, 2016**, tile, tape, cement, porcelain, resin, potatoes, glassware, rock, basket, 28 × 26 ½ × 25".



WHAT DISTINGUISHES Duchamp's readymades from later artists' found objects is that, as the first appropriated artworks, his were not yet automatically perceived as art. A urinal, a bottle rack, an advertisement for paint: These things remained what they were—unremarkable, mundane items—even when observed in an art gallery. Over time, the practice of displaying found objects became normalized and aestheticized, negating the full significance of Duchamp's breakthrough. Appropriation, in some cases, had become as purely visual as painting, except that it took less work. Duchamp's original works represented an epistemological leap in history and provided a ground for establishing new operations in art beyond the limits of its traditional scope. The content of this leap is subtle, and, owing to shifting interpretations of the ready-made over time, it feels more obscured than clarified by a hundred years of history.

This raises the question, then, of what an artist does if they are using a found object not as an object in itself—to effect a juxtaposition, commentary,

or the like—but to create the kind of art that Duchamp derided as “retinal.” That this should never be done is not a hard-and-fast rule, naturally, but the difficulty with such appropriation is that it can consist of little more than the co-option of aesthetic sensibilities that already exist in the world, with the artist acting as a mere curator of aesthetic content. This posture degrades Duchamp's conceptual appropriation to the level of cultural appropriation—the unearned claim of artistic content without any justifying labor, whether conceptual, technical, or other. The job of the contemporary artist who uses found materials is to remain engaged with the potentials of appropriation that go beyond art's compositional, “retinal” qualities, if not necessarily to the neglect of a given object's aesthetic content.

Libby Rothfeld's acts of appropriation maintain an extra-aesthetic awareness because, thanks to her delicate process of construction and her affection for things, her found objects function as artworks while retaining their ties to their contextual origins. The items that attract her are typically



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quodidian in nature, objects that, like Duchamp's readymades, resist pretensions of style and leave open an interpretative conceptual space. Whereas, for example, a Hello Kitty-branded toaster makes an overt visual appeal—is designed to be seen—a nondescript toaster demands a particular type of attention, and it is precisely this unexceptional state that compels Rothfeld. We are constantly surrounded by consumer products and social detritus that are designed to be ignored and to not impose on our lived experience, but ultimately these items undergird our reality far more than anything else. In this infrastructure of junk, Rothfeld finds the freedom to construct her own networks of meaning, built from the humor and pathos of what would otherwise constitute garbage. These associations are created in the mind of the artist, then honed into constructions that articulate qualities not otherwise obvious; her art is the product of a subjectivity that mediates the world around it via a particular methodology.

Rothfeld's works thrive on ordinariness, often using and emphasizing cheap materials: Between 2016 and 2020, most of her work featured bathroom tile and countertop laminate; her 2021 show at Bureau in New York

Opposite page, top left: **Libby Rothfeld, *Whole Wide World (Grandpa)*, 2021**, wood, acrylic, wood stain, cotton, plastic, potted tree, gum, flagging, metal door hinge, 17 × 77¼ × 40".

Opposite page, top right: **Libby Rothfeld, *Whole Wide World (Grandpa Small)*, 2021**, wood, acrylic, wood stain, cotton, plastic, potted tree, gum, flagging, metal door hinge, 20½ × 51 × 42½".

Opposite page, center, from left: **Libby Rothfeld, *Category 4, Amen Lover 1, (Quarter chiming triple fusee bracket clock with carved florets and gilded details by John Moore and Sons of Clerkenwell)*, 2021**, wood, wood stain, oil, 26½ × 14¼ × 5". **Libby Rothfeld, *Genesis News (South German polychrome iron wall clock with Kuhschwanz Pendel)*, 2021**, wood, wood stain, oil, 46 × 14 × 5".

Opposite page, bottom: **Libby Rothfeld, *The Punisher's Collections*, 2021**, metal, sneakers, plastic, motor, polyurethane drum, wood. Installation view, Bureau, New York.

Below: **Libby Rothfeld, *Felix's Community (#5)*, 2020**, laminate, tile, grout, wood, plastic bags, Post-it notes, pencil, plastic tub, resin, salt shakers, pepper shakers, hand sanitizer, face toner, ink-jet print, Plexiglas, 45½ × 38½ × 43¼".

included potted trees embedded in mattresses, painted replicas of antique clocks, and two rotating metal drums with shoes tumbling inside of them installed in the ceiling; the works in progress I saw at her studio recently included cookie tins, kitchen aprons, and one of those clear plastic zippered bags for storing sheets, which she found in the street. None of these things are wholly devoid of aesthetic content, but the whole is visually coherent only because each element remains discrete, a condition that arises, conversely, from the individual objects retaining a connection to their original context. For instance, *Felix's Community (#5)*, 2020, a sculpture in the 2020 group show "Beauty Can Be the Opposite of a Number" at Bureau, lists its materials as follows: laminate, tile, grout, wood, plastic bags, Post-it notes, pencil, plastic tub, resin, salt shakers, pepper shakers, hand sanitizer, face toner, ink-jet print, Plexiglas. The centerpiece is a large tiled sculpture of the number 5 on a tile base that additionally supports a group of objects set in an array of laminate protrusions and depressions: plastic garbage bags; salt and pepper shakers, a bottle of hand sanitizer, and a bottle of toner partly submerged in a tub of resin; an ink-jet print of a photo of a restaurant meal; and a pad of Post-it notes whose corners are bent, as though it had been thrown in the back of a packed drawer and forgotten, with a drawing on the top sheet. Aside from the central shape of the 5, which could be a Robert Indiana if it weren't covered in bathroom tile, each object feels discrete and independent. The parts are never subsumed into the whole; they are included for their own qualities, which is how the whole becomes compositionally distinct.

What these objects have in common for Rothfeld is a sense of attachment, the personal familiarity and subjective associations one has with, say, their vintage salt shaker collection, or the old beat-up stack of Post-its they see every time they open their desk drawer, though in her work this sense can be just as much imagined as it is real. She then recontextualizes with these indefinite personal qualities in a given artwork. As she explained it to me, the process both of growing attached to objects and of creating artworks with them involves making a thing one's own, either in the sense of fixing it or by letting it accumulate wear and personality. But it goes beyond this: If a blemish on a shirt or a scratch on a musical instrument gives that object character, that imperfection is also a monument to the memory of the moment when you dropped your guitar or spilled your drink. Those associations can go forward as well, inasmuch as an object can instigate future memories, in the way that an apron, a bottle of wine, and a cookie tin are the preconditions for a dinner party that hasn't yet happened. Elsewhere, Rothfeld plays with this associative framework of an object's apparent and at times less than actual qualities; her most recent solo show featured paintings of clocks on panels shaped like the clocks, which are not so much paintings as imitations of antique clocks she wishes she could own but can't, trompe l'oeils that re-create the idea of a thing without attempting to trick the viewer. And then there are tricks, as when, in the same exhibition, a wood frame encasing mattresses and potted trees has been scratched up like a school desk defaced by a bored student. Although they appear to limn a "real" history of the surface, the marks were all made by the artist; they are fakes of qualities drawn from other objects.

At root, Rothfeld's practice, like all good art practices, reaffirms and deepens her investment in the work rather than leaching affect from elsewhere. In investing her art with her attachments, she does not exhaust those attachments; rather, she embraces them, putting them in the service of artworks that assume novel shapes something rare in every era and doubly so today. □

SEAN TATOL IS A CRITIC BASED IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

