

Rothfeld Libby

New York based sculptural artist Libby Rothfeld discusses objects, influence, and identity.



photography Nikki Krecicki words Grace Ann Leadbeater

OBJECTS AT HOME

There isn't much about Libby Rothfeld on the internet, which is why I'm at her studio in Maspeth, a Queens neighborhood that, at first glance, looks more auto shops than houses. It's the first snow of the season, and the white blanket stretches across the barren ground. It almost feels purposely barren to keep the mind from distractions: a place to work.

When Libby opens the door of her floor's entrance, I am struck by her ordinariness. Her washy blue eyes extenuate her paling freckles and brown straight hair. Her whole face quietly smiles as she ushers me in. She had told me over email that she doesn't like being photographed with her work, as it takes away from it, so her outfit makes sense: a black turtleneck, khaki canvas drawstring pants with a hole just above the right knee, white honeycomb socks, and black, dusty Danskos.

Her voice is bright, carrying a warmth that bounces off the walls. As I shake the last of the snow off my hat, she pushes a heavy metal door and we're in. The studio is a vast box. There's a loft to the left that holds cardboard boxes, plastic bags, white tubes, a blue tarp, and foam. Beneath it is a wall of tools. The floors are covered in what looks like sawdust, paint, tiles, wood scraps, and other materials that are too abstract to decipher. The windows cover the back wall, revealing the steady snowfall. Libby tells me to sit anywhere, and after doing an awkward dance around all her works-in-progress, tables covered in pencils, buckets, sandy water bottles, more sawdust, more

tiles, and other everyday objects, we sit on chairs that she's currently in the process of redoing—light wood with seat cushions upholstered in a copper leather. She says they are for her boyfriend's apartment, and that she found them at a flea market upstate. "They're a labor of love," she later tells me.

The snow's fall becomes heavier as Libby passes a pumpkin doughnut from Peter Pan Donuts in Greenpoint from one hand to the other, in a meditative sort of way. I set my honey glazed one on the table of tiles and empty, dusty wine glasses. I tell her that it's a collaboration for her next piece. Eyeing one of the wine glasses, I ask what everyday objects mean to her. She pauses for a minute, then says, "So say there's Architectural Digest, and you see the home, and it's so perfect. But that's not actually the way in which a room is ever. That's not the arrangement." She begins speaking fast, like her thoughts can't keep up with her mouth. "There's no one there. There's nothing happening. Nothing is being interacted with. When you leave your keys on top of something where they're not supposed to go or there's a lone sock on the floor. Things are sort of shifting to contain objects that 'aren't supposed to be there.' That's when something becomes more itself, when it's being interacted with." I ask her if this intention with home was always there. "It's not home as much as it's the familiar." The rapidity of her speech becomes even more rapid, like the words she's spitting out are living, breathing things surging toward a horizon, and I want to follow. "The familiar derives from home... I think that although my experience growing up, the way my family, had an interaction with these things, I hadn't realized our house was sort of strange. I saw the certain way my parents considered objects very specifically."

Her parents viewed home as a utilitarian space. "They didn't decorate their house in the way people decorated it." It was filled with inherited objects—random books, plants, and mugs. "Everywhere," Libby says. Their kitchen didn't contain any bowls. The bowls broke at one point and were never replaced. They never had glasses, either. Everything was consumed out of mugs.



When they moved into the house, when Libby was a child, there were hung curtains left by the previous owners that they never took them down. "They never thought, I don't like these, these don't go here this isn't the way I want to dress this place. They just left them. And I always thought about that as a kid. That was just so weird to me. But later on, I thought it was interesting," she says. Libby goes to tell me how her mother would plant spider plants in old diet yogurt containers. "When you have a plant, you put it in this nice little pot, but with her, it was like, Oh, just reuse this Kleenex bottle or yogurt container for a plant." I say, "It's almost a rebuttal to art but then her doing that and not caring allowed you to find the aesthetic in those banal objects, right?" Libby pauses for a moment, then proceeds, "Yeah. Or trying to see the perverse as The Thing. But my mother was creative...My mother did a lot of drawings and she played a lot of instruments."

She nibbles on her doughnut, not worrying about the crumbs, as they only contribute to the studio's appeal. If I didn't know who Libby Rothfeld was and were passing by this space on any other day, I wouldn't pay much mind to it. And that's the wonder of it. It functions exactly how she describes the intended functionality of everything she creates: it is so utilitarian that if you look at it long enough, its sincerity spirals into brilliance: "...the idea of something being purely about utility and void of aesthetic. It's not trying to say anything. But then the function of the thing itself is aesthetic."

Libby currently has an exhibition at the gallery Bureau in New York's Lower East Side: Noon and Afternoon. "I made laminated structures for the show," she tells me. A laminate desk with incepts for computers greets one upon entering the room. Some people in the gallery even placed their own belongings on it. Water bottles are a part of many of the pieces, covering them, raising the question of what was already there and what was perhaps added by a passerby. A chair draped with dry-cleaned clothing and a wall of water bottles sits in one corner of the room; a structure with a rack of clothing and water bottles on it and around it sits nearby. The clothing of both pieces is comprised of yellows, greys, beiges, and browns. They look worn, as if taken from another time. "Water is survival and water bottles themselves are identity choices. But they're so ubiquitous that you don't see them anyway. And then there's the clothing, how we define ourselves, what we choose to put on." Across from them are two laminated bulletin boards. Drawings are scribbled on them; magazine pages are pasted on, one containing blue handwriting over it. All the laminate is intentionally worn. There are doodle drawings, too. One by Herbert Hoover is projected, another by Van Gogh—an academic hand study. There are more water bottles, but this time with tape and photographs, covered in plexi. Vinyl prints are flush on the wall, paired with masks (stages of humans before they became a Homo sapiens). The objects begin one way but slip into another, reusing and discarding simultaneously. She seeks to provoke questions of the simplicity. "There is an absent of the person, of that thing, but the presence is so inevitable. It culminates. The laminate objects become Now and these reference points back to where we came from. When we began to make choices as people. How identity forms us. How objects create identity." Through these transitory pieces, Libby references a time that was thousands of years ago against something that was a few years ago. She compresses the objects into a single timeframe. The images on the walls are something between accidental photographs on your cellphone and photographs that would be contextualized in a textbook. One of the photographs



is of a person's running legs. The individual is in black clogs and black pants, a blur that appears to be a part of the accidental cellphone images. Affixed to the bottom right corner of the photograph is a Homo sapiens clay mask. And to the right of the photograph is a brown fedora. If these three objects were placed alongside each other on a table, they would be random, with no collective intention. But up on this wall, Libby makes them dance. "The show emphasizes a relationship between objects that breaks down their utility and allows one to perceive these familiar structures as artifacts. We make commodity choices and while they may seem solely consumeristic, they are inherent to our identity. Within each choice of an object—its color, its shape—there is this abstract logic that is corresponding with our identity."

Before today, I looked every which way for Libby on the internet. Aside from her website and a brief review on Artforum, the only thing that gave me a idea of who she is was her Instagram (her username isn't her name). I'm curious as to how she uses Instagram as an extension of her art. "I find it to be a problematic application of work," she says. And that's evident, because if you scroll through her feed, it's photos of things from the everyday that aren't a part of her work: a close-up of a man wearing Shakespeare socks with sneakers; a horse eating celery; an out-of-order notice for an elevator. It's the everyday out in the world. "I know [Instagram] allows things to be accessible in a way that wouldn't necessarily be, but there's a certain point, when I'm sharing an image like that [and I wonder] should I keep that image to myself? Why am I sharing that image? If I put it in this platform, then I'm taking it away from something that's for my own personal use. And what is to the point?" I ask if that's why she doesn't like to be photographed with her work. She nods fervently. "Then you're creating a brand of yourself and do I want to create a brand of myself?" She stands up to grab a bottled green tea, still contemplating the initial question, still talking. "[It's] me trying to show people how I am. Although I am doing this interview and having my picture taken, I feel very private about [myself] and my work. I think they're separate. I think I am a catalyst for the work...It's not about me. I'm not creating a brand of Libby." She pauses, then finally says, "Libby helps the work exist."

Libby's mostly devoid online existence makes her seem more grounded. When she speaks, she keeps steady eye contact. Her phone rests on a table out of reaching distance. It's clear that she wholeheartedly considers her relationship with everything. So she nudges one to "reconsider the way in which they interact with things...That in and of itself allows that person to begin to question how they interact with other objects in everyday life." She compares them to fractals. "Like, there's miniature logic that pulls out and out and out. And it's sort of absurd and you realize that whatever formula you're following doesn't actually do anything, but it's don't and you can't help but attempt to rationalize it." I ask what formula. "So there's this photograph of a dog running and it kind of looks like a menu or as if someone is preparing to make a menu. You're trying to understand that logic of that photograph or what's happening in it. And then you see that context (context being a tiled structure). And now where is it sitting? It's sitting in this thing that's kind of a fireplace. I don't even know...a kitchen wall? And then that is becoming its own form of a menu. At first you're trying to break down this one little thing but then you realize the context itself sort of obstructs any kind of ability to rationalize it and you realize these things just become pure form or feeling. It's like, what does it make you feel as opposed to what it's trying to say? It's also compressing both low and high brow. It's something that's always happening. And in that way, kind of trying to obstruct hierarchy. Like, what makes something high, what makes something low? What makes something on the same plane? What if one thing that's functioning loses its function but the other thing has function but it doesn't necessarily do anything so it's this back and forth until everything is compressed into one solidified object." I ask if merging high and low brow is something she wants. She says it's more complicated than that, using laminate in substitution of marble as an example. "[Laminate] sort of has this pathos, it sort of feels pathetic to itself. But I don't want it to feel pathetic." Her tone is akin to a mother talking about her child. "I guess it's also partly emulating with these materials, like wanting to liberate them in a way." The space now smells like a doughnut shop, which is comforting but also peculiar for an art studio. I look at a metal chair with a delicate white fabric draped over it, the water bottles, varying from 8 oz. to 1 liter, and silver pots with script written in Sharpie, sitting on burners. The assortment of things gives the illusion of a common room. Would she go as far as to say her work is altruistic? "I think it's optimistic. And I think that's a funny line to draw because I'm using a lot of materials that tend to be discarded or secondary. It's just messed up boxes or old pots and pans." We look around the room together. "There's a sincerity in all of it—there really is. I'm not being cynical. And I don't think the work comes across as cynical. I believe in the objects themselves. I was drawn to them for their ineffable quality." The large windows look like they're covered with a white tarp now. As I listen to the snow sputtering against the glass, I remember that I'm a 20-minute walk from the train. Libby insists on driving me back, and so we bundle up to brace the cold together. On our way out, I trip on a 5-inch screw in the hallway. "Is this screw yours?" I ask. "Probably," she says, kicking it back into the space.





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