

“The Manhattan Art Review”

Libby Rothfeld - The World Is Not Enough - Bureau - ****.5

The most difficult conundrum of “Millennial appropriation art” is how to avoid the obviousness of glib aestheticization while also navigating the consciousness that appropriation is itself a historicized, and therefore aesthetic, procedure. Simply put, appropriation is an affiliative gesture, as all art is, inasmuch that every artwork is an artist’s affirmation of their decision to do one thing and not another. I just looked back at an Alex Da Corte review I wrote in 2019, and I’m surprised by how little I disagree with it in retrospect, although my claim that Duchamp and Gober are not affiliative appropriators, unlike Da Corte, is contradicted by my previous sentence. I’d say now that Gober certainly affiliates himself with his work, and Duchamp does as well, in spite of everything, but their work nevertheless hinges on incorporating some measure of distance within that affiliation. By contrast, Da Corte’s fetish for aesthetic surfaces acts like a pop art scrubbed of its irony, seriously insisting on a nostalgia for mass cultural imagery from one’s childhood. His work acts as if tricking oneself into enjoying commercials constitutes real progress, which it does not. That differentiation still feels true, but what it glosses over is the difficulty of finding and introducing that distance within the gesture of affiliation. Duchamp and Gober’s paths are now foreclosed by their place in history, so, even if I still dislike Da Corte’s work, I can at least accept that his work reflects the contemporary dynamics of appropriation in art. Libby’s work necessarily operates under similar conditions, but what she manages so uniquely here is an objectification of her affiliations by foregrounding their status as cultural signs. To list some of the points of reference: Cubism, classical music, businessmen, packaging and product design, postgraduate degrees and board memberships, the *Financial Times* (the wall color), James Bond. No matter her personal feelings towards any of these, the works do not signify an individualistic sentimentality but instead showcase the general image of culture as “cultivation.” High art, high finance, fine tailoring, logos, fabric patterns, all of these point towards the received sedimentation of culture, stereotypes of cultural achievement, whether affectated or actually achieved. This could quite easily imply the inverse failure of sentimental appropriation, where the art adopts the imagery of another cultural sphere in an attempt to borrow its legitimacy, i.e. including an image of Glenn Gould to signal that one knows something about the respected field of classical music, but that’s not what’s happening here either. *Lunchtime at Brookfield Place*, her imitation of a Cubist mural, draws as much from the idea of a hotel lobby knockoff as it does Picasso and Braque; what’s more, by acting as an installation work that mimics the idea of a painting, in spite of being painted by the artist, it manages to circumvent the paralysis of contemporary painting by not quite “being” a painting. All of the works are constituted by similarly subtle maneuvers, like musical instrument cases framed in wood, silhouettes of men in suits in garish tartan patterns, or enlarged imitations of classical music cassette tapes with incongruous images and invented or real composers and conductors. The logic of the latter is particularly overt, because it’s simply obvious that a paparazzi photo of Sean Connery looks better when it’s on a J-card above the text “Music from Wagners Ring,” or that the J.B. Hunt logo sort of looks like the Deutsche Grammophon logo, etc. The point of all of this, then, or the content of the work, is the organization of all this imagery into a construction where Libby can exercise her wit and sensibility, which is itself the basis of her attraction to a signifying chain of received culture, not an assertion of her own uniqueness or cultural legitimacy. Her work appropriates not as a claim to meaning but as an internal logic, a mechanism where the opaque interrelation of constellated materials transforms things into art. The last paragraph of my old Da Corte review laments sentimentality as a solipsistic repression of the awareness that all art is ultimately the expression of a cultural inheritance that is not actually unique, which again doesn’t take seriously the difficulty of the problem; an individual’s consciousness of their self-identity being a construct is usually paralyzing, to be sure. Rothfeld’s art only avoids that paralysis by leaning into the constructedness of her own attraction to a vaguely ironic, edified image of culture, culture-as-subjectivity-as-culture-as-art, mediating the various layers of empty signification until it begins, suddenly, to signify its own mediation as something that becomes a kind of estranged fullness. That presentation of alienation within the work is what turns it into something more than alienated, a clearheadedness about reality that can be fairly referred to as insight.