



Marc André Robinson turns the chairs and tables on monumental art in *Myth Monolith*, 2002–3, which appears in the New Museum of Contemporary Art's inaugural show.

ARTnews DECEMBER 2007

Object Overruled

A rash of rough and ungainly sculptures and installations, made of everything from junk to construction materials, household items, even trucks, has been infiltrating museums and galleries. Call it antiart, protest art, or sometimes simply poetry

BY BARBARA A. MACADAM

Is it a coincidence or a movement? Call it neo-deconstructivism, nonmonumentalism, the junk esthetic—or simply the new realism. A rash of rough and unruly sculptures and installations has been infiltrating museums, galleries, and disused warehouses worldwide. This piling together of disparate objects in often formless, unfinished, or disassembled constructions offers an antiesthetic esthetic that can represent or replicate a worldview or a personal one. Is it art or antiart?

"It is not antiart," says Laura Hoptman, senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and cocurator of "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century," which opens this month as the inaugural show in the museum's new building. The exhibition extends from the collaged-furniture assemblage of African-American artist Marc André Robinson, who addresses social issues, to an irregular mound of concrete with a sword stuck in it by Zürich artist Urs Fischer, whose work is more ambiguous.

As Hoptman sees it, this new work is very consciously and carefully composed. "It is not about subverting the values of contemporary art," she says. More than anything, it represents "a new resurgence of assemblage."

In fact, this kind of work seems to be about many notes. "It is not chance art," Hoptman says. And "it is not monumental art; it negates the notion of what a monument should be."

What it is is many things at once, and it offers an open-ended narrative format. It is about memory, suburban life and TV cul-



Claire + Sean look at decay, demolition, and garbage for social and cultural clues. *Deceased Estate*, 2004, consists of detritus from an artists' warehouse.

ture, war and poverty, consumerism and conservation, and almost every other issue that concerns us today. Ian Pedigo, who was in the "Stubborn Materials" show at Peter Blum Chelsea in New York last summer, says that artists feel a "need to start art over again from a more elemental point of view." Pedigo marries found materials to create semiabstract sculptures that suggest a new breed of cultural artifact. "Many of the dominant conceptually based practices of the past 15 to 20 years have nearly eliminated the role of the viewer as an intelligent participant in the discussion of culture," he says. "Often there is not much that remains open to interpretation in such works; there is an inclination toward being didactic." By contrast his sculptures have the suggestion of narrative and a poetic cast that invites engagement. Some of the new art can be seen as a parallel to Abstract Expressionism in its free-form manifestation of the subconscious. In the sliced sculptures filled with crushed objects by Los Angeles artist Jedediah Caesar, who showed recently at New York's D'Amelio Terras gallery and is also represented by Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris, the seemingly haphazard presence of so much material allows viewers to assemble and reassemble the works in their minds.

The New Museum's show is one of many devoted to the phenomenon. Last winter's exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., "The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture," organized by associ-

ate curator Anne Ellegood, included sculptural works by nine artists, among them Isa Genzken, Rachel Harrison, and Charles Long. And in Europe last summer, "DUMP: Postmodern Sculpture in the Dissolved Field," at the Art Hall at Tullinløkka, in Oslo, surveyed 40 years of sculpture, featuring international artists ranging from Sol LeWitt, representing the more formal end of the spectrum, to the Norwegian-born Camilla Løw and Kristina Braein, who work in the strictly deconstructive mode. The exhibition focused on contemporary reactions against "pure form."

Deconstruction certainly is not new. Fluxus artists and Nouveau Réalistes were doing it. So was Dieter Roth, who constructed as well as deconstructed, using every medium at his disposal. Anselm Kiefer documents history with piles of detritus and in so doing makes art out of the process of making art. And Jason Rhoades offered the chaos of his life and thoughts, expanding the parameters of artistic expression to include words in neon, music, garbage, Legos, pipes, sound-equipment, transformers, high-tech equipment, and even a crushed motorcycle ramp.

Artists are reacting to both the state of the world—to politics, war, poverty, and the ravages of ecological neglect—and to the state of their own lives. They are heaping things together in unfathomable combinations—piles of shattered debris, formless

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and inconclusive, or sealed, solipsistic conglomerations of everyday objects. All of these works implicate memory.

The Australian artist Ian Burns, who recently presented his extravaganza "The Manner of Work" at Spencer Brownstone Gallery in New York, says he wanted to "to get beyond junk sculptural form and composition." His Rube Goldberg constructions in many mediums and stages of refinement address matters ranging from consumerism to natural disasters to the relation between high and low tech—concerns that are as disparate as the broken objects and recombinations in his installations. His work distinguishes itself not only by suggesting things that function but by actually functioning. For instance, Burns explains, the sculptures produce live video and audio feeds that signify the imagery that comes to us through the media. His blend of new and old technology and junk produces accumulations that include a flattened toilet, running water, music, and serene nature projections. "Obviously," Burns says, "all this is a tongue-in-cheek poke at the trend toward both neo-deconstruction and art as high-end design."

Two other Australian artists, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, who work under the collaborative name Claire + Sean, live in Berlin. They deal with, among many things, real estate issues and how the people who make a neighborhood desirable (artists, for instance) are driven out by high prices. They look at decay, demolition, and garbage. Their installation *Deceased Estate* (2004) is a bright assemblage of detritus from an artists' warehouse pressed into a kind of ball and tied together with red

string. "As a peripatetic artist, one becomes very aware of the physical stuff that one owns," Healy explains. "Simple processes such as packing and stacking objects can expose wider concerns about ownership, transportation, accumulation, and waste." She adds, "In our highly polished lives, many objects just seem to exist. They are divorced from the process by which they were made."

Claire + Sean want to discover what lies beneath the facade of an object or a concept. In one of their most dramatic works, *Wohnwagen*, as Cordeiro describes it, "we cut up a caravan to fit onto pallets, so we could ship it from Berlin to Melbourne." The caravan went through many stages: it was deconstructed, reconfigured by stacking its parts, and then catalogued by laying out its parts systematically. "This whole process is much like that of sending data. JPEGs, PDFs, and other file formats are a form of compression to make information ready for transit."

The extremes of this neo-deconstructive impulse are marked by consciously structured object-combining assemblages like those of Jessica Stockholder and the disheveled debris-packed environments of artists like Emilio and Ilya Kabakov. Representing the assemblage variety in her recent work is Genzken, whose endlessly compounded and contorted elements are designed to populate a world of her own making. At once charming and threatening, the sculptures are like the little "people" that fill toy boxes or small architectural follies in a postapocalyptic landscape.

Rachel Harrison has long been de- and reconstructing found materials. *Pretty Discreet*, 2004, unites wood, polystyrene, wheels, a Big John Studd WWF wrestler doll, and air freshener.





LEFT *Jamie's Bedroom*, 2007, by Ryan Trecartin. **RIGHT** Ian Pedigo's *Decentering, Reversibility*, 2007.

Other manifestations of the "junk" ethos can be found in artists such as New York-based Gedi Sibony, who engages and shapes space with her materials. Sibony strategically arranges sticks, carpet, vinyl, and construction materials. By contrast, the intellectually adventuresome Oona Stern makes small patchwork environments in which materials masquerade as others—carpeting as brick, for example.

Ilya Kabakov's famed 1970s installation *Ten Characters* taught us how to look at the lost-in-time environments of an artist like Mike Nelson, whose work incorporates fragments of ordinary history, lots of dust, universal and personal memories, excerpts from his previous installations, and haunted-looking derelict spaces. With their social and political rebelliousness, the Kabakov installations also inform the work of Christoph Büchel. Büchel—whose battle with Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art over everything from the content to the cost of his massive project *Training Ground for Democracy* prevented the installation from ever being completed—exemplifies the potential and all-embracing nature of this nouveau deconstructivism. *Training Ground* involved objects that document contemporary life and work, ranging from a Cape Cod cottage to a vintage movie theater, a mobile home, and a truck; and it expanded into a major conceptual piece, encompassing performance through open conflict and engagement with the law. It drew in people who may have known nothing about art but were forced to bring their expertise to the subject.

A surprising number of major galleries have been showcasing such work. Last summer Simone Subal, director of Peter Blum, curated a show of nongallery artists that included installations mostly made of metallic detritus in improbable combinations. The destructions of Rosy Keyser were particularly poetic—among them *Sad White Music* (2007), a canvas cov-

ered with house paint and sawdust. Pedigo's *Structure Left Remaining* (2006), a cylinder on stilts, was strangely affecting, as were Nick Herman's on- and off-the-wall conglomerates of silver plating, wood, concrete, and more.

At about the same time Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York highlighted the predecessors of the movement, many of them more ironic and contained than the younger artists. The show included Lawrence Weiner's wood plank bearing the words "A Pursuit of Happiness" leaning against a pillar; a Fischli & Weiss installation of a dirty coffee cup and pieces of Sheetrock stuck in a corner; and work by Richard Artschwager, Jorge Pardo, and many others, all concerned—primarily, it seems—with art and its making, and how and where we perceive it.

Among the most surprising of these shows was D'Amelio Terras's early fall grouping of Caesar's partially resin-sealed trash, David Brooks's chunks of graphite in a dirty sculpture that included a wall drawing, and a construction on stilts by Nicole Cherubini.

At New York's Elizabeth Dee gallery, young artist Ryan Trecartin had a show last fall aptly, though enigmatically, titled "I-Be Area." The multimedia enterprise captured many aspects of today's deconstructive spirit. Videos of mock-horror dramas played in the gallery amid smashed-up furniture that was seen intact in the videos. Here life and art, fantasy and reality, violence and domesticity, high tech and no tech, clean and dirty, all came together in a form of time capsule.

In the end, these works tell the stories of their own making—even showing where to find what's hidden in them. "It is, in a way, an uncovering of issues which are buried within the material and within consciousness by removing and adding layers until something emerges that might never have had a chance to exist otherwise," Pedigo observes. "It is a way to seek out cause and effect, document what exists in the outside world, and filter it all through an individual's experience of it." ■