

Metaleptic stories

Friday, November 7, 2014

Metaphysics of the kitchen

It is a major challenge for artists to exhibit work outside the gallery or museum environment - mainly because life has so much more to offer than art. The "white cube" of the exhibition space is designed specifically to neutralize life, to create a vacant spot in the world and in the viewer's mind, where an artwork could be set in comfortable isolation, away from life's hustle and bustle. This is why even the works of famous artists often look strangely diminished in private houses: a Richter's abstraction tacked away in a corner behind a floor lamp, with a light switch on a long cord dangling inches from it; a Donald Judd's wall piece in a living room looking uncannily like a metal Ikea shelf, a faint ring stain from someone's glass visible on its shiny surface. This may also be the reason why most of the art I saw at the Governors island art fair last summer - especially the works inside the abandoned houses on Colonel's Row - seemed to me vaguely disappointing. Despite the variety of mediums and techniques used by the artists, and the wit and ingenuity employed in placing the works inside the shabby rooms, corridors and closets, most pieces appeared strangely deficient. The solid reality of the houses: the creaking floorboards, the crumbling moldings, the rich variety of discoloration on the ceiling, as well as the sun and shadows of tree foliage on the walls and floors, and permeating it all, the aura of a longtime human habitation - all this was already so delightful and deeply moving, that even the stronger artworks installed there appeared either washed-out and dull, or else gaudy and superficial, like paper flowers and decorations from yesterday's party.

Becky Browns' piece at #307 in Colonel's Row was one of the few artworks that, to my eye, managed to hold their ground despite the overbearing presence of the house. I believe Brown's success was mainly due to the fact that she neither ignored nor fought the ambience of the place, but accepted it, letting it permeate the work and letting the work subtly modify the character of the house. Brown's piece was a room installation taking up the entire kitchen and part of the foyer.



Becky Brown, *No, said the Fruit Bowl*, 2014
installation view, Governors Island, NYC

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The stove, the fridge, the sink and some of the cabinets were crammed full of objects. What first registered as simply “stuff”, on closer inspection turned to be a haphazard collection of household items: bags and shoes, cords and pencils, books and magazines, telephones, remote controls, keyboards, printers, a bike’s wheel and saddle, a snow shovel, a pair of flippers... All the objects had been spray-painted white or pale yellow, matching the color of the kitchen’s cabinets and countertops and accidentally, the discoloration stains on the walls and ceiling. A few smaller appliances - a toaster, a coffeemaker, a radio - were similarly bursting with objects: children’s toys and school trophies, cutlery, pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, crumpled paper, bits of string - painted uniform white or pale yellow. Apart from these “spills”, the kitchen appeared almost normal - standard cabinets and utensils, none of them new, all neat and wiped clean. A table and two chairs completed the furnishing of the room: a desktop computer and a printer (spilling a small pool of debris) sitting on the table, a framed picture and a round clock hanging on the wall above it. The clock, the picture, the keyboard and monitor, were all painted matte white, and the clock was stopped at five minutes to five.

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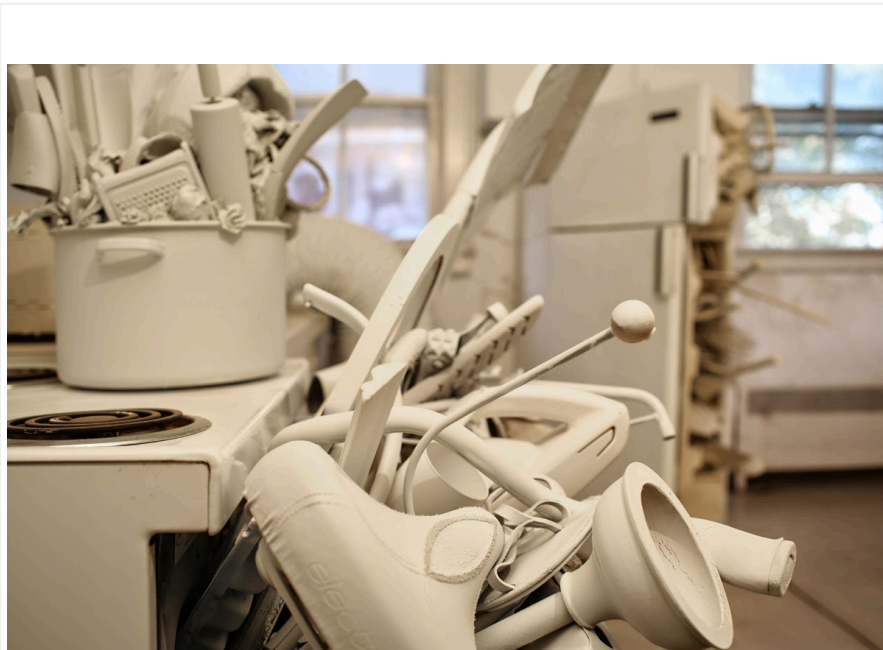
Becky Brown, *No, said the Fruit Bowl*, 2014
installation view, Governors Island, NYC

The simple gesture of painting everything identical flat color proved sufficient to partially defamiliarize the scene, and to make the piles of objects spilling out of kitchen appliances and containers look like some kind of organic material, the nightmarish emanation of the kitchen’s organism. It brought to my mind Victorian photographs of the paranormal, documenting the “ectoplasm” - the gauze-like white and grayish substance that was believed to spill from bodily orifices of mediums during trances. The uncomfortable mixture of familiarity and strangeness in Brown’s installation produced the feeling of uneasiness and almost dream-like suspense. Certainly, part of the effect was coming from the materiality of the kitchen itself, its authentic lived-in quality and the strong emotional weight associated with this part of the house. Kitchen is frequently a psychological center of a home; a space of femininity, it is usually perceived as nourishing and protective, but may also turn dangerous and even deadly. As a theme or referent, kitchen has been featured in thousands of artworks, many of them taking a feminist perspective - Martha Rosler’s classic *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) being perhaps the most famous example. Clearly, Brown’s work is part of this conversation. Even though the artist had requested a different part of the house to install her work, she was assigned to the kitchen, and the space helped to shape the meaning of the piece.



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It helped in other ways, too. Brown's sculptures, interventions and abstract paintings have a peculiar energy manifested through vivid colors, dynamic shapes, and slightly confrontational text messages. She has a knack for manipulating materials and imagery to produce immediate emotional impact. Her works do not just talk - they yell, argue, grumble, and generally clamor for the viewer's attention; they are emotional pieces, playful and humorous, and sometimes wicked. They do many things at once, but those things are often at cross purposes: materials, images and language clashing and sometimes negating each other. In the new installation, these difficulties were successfully overcome: the kitchen helped the artist to control the organic force of her work, to shape its incoherent emotional power into a definite sculptural form. The piece still talks and sounds a bit quarrelsome, but now only in the title: *No, said the fruit bowl*.



Becky Brown, *No, said the Fruit Bowl*, 2014
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Posted by [Tatiana Istomina](#) at 6:28 PM

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