

Criticism:

'Money' Attacks Commercialism of Art by Dennis Raverty (originally printed in the Des Moines Register, June 21, 2001 and reprinted by permission of the author)

Those who are tired of ponderous and difficult contemporary art will find a whimsical show of new work by Fred Truck at the Steven Vail Gallery in Des Moines.

The work highlights the adventures of Truck's creation, "Mr. Milk Bottle," a 1940s-style, pint-sized glass milk bottle that has been given big, Mickey Mouse feet and gloved hands and a strangely blank, robotic, non-cutesy face.

Available for sale on the premises are Mr. Milk Bottle T-shirts and Mr. Milk Bottle kitchen magnets, Mr. Milk Bottle bronze portraits, and a Mr. Milk Bottle fuzzy stuffed doll. There are even Mr. Milk Bottle "tattoos" like kids would find in boxes of Cracker Jack.

Truck, in effect, turns the gallery into a retail store - collapsing the separate activities of the art museum and the ever-popular museum shop-here in the setting of a related art world space, a commercial gallery.

It is obvious from the title, "It's All About Money," that the exhibit is a none-too-subtle critique of the crass commercialization of the art world - what the philosopher Theodore Adorno called the "culture industry."

The artist cynically refers to himself as the "CEO" of the "Badge of Quality Corporation."

The logo of the "corporation," for which Mr. Milk Bottle is the spokesman, is a green star on a blue field surrounded by a red circle. This logo is painted in shiny enamel paint in the very middle of the gallery floor as visitors walk in and is stamped like the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on everything.

The works in the exhibit are displayed like merchandise in a boutique.

"Mr. Milk Bottle in his Balloon Dream," identical desk-top-sized bronze figurines, are displayed on pedestals while behind them hangs a light box with a 40-inch tall display size photo of the bronze figurine. The photo is much bigger than the figurine itself, and looks like a lighted display sign in J.C. Penney or Sears that draws customers nearer to examine the product more closely.

The bronze "busts" of Mr. Milk Bottle are shown in the accompanying photo filled with flowers and used like a vase.

Truck used to be connected with the Fluxus movement during the 1970s. The movement was dedicated, among other things, to a vehement renunciation of commercialism and a rejection of the materialism of late Modern art (especially Minimalism). It favored aesthetic processes and intangible concepts that could not be bought and sold and so avoided what these artists considered to be the vulgar materialism of the art market. Some of the artists, such as Yoko Ono, got into conceptual art, Joseph Beuys into performance and Nam June Paik into video.

Truck's previous art, like theirs, avoided the marketplace.

He made artist's books in multiple for broad distribution (including an "illuminated manuscript" on the flamboyant Fluxus leader, George Maciunas), he designed an interactive CD-ROM, and he created a virtual reality computer simulation that let users fly in Leonardo da Vinci's bizarre, bat-winged flying machine.

Disappointed, he said, by his inability to actually sell much of this art, Truck apparently decided to become a "corporation" and make saleable merchandise, partially as a critique of the whole consumer society, but especially as a critique of the art world.

The artist claims it's all in fun, but the bland, expressionless face of Mr. Milk Bottle belies a deadening disillusionment with the whole enterprise of the artist in contemporary society.

Perhaps this aspect of the exhibit is best exemplified in the piece, "Visible Mr. Milk Bottle." It is based, the artist said, on those 1950s glue-together kit-models of the "Visible Man," a clear plastic figure through which the lungs, the heart, the colon, could be viewed.

The "Visible Mr. Milk Bottle" is transparent, like the "Visible Man" model, but instead of having insides, it is completely empty.

The emperor may have no clothes, but in this case it doesn't matter because it's not about art, it's about money.

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Criticism Bibliography

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