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Zeke Moores: In-Disposed

One traditional definition of an artwork is that it is an object lacking any utility beyond its aesthetic impact, that is, as an object whose function is as an object of thought. Regardless of where one stands on this definition, and on echoes of the craft vs. art debate it may engender, the fact remains that this thinking is ingrained in our ways of seeing and dealing with artworks. A result of this convention is that, for most of us, art is something essentially “useless.” That is, one doesn’t use a painting or sculpture for anything; one just looks at it. What else is a museum or gallery but a place designed to hold things for us to look at? “Look with your eyes, not with your hands,” we tell children visiting art museums, reinforcing the idea that art objects are to be regarded from a distance.

However one thinks about art as well or at least we in the arts hope someone does. Faced with a work of art, we hope that the initial impulse of the viewer will be to question, to ask “why?” That is, why does this object exist, and why is it somehow exterior to the everyday objects of our experience? Our ideal person encountering an artwork is an engaged viewer, who thinks about the work, who interrogates it, and who will, ultimately, complete the creation of the “art” in the artwork through this encounter. In short, to paraphrase Immanuel Kant, the Subject critiques the Object and, in so doing, creates meaning.

But let’s back up. Another tradition in our culture is that if things don’t have utility, then they are disposable. Of course, in our daily lives, few things are truly useless. We live surrounded by things that are in the process of being used, and of having their use exhausted. Of course these days, a thing need not be truly useless to be disposable.

Take a box, for instance. It is, at root, a very basic tool, designed to hold things, and made from cheap materials. Most boxes will be used once, maybe twice, and then discarded (or recycled). Whatever we do with them, once they’ve been unpacked, most boxes ultimately end up in the same place: a landfill. After all, we know that there will always be another box to hand when we need one.

But what are we to make of the boxes by Zeke Moores? At first glance, we may be fooled: the scatter of objects on the floor looks like nothing more or less than discarded cardboard boxes strewn randomly. It is only because they are in an art gallery that we pause and look more closely. Questioned, the works yield up an important fact: they are not made of cardboard at all, but of bronze. At the moment of that realization, they slip away from being utilitarian objects—though of course they would still function as boxes should one wish—to being *sculpture*. One could stop there, dismissing these carefully crafted objects as mere one-liners, but to do so would be to miss the point, would be to treat art as just another utilitarian object, something to be consumed, used up, and discarded. Many of us do just that; the artist's challenge is always to get the viewer to stop long enough for the questions to be posed, for the process of making meaning out of material to unfold in the viewer's consciousness.

These sculptures by Zeke Moores – any artwork really – are much like a box, packed by the artist with the potential to convey meaning. The viewer, by actively looking, unpacks the box, and constructs meaning in so doing. To go back to Kant, the Subject makes the meaning. Why should a Subject do this? Well, perhaps because the urge to make meaning is somehow intrinsic to humans, like opposable thumbs and an upright, bipedal gait. We think ourselves into being, and despite admonitions from all sides to stop making sense, we just can't seem to help it.

In critiquing an object, viewers make meaning from what they find—from their reading of the object, whether that reading is of text, paint, projected light, wood or metal. Of course, viewers can make whatever meaning they want from any object they are faced with—this isn't where the "art" lies in the art object. Rather, it lies in the repeated making of the same meaning, in the elegance of the combination of idea and material that leads almost any viewer to make the same construction of meaning.

But what possible meaning can we construct from a discarded cardboard box, a cheap beer cooler, a port-o-potty or a sheet of construction-grade plywood? These utilitarian objects, unlikely subjects of representation, should provide little fodder for thought, should be figuratively mute. However, they are not. Indeed, they lead the careful viewer to conclusions that speak to the history of sculpture, to the arbitrary ways that value is created and maintained, and to expressing resistance to our seemingly insatiable need to use everything up.

From the beginning of Modernism, sculpture's trajectory has been from statue to object to idea, in much the same way that painting's has been from picture to object to idea. As Postmodernism has shown, once you arrive at an idea, you can repack it with everything discarded along the way: ideas are

elastic in ways that categories are not. That is, an idea can simultaneously contain both the concepts “statue” and “object”, whereas the categories “statue” and “object,” formulated as terms of art discourse, cannot. That is the freedom of the “post” in art: we’re past the stage of certainty. It’s not that there are no rules; it’s that there are no limits.

In focusing on discarded objects, on tools that have been used up (boxes, pallets, crates, coolers, sheets of plywood), Moores situates his sculpture as a critique of consumerism, while presenting us with examples of the highest craftsmanship and technical skill. These works are the work of a virtuoso, the result of careful and meticulous labour, and of an unflagging attention to detail. A sheet of construction-grade plywood is a crudely made object, and capturing the crudeness of the plywood is not the result of simple mechanical reproduction, but of careful, thoughtful work. So too are the boxes, which so convincingly replicate the abject quality of the original models, the result of long, skilled labour.

Whether cast or fabricated, Moores’ takes on everyday objects lift them out of the realm of the disposable, of the temporary or the portable, and rematerialize them as objects of substance and weight, part of a long-standing discourse on the nature of the things we humans keep making. Beauty, says Kant, is a subjective response, one that inheres not in the object, but in the viewer’s reception. The work and the skill, however, are there, and it is their truth that sparks the feeling that what we are seeing is beautiful. The difference between making things and making meanings is never more apparent than in such seemingly simple work: the potential readings of this work are myriad and complex, but they are still finely focused through lenses of carefully wrought intention, honed by skill and technical prowess.

Too often we only see what we expect. Here, unexpectedly, we see what we so often miss.