

ARTFORUM

March 2014

Colby Bird
FITZROY GALLERY

"Rules: consistent dimensions, accurate Kodak Color Control Patch colorways, precise professional framing, careful art handling, correct installation, proper contextualization, sale of work." Whether the last of these items - listed, along with a set of "mediating actions" by Colby Bird as critical to his recent exhibition "Clyde Glenn Burns" - was realized may remain forever known to only the artist, his dealer and their actual or prospective collectors. I can report, however, that every other condition was met. Yet Bird's second solo outing here was far from the dry classic-Conceptual exercise that this deadpan prose poem might have led one to expect; it was, in fact, highly crafted, even sensual.



The show, named for "elderly handyman in Valley Mills, Texas" who exerted an unspecified influence over the artist, consisted of three bodies of work. Entries from Bird's "leisure" series (all works 2013) lines the walls, while three "Chair" sculptures occupied the floor and ten smaller objects, each titled House Lamp, sat on two shelves in the gallery's back office. The "leisure" works - murky photographs taken with a Polaroid Land camera, printed as negative images, and tinted brown with wood stain - were displayed in framed painted acid hues corresponding to colors from the aforementioned photographic matching system.

The "Chair" series makes use of one of Bird's favorite talismans, the still-popular "bentwood chair" designed by Michael Thonet in the late 1850's. Retaining the swooping lines that characterized the originals, the seats are reconfigured by Bird into eccentric new shapes. Curling upwards and outward in a way that partly returns them to their material's organic origins, they assume a wayward, Seussian precariousness.

Each also incorporates a natural element vulnerable to more than just woodworm: In one, a flower sprouts from a glass bulb of water; in another, a real orange joins carved apples, pears, and grapes. The perishable items, dubbed "entropic elements" in the press release, must be continually replaced. The move may be familiar from Arte Povera, and the binary not entirely true (wood also warps and decays), but Bird's light touch prevents it from ringing false.

lora reynolds gallery

“House Lamps” plays the same game of augmented appropriation at more modest scale, employing, among other materials, bits of reclaimed or reshaped timber as the structural supports for a variety of light bulbs, all at a size convenient for a domestic side table. In one, a tree stump sprouts a selection of frosted and mirrored bulbs; in another, a single bulb is sandwiched between two bricks. The designs – and, really, they would be indistinguishable from “pure” (albeit quirky) design in any other setting – are charming at first but soon begin to feel ingratiating, lacking as they do the combination of rigor and awkwardness apparent elsewhere in “Clyde Glenn Burns”.

The real action here, then, was in the gallery’s main space, where the struggle to forge physical and ideational connections between the images of figures, objects, and locations in the “Leisure” series – a woman emerging from a pool, and basketball on cracked concrete, a plane of dense foliage – and their loopy sculptural attendants became truly pleasurable. The artist’s deft juggling of nature and artifice allows his cultural references (far more muted here than in his earlier investigations of “bro” culture) to remain similarly suspended; the effect too is ambiguous, cool, almost evasive, but possessed of a visual flow that makes it tough to dismiss.

-Michael Wilson