

Art Lies no. 62, Summer 2009

Colby Bird, CRG Gallery
— By CHRISTINA LINDEN

A well-used, dorm-sized fridge stocked with 40s on a flimsy shelf was presented as an untitled sculpture in Colby Bird's 2007 two-person exhibition at CRG Gallery. The piece is often mentioned when characterizing the Austin-born artist's work. However, even a cursory familiarity with Bird's output suggests that two attributes separate his art from the broader category of trash sculpture into which it otherwise risks being subsumed: 1) precarious balance and 2) "boys-will-be-boys" posturing.

The fridge embodies these attributes perfectly. This work was made in the days before Unmonumental opened at the New Museum, which codified a trend toward sculptural assemblage using found and repurposed junk, so the risk I mention holds up mostly in retrospect. It is also important to note that this, Bird's second exhibition at CRG-and his first solo show in New York-lays significant emphasis on another element that sets him apart from the Unmonumental crowd: his photographic practice. Repurposing is used to some extent in both his sculpture and photography, but it's with the latter that the visible contrasts between subjectivities are much more evident.

A series of limited edition prints made from mass-produced posters-a decorative rendering of marijuana leaves, black and white landscape photography, a portrait of Tupac Shakur-are reproduced as pigment prints, crisscrossed with repetitive, calculated patterns applied with spray paint and then reproduced as silkscreens. In these works, Bird most clearly shows his interest in cultural fields mined and appropriated by the suburban middle class, including hip-hop and certain forms of "classy" baroque artwork.

Some pieces in the exhibition play out these concerns in more subtle and ambiguous terms. Old Money is shot from a window with a view of densely overgrown trees. An electric chandelier, a small framed artwork and a door leading back into the house are all reflected on the window glass. Forest creates a cheap artificial version of dense woodland growth for the interior, using a paper lantern and silk plants on panes of glass resting on empty cans of house paint. These images provide twin responses to desire: the search outside yourself for what you can call your own, while having your own reflected back at you; and staging what you crave within the space you inhabit on whatever terms you have at your disposal.

A massive banner occupies a large portion of one wall. There is not enough room to roll it out for complete legibility, but we can make out the word "SWAGGER" printed in huge pink letters on a black background. Paradoxically, it seems that Bird is overtly muting some of the bravado of earlier works that led to accusations of insincerity and boy-art irony. But a move toward building safe distance into his work seems more like a retreat than a step in any productive direction. This brings us back to assumption #1: Bird's position of precarious balance. The most successful inclusions in the exhibition hover between impish posturing and self-questioning criticality over the fetishism implied by appropriations that cross lines of race, gender and class. Clearly, Bird's work holds the most potential for provocation when he is willing to risk making himself present-or letting his presence be felt as subject.

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