



Conrad Bakker at Lora Reynolds
by Laura Lark
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The pursuits of a contemporary artist, particularly one whose work is largely conceptual - 1 -or not lucrative—often both—is a subject about which the general public has little understanding. Many MFA recipients enter their careers knowing they might never attain fame or fortune. Therefore, a society driven by consumerism likely has little insight into the bigger picture of what may drive an artistic practice—intellect, curiosity, playfulness, commitment and love, among other things. This idea is at the heart of *Relax and Take Your Fucking Time*, Conrad Bakker's show at Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin.

On his website, Bakker describes his ongoing *Untitled Projects* as an endeavor that “engages the careful construction and specific placement of carved and painted objects so as to critically comment upon and make tangible the everyday economies between persons and things and spaces.”

In Bakker's practice, this has meant a number of things. A viewer could, for example, encounter a box of Hefty brand garbage bags and realize, upon closer examination, that this “box” is actually a carved sculpture and that the images and text describing the product, while accurately depicted, are rendered in saturated oils and in a very painterly fashion.

Bakker has also made paintings of items up for auction on eBay, carefully reproducing the sellers' photographs of the items at a comparable scale. He then re-posts his paintings of postings and auctions them on the same site.

The objects and images in Bakker's world are not there to be consumed, dismissed and forgotten. They have been studied. They have been assigned value. Bakker presents them to the viewer requiring that he or she do the same.

Conrad Bakker derived the title and conceptual armature of his most recent show from a predictably generic and mass-marketed source: a spam email on the Internet.

Relax and Take Your Time: a command from a company hawking a Viagra-type product. The lucky reader, it suggests, doesn't have to worry about the frustrations of age or emotional setbacks concerning performance. Here you could take your time! Read a book! Grab a snack! No need to rush through this thing and not get the full enjoyment or, God forbid, do a half-assed job.

Appropriating this title, Bakker departs from the ideas of sexual enhancement (while still poking at our society's panicked desire to remain productive and “alert”) in order to address the lot of the artist in a society that values constant production and has very specific ideas about what it means to be “working.”

The concepts of toil and production are addressed in this new show in a number of poetic and beautifully crafted ways. *Untitled Project: CONE*, for example, an object typically positioned to divert traffic, is placed in the front of the gallery near the door.

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One would dismiss it if he or she wasn't looking carefully—it's remarkably, accurately rendered. A closer look, however, reveals brushstroke markings in brightly pigmented DayGlo orange paint.

The same effect is pulled off in even more mind-boggling ways with a Black and Decker workbench, Untitled Project: WORKMATE (Yogurt), and a portable electric sign, Untitled Project: SIGN (Relax and Take Your Time), with what appear to be removable plastic letters—the type one often sees in front of seedy bars along the roadside.

It is important to note here that it is clearly not the artist's intent to fool the audience's eye—at least, not for long. While Bakker's objects are deceptively real from a distance of even ten feet, one realizes just how much these works are to be read as singular, intimate, handmade crafts when closely considered. When the viewer nears one of Bakker's objects, one does not feel duped by not experiencing the "real" item. Rather, one is astounded by the amount of contemplation that had to have gone into "replicating" such a large and/or detailed thing. Bakker seems to be saying to his audience: "I've studied this intently; please take a moment and allow me to share this experience with you."

Image

Conrad Bakker, Untitled Project: CARAVAN [1975 Caravane eriba Familia Draguignan 2200€] 2010, Oil on panel, 7-1/2 x 10 inches

It is here, then, that the quoted spam command, "Relax and Take Your Time," falls short—and where Bakker lets us know that he is after more than an exploration of the object and one's superficial perception of it.

Relax and Take Your Fucking Time—still a command; still, possibly one pertaining to sexual performance. More likely, however, the added edge of anger in Bakker's directive points beyond the hungry consumer to a society that consumes the consumer. Is an artist necessarily bad if he or she does not commercially "put out"?

Should an artist punch a clock when he or she has a bright idea?

These questions strike a discordant note, since they point toward the clash between artistic practice and the economic structure of the society in which that practice takes place. And that clash forms a further theme of Relax and Take Your Fucking Time.

Oil-on-wood paintings are perched on small shelves about the gallery, each depicting a rather unremarkable travel trailer. The trailers themselves are a pale beige and obviously used. For the most part, they are set in verdant landscapes; parked in green, grassy areas surrounded by trees.

Bakker appropriated these images from the advertisements for the sale of each individual trailer and reproduced them on small wooden panels. All are 7.5"x10" and are entitled Untitled Project: CARAVAN (each includes the specific information found in the original ad). Their placement on small shelves gives them an intimate, jewel-like quality. And the paintings, like the carved objects throughout the gallery space, have the same fluid brushstrokes. They are at once images without sacrificing the distinctive "objectness" of Bakker's other creations.

The trailers as lone subjects seem somehow alien, as if their function has been spent and is now something offered up as second hand. The trailers are icons of "working class" leisure, getaways for people who spent their lives punching clocks, but, if they were lucky, got a week (or two!) of vacation a year. Only Bakker's lush reproduction of these objects reminds us of their original worth.

The conventional idea of leisure combined with the equally conventional symbols of functionality—particularly those associated with the American working class—is of particular interest in this exhibition. Whilst Bakker depicts objects associated with "work"—the orange cone, the portable sign, the amateur carpenter's workbench—these objects also signify slowing down or participating in leisurely activity. If all the objects and images in the gallery are taken to represent the portrait of an unseen individual, then this man or woman is clearly intent on leaving the workplace behind.

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Bakker's Untitled Project: LAWNCHAIR (Walden) is in itself an ode to the virtues of a life that permits an individual time for peaceful contemplation and repose. LAWNCHAIR (Walden), which appears to be an aluminum-framed lawn chair with green plastic webbing, seems to have been recently abandoned by its occupant, who has left an open copy of Henry David Thoreau's Walden at the base of the chair. Upon closer inspection, of course, both the chair and the book are hand carved and hand painted wood.

All of the objects in the show are of things that were mass produced and left behind—either possibly discarded, like CONE, or temporarily vacated, like LAWNCHAIR. Only one object struck this viewer as visually, though not thematically, jarring—and that is Untitled Project: PRODUCE (How to grow a Tomato Plant), a rendition of a thriving plant in a “plastic” bucket. Although Bakker's concept of taking one's time, even down to observing and harvesting one's own tomatoes, is as strong here (if not stronger) than in the other works, it is the representation and reproduction of organic matter rather than mass-produced objects that strikes one as slightly incongruous. As lovely and full of meaning as this work surely is, it seems a bit out of place. Perhaps Bakker intends more work in this vein; at present, nature's products, in comparison to human artifacts, seem slightly off-thesis.

However, because this piece, too, is beautifully crafted and is situated near a window, as if soaking up the sunlight, another interpretation suggests itself. Perhaps in contrast to the consumer-critical themed works, PRODUCE stands as a hopeful alternative. Maybe the artist, by including this piece in the exhibition, is conveying that consumers are actually able to create something worth having themselves.

If Bakker's message with his Untitled Project series wasn't clear before, it's certainly apparent now with this new exhibition at Lora Reynolds.

Sit down. Shut up. Think. Relax. Take your time.

No, wait. Relax and Take Your Fucking Time.

“There's a poetry to profanity.” -David Simon

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Image

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