

...might be good

a project of fluent-collaborative

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## I. Conrad Bakker's Slacker Economy at Lora Reynold's Gallery, New Video New Europe at Arthouse & A Stitch in Time at Women and Their Work

Conrad Bakker's Slacker Economy at Lora Reynold's Gallery

On view through January 7, 2006

On the night Chicago artist Conrad Bakker's show opened at Lora Reynolds Gallery, his trompe l'oeil oil on carved wood Orange Peels (2005) shared a windowsill with somebody's forgotten cup of eggnog. (See the image above.) Stowed behind a half-open door in the crowded gallery, the peels looked like a happy accident of color, a vermilion note some partygoer left to warm the only part of the room that was uninhabited.

Everywhere else, Austinites were busy relishing the allusion at the heart of Slacker Economy. The show is dominated by a central tableau: atop a weirdly diminutive folding table sit what appear to be thirty-two copies of the same VHS tape. The tapes, of course, are not really video tapes, but blocks of wood carved and painted to resemble tapes—complete with covers. The film in question is Richard Linklater's Slacker, the great period piece about Austin in the early nineties. The table isn't really a table either. Much like the "tapes," if one were to try folding the table, it wouldn't work. The proportions are off. Behind the table, a wooden poster for the film completes Bakker's sculptural sketch of a video store. For the duration of this show, the gallery will go into the business of rentals: you can check out a wooden video for three nights for just a few dollars.

In other corners of the room, carved wood poses in such diverse forms as a stepstool with a madly unraveled cassette tape placed delicately upon it like a ring on a pillow. There is also a shopping bag with a book inside of it and a cheery red ashtray with several wads of pink chewing gum stuck to it. But, Slacker Economy's virtuoso piece has to be the sequence of tiny paintings that depict Slacker-themed T-shirts Bakker found on eBay. A close second is the post-it note (yes, a post-it note carved out of wood) that reprimands: PAY FUCKING ATTENTION!

The warning is timely. It's too easy to waltz through this alternate reality of objects with thoughtless delight. At the Q&A session held during the opening, people in the gallery asked Bakker earnest questions about the work's comment on globalization and the consumer economy. Afterward, we all milled around the room examining the objects, which gleamed like Christmas toys under the gallery's flattering lights. Maybe it was just

# lora reynolds gallery

the eggnog, but the glazed look of a shopper's happiness seemed to prevail among the crowd.

Bakker's art, in recent years, has given form to various permutations of the concepts in Slacker Economy. In *Untitled: Mail Order Catalog* (2002), Bakker produced a book of his signature tricky objects, all meticulously carved and painted to resemble the sorts of products that attractive commercial photography might enticed you to buy. A chunky pair of binoculars graced the cover. Like the table in the show at Lora Reynolds Gallery, the binoculars called up all the appropriate associations—I could imagine holding them to my eyes as I gazed over a vista somewhere in the mountains, etc.—but they also seemed less than functional and were a little too cute to be real binoculars. Like the orange peel, ashtray, post-it note, and VHS tapes, the binoculars belonged in some grown-up version of a Fisher-Price toy cabinet.

At the opening, I wondered how many people might have been thinking about the larger, architectural irony of what we were all doing to cement the meaning of Bakker's project simply by being there. The seedy, small-time urban core that is much of Slacker's setting (and subject) was right beneath our feet, or beneath the still shiny-new layers of concrete and elaborate plumbing that support the large retail/residential complex of which the gallery is a part. In 1990, some urban centers did not have the cache they do now. Downtowns were unfashionable and under-populated; in place of the posh businesses at the intersection of 6th and Lamar, just down the street from Lora Reynolds Gallery, there was a used car lot. Bakker's work referenced a now-lucrative tradition of homage to these older, dustier days.

In Bakker's art and the world we share with it, appearance and reality have become fatally confused. Plato contended that artists are finally contemptible because they "lie." "Which is the art of painting designed to be—an imitation of things as they are or as they appear —of appearance or of reality? (The Republic, Book X) We might make the same complaint of the advertising industry, or of the eBay images on which Bakker based his tiny paintings, which are, themselves, now being sold on eBay as art. The subject of Bakker's work, refreshingly, is not the vast conspiracy of systems that order our lives in a consumption-driven society. Rather, it is the minute and personal affections that drive us to consume and consume again. Bakker shows us how we fix these affections perhaps more on surfaces than the objects we so desire. And, if we clue in to the systems that drive what we are doing, that seems to be okay with him.