



Bird's thoughtful compositions Austinite returns for sculpture-centric show at Lora Reynolds Gallery

By Luke Quinton
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Colby Bird is gracious and tall, with waves of red hair and a few lines of silver. His ideas flow quickly, and as he makes a statement about his work, he often follows with a thought that undercuts it, as if he's pursued by a sort of art theory subconscious that runs parallel to his speech.

Bird is an Austinite, a graduate of LBJ High School who migrated to the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn nearly a decade ago, and he has seen his work travel, including a recent acquisition by the Whitney Museum of American Art.

But the acquisition Bird seems happiest with is the one that hangs in the gym at LBJ, a 28-foot long banner that says "SWAGGER." It was a carefree piece from more innocent times, when Bird was reflecting on his path in life and the strange emotional effect that high school has. "I didn't think twice about it. I made it and I was just so proud of it," Bird says.

"Dust Breeds Contempt" is Bird's second show at the Lora Reynolds Gallery, a mix of sculpture and photography that considers physical labor's relationship with objects of art. The questions are similar, but there are new layers of abstraction.

Bird created small sculptures from sliced chair parts that he sawed, sanded, then contorted into abstract shapes that are fluid and precarious.

Oh, and they are resting on fruit. An apple and orange, and two more "fruits" out of alabaster, which works better for permanent installation. Bird wants the fruit to evoke the passage of time, the fact that it will degrade.

Circling somewhere near Duchamp's ready-made territory (the re-packaging or alteration of common household objects), Bird is scuffing the chair's finish, and divorcing it from function by chopping it up and using the parts.

The best sculpture, though, is "Cord," a spiral twist of stacked 2x4s. They're painted white with unfinished edges and blend haphazard patina of studio dirt with a precise shape.

This exhibit as a whole is "an attempt to speak to two different crowds at the same time," says Bird. He wants to value physical work and keep "a connection" to manual labor.

This generation of artists does seem more preoccupied with showing its work. Good art, of course, has always required a great deal of work, whether that work is creating a concept, technical skill or an instant of inspiration that incubated for years in the artist's head.

"There's a lot of guilt involved with being an artist," Bird says. "Defining yourself as an artist still seems somewhat unfair."

Perhaps it's an increasingly unbalanced economy that makes artists display the skill and hours behind a piece. They want to stack layers of meaning, as if to ward off the layman's stereotypical, knee-jerk response that scoffs: "I could make that." And we've all said that.

No one seems to be complaining about this trend yet. After all, cleverness abounds in a golden age for new media and techniques.

Bird represents these considerations, but some of his new work adds a little distance, both conceptually and personally.

"33," a piece with interlocking wooden No. 3s, hit a little too close to home (it's Bird's age and basketball star Larry Bird's uniform number), so he added a third "3."

Although it's presented almost as an afterthought, Bird is a gifted photographer, too.

There is a crispness to his color palette and focus, and a sort of Rococo richness to the composition.

And there's a feeling of intrigue, too. A doll sits on a couch, its face turned from the camera in "Howdy." In "Easter," colored eggs sit on table prepared for the holiday, on a wrinkled white tablecloth.

The focus of Bird's photographs works an entirely different art muscle. It's more contained, less obscure.

Unfortunately, only one photo is displayed each day.

Many photographers have based their careers on less.