

STYLE DEPOT

David Varno

It's nearly impossible to imagine a newspaper headline ten years ago with the phrase "...PRESIDENT'S DOMESTIC SPY PROGRAM." Yumi Janairo Roth's work doesn't specifically have to do with surveillance, but her *Disco Barriers*—meticulously mirror-encrusted police barriers—subvert authoritative measures against movement. They reflect with their mirrors what's going on, in a way that everyone (not just the man behind the camera) can see. They evoke movement, rather than restrict it.

We live in the age of the terror meter. The National Threat Level gauge invokes the nuclear age in so many frightening ways. Homeland Security instructions to the citizenry are as nonsensical and inapplicable as "Duck and Cover," but without any of the glee. Roth has fixed that glitch, by appropriating the icons and messages found on the DHS site www.ready.gov into the home decorating cache. Hand towels are machine embroidered in mass-production style with the government's anesthetized images of bio-chem warfare, and displayed behind safety glass. And cement traffic barriers, familiar on sidewalks in front of tall buildings and courthouses, are dressed up in satin slipcovers.

The re-imagination of these symbols invokes the avant-garde, inflicting double vision rather than a clear single-mindedness. They are also irony-laden and iconoclastic. But the immanent use of mundane and mass-produced images is engineered in a way that presents a positive transcendence of modern/contemporary society and its social framework. Michelle Grabner, in discussing Roth's recent work, concludes: "Roth asserts mass taste onto Minimalism's reductivism." And of course it's a taste for both the high and the low—or rather, a taste immune to that distinction entirely. Duchamp's ready-mades were individually signed, Grabner reminds us, but his work raised questions of ownership and creative control over implications of mass production. Roth alludes to mass

production, specifically with her *Domestic Tranquility* dish towels, the logo for which was digitally transferred and embroidered at a t-shirt shop, which suggests the possibility of the item's potential for bulk distribution.

Roth's rhetoric regarding interior design motives is as strong as her outdoor subversions. "What better way to alert the public," she asks in her statement, "than by placing highly decorative (and vitally informative) signage on their housewares?" Our faith in the brands of home decoration is paired with the notion that if we trust the design—the icon—then our safety is assured. Our trust is not in the institution behind the design, but in the iconography itself—the icons that dictate our activities and environment. We decorate and furnish our homes to insulate ourselves from the outside world as part of our longing for the ideal; Roth's juxtaposition of decoration and safety reveals that feelings of safety are desired, not real (Rodgers).

Dressed up shipping pallets and barriers are here and accompanied by a series of photos that show the work in site-specific situations. *in situ Houston: Officer Jay* (2005) captures the institutional response. Suddenly a police officer is caught up in his own reflection, and redirected by a tool of his own department. Though he is shot from an upward, Orson Wells-authority-invoking angle, and his face is wrinkled in condescension, one can see he is genuinely caught off guard; out of step; and perhaps even brought to a magnanimous repose.

Before a recent show at the Lawndale Art Center, Roth installed the slipcovered cement barriers on the streets of Houston, for perhaps a more fleeting moment than that of other site-specific projects, such as Thomas Hirschhorn's, whose *Precarious Construction* (Münster, 1997) was a sidewalk construction site cut out with windows revealing icons from televisions to automobile logos. Though Roth's recent work is transplanted,

the photographs provide decent evidence, and illuminate the works' potential in their natural setting. At Sarah Bowen Gallery is a photograph of the barrier in another scene—a Boulder, CO construction zone. Waylaid among uncovered barriers, the satin-ensconced block is a diamond in the rock, an anomaly queuing to leave this waste-pace for public view.

The decorated shipping pallets are perhaps the strangest of her pieces. Four wooden pallets, ornately carved and inlaid with mother of pearl, are displayed in a front corner of the space. Shipping pallets travel the world; they are rigorously recycled and borne to bear the brunt of labor (the weight of the world?). But what happens when they are held onto and decorated—so that they no longer blend in a crowded warehouse? Her designs suggest the resistance to assimilate—in transit, in travel, in immigration.

As an artist in residence in the Philippines in 2005, Roth spent a fair amount of time riding the semi-public *jeepney* transit service. After WWII, Filipinos took US Army jeeps and modified them; now *jeepneys* are the most common form of public transportation in Metro Manila. There is no map or formal infrastructure; riders adapt to the system's folkways of navigation and payment. To acclimate herself, Roth designed maps. For the service of novice riders (and perhaps the consideration of veterans) she installed them on the walls and roofs of the shuttles. The photos she took capture the passengers' bewilderment and surprise, as they are caught attempting to make sense of a system they already know. The project, *Small Acts of Public Service*, raises questions about maps' overall function, and about who they really serve.

A look at the *jeepneys*' exterior design lends a further clue to Roth's crafting of the shipping pallets. The shuttles are actually quite beautiful in some cases, in a charming local way. The

frames are often painted in bright shades of purple, pink, yellow, etc., and pasted with a myriad collage of images.

Psychoanalyst Michael Balint reminds us that modern art's greatest contribution to humanity is that it has sophisticated us to the world's discordances (Kuspit). It has illuminated them; made oppression obsolete; healed us from the pain and fear of the modern, mechanized world. We no longer need to adjust to cement infrastructures or commodified living. It's already happened; the anesthesia is given. In our world, reality is veiled from the common passerby by symbols of fear and control, and people are freaked out all over again. Cement sidewalk barriers serve no real protective function; they are in place to remind us of certain (or abstract) dangers. Roth's objects, incongruously decorated and displaced, are not polemic negations—they lend an ambiguous vision of another possible reality, through 3-D or X-Ray glasses. Her juxtapositions turn the system upside down and shake out shredded scraps of classified information. And they invite the viewer to, instead of throwing a brick, to make a jungle gym.

David Varno writes regularly for the *Brooklyn Rail*, and is based in Brooklyn, NY.

Michelle Grabner, "Arts Not Fine, Postmodern Constructions: The Art of Yumi Janairo Roth." Exhibition catalog, Wriston Art Center, 2000.

Yumi Janairo Roth, Artist's statement 2006.

Timothy Rodgers, "Decorating Tips for Subverting Authority." Exhibition catalog, Lawndale Art Center, 2005.

Donald Kuspit, "A Critical History of 20th Century Art." *Artnet Magazine* 14 December 2005: www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit12-14-05.asp