

# Arts Not Fine

## Post-modern Constructions: The Art of Yumi Janairo Roth

by Michelle Grabner

*There has always been decoration. There always will be. Decoration is a wide, amorphous practice engaged by all cultures. It would be a mistake therefore to see the decorative arts as a natural grouping with an internal logic. Their collectivisation in the present context is to do with negative circumstances, with the consolidation of a hierarchical classification system within the European visual arts. There came to be, to use Walter Crane's phrase, 'the fine arts, and the arts not fine.' The decorative arts were, and are, disenfranchised art: the arts not fine. They bring two things simultaneously to craft: art, and the crisis of being denied the status of art.*

Peter Dormer, *The Culture of Craft*

The beauty of Yumi Roth's art resides in the effectiveness in which it reattaches style to the ordinary, mystery to ornamentation, and perfectionism to the mundane. By subjecting everyday visual elements to the platitudes of modern thought and critical thinking, Roth's sculptural forms become icons of personal taste that navigate a circuitous path from High Modern design to the banal and back again. She does not criticize the shortcomings and coded aesthetics of everyday life; instead she works to redeem them.

This recasting of modern abstraction and decoration starts in Roth's search for disassociated ornamentation. Coffeepots, contact paper and transfer-ware are some of the sources for her monumental Formica-tag wall pieces. Kitschy contemporary reprisals of Art Deco motifs bedecking cinema complexes throughout the suburban United States are yet another, albeit highly bastardized, source for her series of upholstered wall friezes. Like Los Angeles artist Michael Gonzalez, who layers the actual blue, yellow and red dots that comprise the recognizable packaging of Wonder Bread into hypnotic paintings, all of Roth's projects reveal a commercial and capital compliance within the construct of art.

Delicate Formica patterns, fields of high-relief flora motifs, clean lines and decorator colors comprise the visual vocabulary of Roth's giant sample chip series. Appropriating the form of the laminated take-home sample—common in the kitchen and bathroom departments of any home improvement superstore—Roth asserts mass taste onto Minimalism's reductivism. Ironic in their scale, yet convincing in their craft and accuracy, these "samples" symbolically bridge the fissure between Crane's "fine arts and the arts not fine."

And yet more interesting still, these works consistently tug at the dichotomy of values that have come to separate art and design, design and craft, and art and craft. These dichotomies—machine-made vs. handmade, mass-market product vs. discreet object, innovative vs. traditional, sophisticated vs. vernacular, male vs. female, the workshop vs. studio—break down in her work. Roth's assortment of giant sample chips instead represent a changing, porous world of exaggeration, an agglomeration of taste and visual delight. Her work marks a disinterest in the polemic and erodes the edges of the conventional models of high art.

Working within a cultural zeitgeist informed by both Clement Greenberg and the obsessive ornamentation of the Victorian era, the conceptual underpinnings of Roth's projects are also present in the works of fellow post-modernists such as George Stoll, Jim Isermann and Pae White. These contemporary artists, like Roth, recycle style and design from 1950s interior decoration, thrift stores, and flea markets. It is a social/cultural trickle-down effect. Originally influenced by Jean Arp's biomorphs or Alexander Calder's mobiles, modernist motifs became popular motifs and now accumulate as outdated and unstylish fodder on Salvation Army or Goodwill shelves until they are rescued and remade into art. Art critic David Pagel sees in this provocatively unoriginal work "a profoundly democratic impulse."

In addition to appropriating a pre-existing visual vocabulary from the coffers of modernism and the bins of kitsch, Roth's practice proposes that beauty and value are just as likely to be built from the bottom up. For Roth, beauty is not just a construction of elitist exclusivity, it is a product of populist taste, mass production, and unfashionable pleasures. In her artist statement she underscores this assumption by explaining, "My questioning of traditional hierarchies between materials and processes elevates the 'mundane' and diminishes the 'valuable,' thereby creating an ironic inversion of the viewer's visual expectations." She continues, "When reduced to preferences of color and form, 'taste' appears arbitrary and idiosyncratic, much like shopping for wallpaper."

Subjecting ultra-suede and faux granite laminate to the rigors of craftsmanship and a fanatical work ethic, Roth's sculptural process has as much to do with shopping, home improvement projects, and hobby activities, as it does with metalsmithing, woodworking, quilting and installation. She is honest about her material sources, their economic hierarchy and social positioning in the everyday world; no tricks or gimmicks or illusions are involved in the construction of these artifacts. They are products of art, as well as signs of white-collar rank, class and taste.

A subtext within all of Roth's projects is nostalgia. Best described by Los Angeles art critic Susan Kandel in a 1998 essay titled *Blink Twice* as "a kind of willing homesickness," the nostalgic quality of Roth's work is not "excessive sentimentality or even vague yearnings for an irrecoverable past" but instead "a cultivated passion for that which is both familiar and sympathetic." All of her work induces an empathic response. It is a domesticated Pop experience. Sometimes Roth's constructions are keys to stylistic success, as in the Formica sample chip series, and sometimes they foretell its demise, as in the soft-sculpture architectural fragments.

"A sensibility," writes Susan Sontag in the 1964 *Notes on Camp*, "is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tool of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea." Roth empowers our personal sense of taste while challenging high art's preference for originality and genius. Her exquisite constructions attest to an arena of production that employs both material quality and a structural logic. Hers is an agenda that does not distinguish high from low, modernism from daily life.

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