

Yumi Janairo Roth *Untitled*
Furniture dollies, walnut, rattan, steel
2007

GIMME SHELTER

“Gimme, gimme shelter or I’m gonna fade away.” When we think of shelter we tend to think of the physical space where we live. But shelter is more than that. It is a sense of well-being, a place where we feel welcome, loved, safe, and “at home” with ourselves. Seeking comfort amongst discord is an eternal human quest and these lyrics, written by the Rolling Stones in the context of the late 1960s, capture a fundamental human yearning for calm amidst the storm of existence. War, terrorism, globalization, and environmental degradation all threaten our contemporary sense of self. In the twenty-first century the idea of a global village is perhaps not as utopian as it would seem. Attendant with our greater human mobility is the faster spread of disease, ramped up global warming, rising nationalism and fundamentalism, and perpetual human exploitation by way of human trafficking and undocumented labor. As people and goods travel more rapidly around the globe it seems that instead of wholeness people feel more fractured, unmoored, and vulnerable. The disassociated and de-centered subject is antithetical to the idealistic notion that we are all “citizens of the world” rather than of individual nations.

This uprooted feeling, however, is not altogether detrimental. As a traveler knows it is the feeling of disorientation in a new place that enlivens the sense and makes the everyday seem new again. Feeling ungrounded forces us to creatively re-think our identities. As humans we are adaptable animals and we tend to adjust to each new environment. The exhibition *Ruminant* offers us a look at the ways in which four different artists take in information from their surroundings, reprocess it, and reformulate it in an effort to discover just what it is that makes us feel secure, grounded, and whole.

Yoonmi Nam has lived in Korea, Canada, Japan, and the Midwestern United States. Each of these places has contributed to her sense of self yet each has at times left her feeling alienated. For Nam, the foreign and the familiar are enmeshed and she is never truly comfortable in any one place. This sense of estrangement informs her work as she tried to create an imaginary space “where different works co-exist.” Her delicate architectural drawings depict structures in transition. Initially they give us the impression that the buildings are being destroyed by time, neglect, poverty, or by the forces of nature—tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and tornadoes. But as we linger over them we realize that perhaps these are not ruins but rather sites of construction. These unpeopled images become metaphors for impermanence. It is these transitional spaces that fascinate Nam as she continuously attempts to orient herself within one location.

Similar to Nam, Ling-Wen Tsai also yearns for a sense of belonging. Raised in Taiwan and now living in Portland, Tsai often feels foreign in both western and eastern cultures. Her rooftop photographs are meditations on disorientation. Cropped so that there is no frame of reference, the puddles



that have accumulated on the rooftops appear as abstractions. They reflect inverted portions of sky, trees, and buildings but the images are fractured. There are areas of dull grey that interrupt the shimmering reflections. The viewer may be tempted to fill in the gaps but that would disrupt the tranquil and contemplative beauty of the image as is. By subverting expectations Tsai induces us to accept a certain amount of rupture as it signifies that transience is the natural order of life.

While Nam and Tsai seek the universal in the personal, Yumi Janairo Roth’s perspective is less individual. She uses everyday objects as symbols for the ways in which our external environment is controlled and transitory. Her shipping pallets and furniture dollies become representatives of a global economy while her wooden barricades become stand-ins for an increasingly controlled public space. Shipping pallets and furniture dollies are ubiquitous yet they are barely noticed. In a sense they are guest workers, invisible and uprooted yet indispensable to the world market. These objects are most often generic and nondescript so Roth has altered them by hand. Each one bears distinct decorations of delicate in-laid mother of pearl or fragile caning or intricate carving. In this way she explores how ornamentation transforms each piece. Roth takes a similarly decorative “pimp my ride” approach to the ubiquitous wooden sidewalk/traffic barricade. By plastering them with tiny disco ball mirrors she subverts their authority and makes them more inviting. By glamming up otherwise barely noticeable objects Roth asks questions about comfort, safety, and displacement.

In a similar way, Adriane Herman takes items that would normally be discarded and transforms them. Herman has collected an archive of other people’s shipping and “to do” lists as a way to ascertain human action and intention and to reveal the human compulsion for order. List-making is often a coping mechanism and a way to organize an otherwise chaotic world. By recreating these lists in a more permanent and labor-intensive medium, Herman makes them monumental. Like a forger, she copies the look of the list as closely

as possible into a clay medium and then burnishes the surface to a fine polish. In this way, they are transformed into culturally significant artifacts. Each list reveals individual characteristics about its anonymous writer. Some are neat, others are messy. While many of them list food items, some are statements of intention: “Get colored yarn. Only wool, no acrylic,” or “Lunch, check-in, nap, movie, dinner, drinks, sex, breakfast.” One particular list even has corrected spelling. Unlike more public documents these bits of scrap paper exhibit inventories that were never intended or anyone but the writer. By monumentalizing this mundane activity, Herman shows us a raw and unrefined version of our own transient objectivism.

Each of these artists transforms the inconsequential in order to reveal something about our desire for permanence, comfort, and safety. They focus on things that are often over-looked—generic midwestern structures, rooftops, pallets, dollies, barricades, and lists. By doing so, they remind us that no matter how insignificant or out of place we feel, if we can transform and ground ourselves, we will never “fade away.”

Nadine Wasserman is an independent curator and art critic. She previously held positions as Curator of Exhibitions at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at the State University of New York at New Paltz, Curator of the Wriston Art Galleries at Lawrence University, and Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

RUMINANT

August 27-October 19, 2008

ARTISTS

Adriane Herman
Ling-Wen Tsai
Yumi Janairo Roth
Yoonmi Nam

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