

Caren Lorber at Sweet Inspiration

At first glance the assemblages of Caren Lorber, on view at Sweet Inspiration, 2123 Fillmore Street, the first week of June, struck me as too obvious and “cute” to warrant much consideration as “Art.” However, this thought left me uneasy, and wondering to what extent I have internalized ideologies responsible for excluding a range of cultural expressions based on traditional aesthetic hierarchies and object classification. Recognizing that the distinction between art and culture is somewhat arbitrary, and wanting to expand the parameters of what we consider to be “Art,” I went back to look and consider the work more carefully and in fact found much going on beneath the surface.

Caren Lorber is an assemblage artist whose work is formed by appropriating an assortment of trinkets, fabrics, and reproduced images collected and purchased, to conjure imaginary personas, places, and emotional states, set in self-contained frames. According to Lorber, the intent of the work is “to bring to viewers a smile of childhood recognition, a moment of joyfulness to their heart and a reminder of the transformative powers of simple playfulness.” It is the mode of construction and object choices however, that situates the work in a complex network of social discourses, and gives the work its significance.

In *The Queen* (2000) for example, various materials and objects are combined to convey concepts associated with royalty. Here, a humanoid form is anchored on an emerald green and metallic gold wallpaper background. A rectangle remnant of textured green fabric is placed at the lower left corner. The outline of the “Queen’s” head is formed by a design pattern in the wallpaper. Two gold artificial flowers with circular black earrings at the center represent the “eyes.” Rhinestone loop earrings locate the “ears” and a bespectacled plastic joke store nose is placed at the center of the face. A square dresser handle, recessed at the center, forms the “mouth,” complete with a plastic cigarette. A multi-string beaded necklace functions as the hair and supports a small gold crown. Beneath the mouth is a fringed curtain sash that is gathered and sewn at the top to resemble a free flowing “Empire dress.” Protruding from the sides of the dress are the figure’s “arms” — formed from flower stems and complemented by gold plastic hands — one holding a minuscule Racing Form. The arms extend outward and upward in a celebratory gesture. The figure’s legs are constructed from two green and gold Sherman cigarettes supported by green dice “feet.” At the viewer’s lower right corner, a tiny plastic replica of a camera is placed above a refrigerator



magnet proclaiming “Its Good to be Queen.” In juxtaposition to the magnet is a miniature figure of a Beefeater guard. At the opposite corner, a circular replica of an early cartographer’s map of the world hovers above a galleon sailing vessel. Above the map is an Egyptian coat of arms that depicts two sphinxes, back-to-back, sitting on top of wings associated with the Egyptian goddess Isis.

Attached to the map is a small replica of a champagne bottle.



Lorber’s personal aim in assembling this constellation of assorted materials, trinkets, and charms is to transform them into whimsical tales, imaginary characters or someone journeying through life, she says. It is their arrangement however, and the viewer’s familiarity and experience of these artifacts that gives the work its social significance.

In fact, the work functions because we as viewers are sufficiently socialized to recognize these objects and make associations that extend beyond the color of the wallpaper background, to conceptualize metaphorical phrases like “green backs,” or “worth its weight in gold.” Thus, just as “green” and “gold” can allude to wealth through a linguistic color-coding, the placement of objects in particular locations can render a legible face based on prior knowledge, just as the arrangement of dots and a line in a circle signifies a “smiley face.” It is this strategy of juxtaposing and orchestrating familiar objects/commodities — which here function like pictographic phrases — that gives meaning to the work.

What is perhaps less visible is how the words or images that we take for granted go undetected as inherited, contested, and embodied power relations. So, while a galleon ship placed on a map of the world can — when paired with an image of a bottle of champagne — stand for a desirable globetrotting lifestyle, it can just as easily stand for a history of slavery and colonization, which formed the basis for empires and royalty, kings and queens.

It is within these various relations of power — private and public — that the work is situated and metaphorically engaged, unconsciously demonstrating how identities are constructed in contemporary society. They are formed by the commodities and images we collect and consume. When condensed, they form individual portraits and constructed personas much like *The Queen*.