

## Trends

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## Use Your Illusion

By Hilarie M. Sheets

***Contemporary sculptors are tricking the eye and the mind with uncannily realistic objects***

In the legendary contest of artistic ability in ancient Greece, Zeuxis thought he had won a victory when his painted grapes looked so real they attracted birds—that is, until Parrhasius moved to unveil his own painting and revealed the curtain itself to be an illusion. The age-old idea of *trompe l'oeil*—fooling the eye with astounding realism—has taken on new dimensions among contemporary artists, particularly those sculptors whose work confounds the viewer in shared physical space. Lavishing time and often extraordinary materials on mimetic renditions of the highly ordinary—a garbage bag, an aging man, a suburban kitchen—artists make us look twice and fill us with wonder, bafflement, delight, and discomfort.

“*Trompe l'oeil* was once a measure of how well an artist could paint, but over the last century skill alone has rarely been enough to make an artwork interesting,” says artist Alison Elizabeth Taylor, who was inspired to learn wood inlay in graduate

school after seeing the Duke of Urbino’s Renaissance studiolo, installed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its fantastic *trompe l'oeil* books and instruments. Taylor adapts the painstaking marquetry technique to render slices of destitution in American life, including a corner piece recently on view at James Cohan Gallery in New York that appears to be layers of peeling linoleum flooring.

“I’m not really trying to fool the eye into thinking that the flooring is actual, but I am using *trompe l'oeil* in materials not as malleable as paint, hoping to create a perceptual experience that stops viewers and invites them to consider the subject more deeply,” the artist says.

“*Trompe l'oeil* is the hook that draws us in,” says curator Siri Engberg, who has brought together more than 50 artists trafficking in the hyperreal for her show “Lifelike,” at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis



Photograph of Patrick Jacobs working on *Raked Leaves*, 2008, a miniature “diorama” viewed through a three-inch window.

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through May 27. “Then comes the moment of the uncanny—what am I really looking at? These are things that are very pedestrian and potentially overlooked—a paper bag, an eraser, a sleeping bag—that the artist has brought back to life either through very different materials or just through sheer, systematic labor.” For “Lifelike,” Yoshihiro Suda carved what looks like weeds growing out of a crack in the floor in a remote corner of the gallery, using magnolia wood painted to perfect verisimilitude. The piece is so inconspicuous that viewers could easily walk by without noticing it. Jud Nelson made a dead ringer for a stuffed white Hefty garbage bag that on closer inspection proves to be chiseled from marble. Its undulating surfaces summon up ideas of classical drapery.

Also in the show is what looks like a child’s plastic chair with a box of tissues on it, by Robert Gober. With time comes the nagging feeling that something’s a little off—the flowers on the tissue box are actually hand painted, the chair is curiously modeled—and then the label reveals that it’s all made of bronze.

“When you know that the painted tissue box is bronze, you know that it is unnaturally heavy, and then the meanings start to flow from the physical thing itself,” Gober has said about this piece, which is based on items present in his psychiatrist’s office. “This object was the silent companion to my talking cure.”

“It’s a meditation on the object and the elevation of the mundane,” says Tom Sachs, who, for his recent show at Sperone Westwater in New York, placed exact facsimiles of a car battery and a cinder block on a “plywood” pedestal, all cast from bronze. “I love batteries because they store all that potential energy, and the cinder block is one of those incredible miracle materials that has provided housing for people who previously wouldn’t have been able to afford it.” Sachs recognized that not all viewers noticed the transformation in materials.

All of these artists play with the space of the encounter, which Engberg argues stretches back to Marcel Duchamp’s practice of plucking ordinary objects from life and placing them in the context of the museum as “readymades.” But rather than just taking a urinal, say, and putting it in a gallery, contemporary artists are “taking an object from life, lovingly remaking it, and putting it in the gallery.” Elizabeth Armstrong, curator of contemporary art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, calls it the “reverse readymade,” a phenomenon she has seen over the last decade or two. “It’s taking Duchamp and standing him on his head—this notion of returning to what art used to be, beautifully crafted handmade objects, but in fact they look like throwaways.”

Armstrong is showing a number of artists making such works in the exhibition “More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness,” opening at SITE Santa Fe in July and traveling to Minneapolis next March. Among the curious objects on view will be old-fashioned boxing gloves by Dario Robleto that are actually made from a mind-boggling list of materials: cast-and-carved bone charcoal, a melted vinyl record of Leadbelly’s “The Titanic,” broken male hand bones, ground coal, horsehair, dirt, pigments, lead salvaged from the sea, string, and rust.

“He mixes them as an alchemist would to make these poetic relics,” says Armstrong, noting that viewers would have to read the label to know that the gloves weren’t “real.” “He’s interested in moments in our history as Americans when different groups were kept out of the center, whether African Americans or American Indians, and asking us to think about these moments again through objects.”

While some artists make mimetic still-life objects for contemplation, others turn to figuration. Duane Hanson was a pioneer in this mode, with his perfect one-to-one-scale doppelgangers—a museum guard or tackily dressed tourists—going almost unnoticed in the gallery until you realize that they are frozen in space. In “Lifelike,” Engberg has included Hanson’s *Janitor*, from 1973, as a precursor to more recent pieces by Charles Ray, Ron Mueck, and Evan Penny. These contemporary sculptors all give immediate cues that their figures aren’t real—shifts in scale, radical cropping of the body, nudity in the gallery context—yet employ uncanny realism, down to individual hairs and pores.

“The real part has to be particularly real in order for it to be an interesting confrontation; on some level the brain needs to be confused,” says Penny, noting that, paradoxically, the more detailed the information that is given, the more strange and unstable the figure becomes.

“With a highly illusionistic painting, you’re not going to stand in front of it and feel your heart pound. But I think with a sculptural object you’re more likely to have that type of visceral experience. You’re standing in front of something that is apparently like you, with that direct equation to your own body and your own mortality.”

A retrospective of Penny’s work titled “Re Figured,” currently on view at the Museo delle Arti Catanzaro in Italy, travels in September to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

The Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow, who died in 1973, was another forerunner for contemporary artists working with illusionistic fragments of the body, although her work has previously not been widely shown outside her country. On view through April 29 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and traveling to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, and then the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a survey of Szapocznikow’s sculpture modeled directly from her body—lips, limbs, belly, breasts—cast again and again in voluptuous, dewy, skinlike polyester resin, sometimes served up on dishes like dessert.

Hammer Museum curator Allegra Pesenti says that when Szapocznikow became ill with cancer, her practice of using herself as her principal subject took on new urgency. “This is a form of memento mori,” says Pesenti. “She realizes it’s her own body that is impermanent.” When Pesenti visited the artist’s son, who had his mother’s work stored in his garage, she received a shock. “I’ll never forget the startling effect of him moving the flashlight across all these cantilevered limbs sticking out,” she says. “It was really like taking her back to the living in a way.”

Not all is discomfort and mortality in the realm of contemporary trompe l’oeil. There’s an aspect of playfulness—a strong element of traditional trompe l’oeil painting—that also unfolds, particularly with artists making three-dimensional environments. For “Otherworldly: Optical Delusions and Small Realities,” on view last year at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, curator David McFadden gathered the work of several dozen artists who create teasingly believable scenes in miniature scale—whether Joe Fig’s entirely convincing tiny studio with Jackson Pollock slinging paint onto canvas or Patrick Jacobs’s persuasive landscapes viewed through peepholes.

“When we looked at Alan Wolfson’s subway station in ‘Otherworldly,’ which was reduced to 1/28th the size of reality, there was no question it was not a real place,” says McFadden. “But we’re willing to suspend disbelief and move into that space as if it’s real because of the virtuosity. I think there’s a kind of childhood thrill in being able to pretend again.”

Engberg sees a trickster humor in the plays of scale many artists in “Lifelike” engage in—whether Maurizio Cattelan’s seven-inch-tall elevator with changing lights and doors that open and close or Robert Therrien’s gargantuan folding table and chairs that give viewers an *Alice in Wonderland* sensation of the shrinking body. “There’s a wonderful performative aspect when we encounter these works,” says Engberg. “These artists are interested in sprinkling a bit of spectacle into the experience.”

Keith Edmier kept the scale, and every other element of his childhood home in suburban Chicago, as true to life as he could when he fabricated *Bremen Towne* (2008). In “Lifelike,” viewers can walk through his wood-paneled kitchen with a harvest-gold linoleum floor and be transported back to a very specific 1970s moment. “It’s the mold that essentially shaped me,” says Edmier, who went to extraordinary lengths to precisely reconstruct all the furniture, appliances, and wall and floor coverings that he could see in the background of family photographs. When he couldn’t find an exact dinette set on eBay, he sculpted it. When he couldn’t locate the wallpaper, he redrew the pattern and had it custom made.

“There were moments when we were building it where I’d just look at the corner of the room and for a second lose all perspective. I actually went back in time. In some ways my whole memory of that house is now all connected to this re-creation. I don’t want to say it was therapy, but it was pretty healing.” The way that illusion can transport viewers to another world, even if just momentarily, is a strong component in the work of Leandro Erlich, included in both “More Real?” and “Lifelike.” At SITE Santa Fe, his *Stuck Elevator* (2011) will be one of the first things viewers see—a door halfway open and yielding a view of a lit elevator shaft that appears to descend some 20 stories. “You really have to stick your head way in to see that it’s a mirror,” says Armstrong. “It has the fun of a magic trick. Right at the beginning, I

wanted viewers to see how easily we are deceived,” the curator continues. “I felt it was really essential to connect this fun that we have with deception with a parallel world where it’s really quite dangerous and having a huge impact on our cultural psyche.”

“The notion of ‘truthiness,’” says Armstrong, referring to the word coined by the comedian and fake-news reporter Stephen Colbert, “this slippage of fact and fiction, is a major cultural shift of our time and one that artists are also trying to interrogate.”

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