

Art in America



Björn Braun: *Untitled*, 2015, found painting and aluminum, 27 by 34½ inches; at Boesky East

Björn Braun

By William S. Smith
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“Nothing is ever wasted, only repurposed.” That’s how the press release for Björn Braun’s exhibition “New Towns” describes the Berlin-based artist’s process. It’s a policy that any Boy Scout could admire. Among the things Braun repurposed for the show are real birds’ nests found in the wild. Braun pulped and boiled the twigs and branches from the nests and fashioned the resulting mush into several floor sculptures that look exactly like mass-produced paper egg cartons. In a witty and somewhat macabre twist, each tray contains several small eggs that were apparently left in the abandoned nests.

Equally clever were the metal reliefs resembling monochrome paintings that hung on the walls. Braun purchased nostalgic landscapes from thrift stores and cast them in aluminum. The texture of the paint massed low in the renderings of trees and mountains, and the weave of the canvas are faintly visible in these untitled works. What the Empire did to Han Solo, so Braun has done to the work of anonymous Sunday painters.

It’s remarkable, though hardly atypical, how quickly a critical orthodoxy has cemented around Braun’s work, despite the fact that he is relatively young and has had only a handful of solo exhibitions. Articles in both *Frieze* and *Mousse* have noted his modest or even humble aesthetic and commented on his penchant for “collaborating” with natural forces, especially birds. For Boesky East, Braun made a brick by compacting bird seed and other organic materials and inserted it in the lintel over the gallery entrance. Birds could peck away at the block, gradually opening the gallery to the outside. The press release encouraged visitors to imagine how

this process might blur various boundaries—physical and conceptual. (The brick appeared fully intact on the last week of the show’s run.)

This supposed collaborative spirit and understated aesthetic were harder to recognize elsewhere. It was particularly difficult to understand the reliefs as anything but blunt assertions of a dominant authorial presence, their subtlety masking an underlying grandiosity. Braun has repurposed thrift store paintings by entombing them. This grim version of appropriation results in pictures that are weighty in every sense. Braun’s reliefs suggest grand themes (nature and culture; life and, especially, death) while nodding to major traditions: modernist painting, abstraction, the monochrome.

But what is in a nod? The reliefs look like some of Alberto Burri’s monochromes. The egg carton floor pieces resemble the configuration of firebrick works by Carl Andre. But why? What are these references doing? Are Braun’s fussy, fragile productions meant somehow to be a joke on the rawness and impermanence of Andre’s art? Such imprecise yet unmistakable citations of established masterpieces convey only an appeal to authority and further pull away the already flimsy mask that they are modest or simple objects.

The existence of that mask at all is what’s irritating here. It’s the only thing separating Braun from the larded-up grandiloquence of Daniel Arsham or Loris Gréaud, artists who are expert at conjuring meager effects from extravagant production budgets. The found-object-esque look is so obviously a red herring that the satisfaction one gets in learning the truth is totally superficial. The whole situation at Boesky East, despite the specter of ornithological chaos, felt controlled, carefully staged to amuse those with only minimal curiosity, people who might be put off to find egg cartons and monochromes presented as art. Fortunately for them, we don’t have to wait long for the big reveal to hit. The earthy smell of the nests was the first clue that the artist’s wit, knowledge of canonical art history and admirable hard work would be on full display.

The clever and concise backstories hold the line and guide us toward familiar conventions. It’s TED Talk conceptualism with a great elevator pitch. Not a single neuron in the viewer’s brain could be wasted on dalliances or reveries. “Nothing is ever wasted.” Indeed, these hand-crafted artisanal forms lead, with streamlined efficiency, to mechanistic forms of thought.