

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



ART PRACTICAL

“Review: *Against Automatism*,” by Anton Stuebner, July 30, 2015

Against Automatism, at fused space, attempts a rebuttal “to a world where mechanization rules.”¹ The works implore viewers to consider the relationship between “the maker’s hand” and “the body as the origin and destination of art.”² The dichotomies suggested here—between mechanical reproduction and handwork, between devices and bodies—are deeply provocative. But these considerations never fully rise above suggestion, and *Against Automatism* offers a tenuous comment on how creative practices can resist reductive forms of categorization that automaticity precludes. But while the works on display may be largely unclassifiable, excellent selections by artists like K.r.m Mooney and Sydney Shen, while difficult to pin down against singular critical concepts, offer insight into what might be defined as “organic” creative processes.

Citing “automatism” as its primary point of departure, the show’s title implicitly references the work of French Surrealist poet André Breton (1896–1966).³ Influenced by then-emergent advances in industrial technologies, Breton imagined the ideal artist–writer as a cultural producer operating on instantaneous creative impulses, positing that automatism’s immediacy unlocked unconscious modes of expression that allowed its practitioners to make truer work. The exhibition’s press release does not explicitly cite Breton, and the distinction presumed here seems to be between sentience and sapience—between cerebral and more sensuous, perceptive works—and each of the seven artists featured in *Against Automatism* presents a distinctive mode of expression.



K.r.m Mooney. *Ductile Structure 1*, 2015; cast organic compounds, silver plated steel; 3 x 4 ¼ in.

Some of the works on display present highly imaginative life worlds. Abu Bakarr Mansaray’s graphite and pastel drawing *HELL* (2015) depicts vivid blueprints for a nightmarish doomsday weapon with a monstrous fanged frontispiece underneath a giant bloodied hammer. Ominous text darkly assures the machine’s destructive power: “The most painful punishment ever made. So be warned!” Miniature drawings of cogs and screws scatter amid the violent imagery and apocalyptic warnings, the exacting instructions for an all-too-terrifyingly-hellish device. Disturbing in its precise depiction of a post-rapture world, Bakarr’s drawing exhibits a dazzling control of imagination rooted in violence and the fantastical.

Jason Benson’s sculptures, by comparison, combine hardware with found objects to create three-dimensional portraits of otherworldly creatures. In an untitled 2015 work, a pipe juts out from a rectangular surface coated in epoxy resin. A coiled CFL bulb suspends from one of the pipe’s joints, while a long electrical cord hangs slackly from the other. The bulb glows with an eerily diffuse silver light, lending the amber-colored epoxy resin a warm hue. A disturbing sight, though, offsets this warmth: a child’s white T-shirt, its folds hardened into place, with a carved wooden bust exploding through its chest, encircled in a wicker wreath, its face contorted into twists and knots. Benson’s juxtaposition of folkloric objects and commercial materials presents a surreal tableau out of a

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

modern-day Grimm's story, a dreamlike fantasy of industry and fairy tales.

Mansaray and Benson present the most overt commentary on "making" in the age of automaticity, and their work is directly informed by anxieties about how devices and hardware threaten to overtake and pervert imaginative consciousness. But just as *Against Automatism* establishes a thematic consistency between Mansaray and Benson, it breaks it again with Alex Dordoy's meditations on nature and representation. Dordoy's acrylic paintings *Wednesday 1-3* (2014) depict hummingbirds in flight in kaleidoscopic colors, a seemingly charming play on nature—except that the birds are shown upside down, not flying but falling toward uncertain oblivion.

K.r.m Mooney's excellent mixed-metal sculptures offer another reimagining of natural forms, combining cast organic compounds with silver-plated industrial objects. Scattered across the gallery floor, Mooney's sculptures invite closer examination, requiring viewers to get up close and investigate. Although they seem formally simple, their construction reveals their complexity. In *Ductile Structure 1* (2015), three cast plant remnants—a twig, a stem, and a leaf or strip of bark—are affixed along the edges of a steel can. Cut with three deep scallops, the can resembles a pronged crown, the plant castings balanced precariously along a sliver-thin edge. Plated in silver, the crown has a powdered finish, its soft surface belying its sharp edges. In playing with these juxtapositions, Mooney's assemblages quietly disrupt assumed boundaries between softness and sharpness, between organic material and manufactured objects.

Not all of the works in *Against Automatism* explore the human body as a site of critical investigation. But bodies readily appear in Paul Kos' black-and-white photograph triptych *Emboss I-III* (1995), in which a nude woman stands next to a chair, her back to the camera, her low-heeled black shoes slightly askance. In each print, her thighs are marked with a chair's fleshy impression: the circular perforations of a garden chair, the thick slats of a wooden stool, the tight triangular weave of a wicker seat. Kos employs impression for comic effect, but his work also raises pertinent questions about the gendered portrayal of the female body as a site that is culturally "impressed" upon.

Sydney Shen's stellar series *F-Hole* (2015) also employs visual humor to critique modes of looking that objectify female bodies. Shen's prints of lamps that resemble breasts and armrests resembling buttocks may

play like sight gags, but they also reveal how we are acculturated to eroticize the female anatomy through innuendo in visual culture. The *f-holes* die-cut in sueded matte board make a sly reference to Man Ray's *Le Violin d'Ingres* (1924), which notoriously depicts a nude woman with violin *f-holes* marked across her back. Shen's work not only presents a very modern commentary on gender, but also engages—and critiques—photographic genealogies of female bodies.

While the "maker's hand" shows up only tenuously in most of the works on display, it emerges defiantly in Thomas Wachholz's diptych *Ohne Titel (Reibflache)* (2015), which features two panels of auburn wood covered in clusters of errant white lines. At first, the work may seem willfully abstract, a plane covered in meaningless marks. But recognized as traces of the hand, those same clusters become as dense and rich as a self-portrait, the remnants and constant reminder of the artist's presence. Yet *Against Automatism's* conceptual conceits are ultimately too diffuse to be reduced to a single theme, and at times, the various conversations at play can feel disjointed. At its best, however, the exhibition offers a compelling argument for the need to support artists with distinctly expressive—and at times, unclassifiable—creative points of view.