

Everyday objects transformed

Works by two young Vancouver artists inspire a second look at forms that fill our lives

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TREVOR MAHOVSKY AND RHONDA WEPPLER Contemporary Art Gallery 555 Nelson St.

Until Jan. 14 Trevor Mahovsky and Rhonda Wepler are young Vancouver artists interested in the surface of everyday objects, and how to simulate that surface with an economy of means. For their new exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery, they have simulated hundreds of objects, from Adidas sneaker boxes to cigarettes, transit tokens to stereo speakers, foil takeout packages to coffee cups. In so doing, the artists urge us to look again at the sculptural objects and surfaces that make up our daily lives.

I first saw Mahovsky and Wepler's work in 2004 in a show at the OR Gallery. For this exhibition, they had covered two economy cars with tin foil, then unwrapped the foil and reassembled it in the cars' shapes in the gallery. The effect was wondrous. For now the "solid" automobile, that ubiquitous harbinger of pollution, urban sprawl and the quick getaway, was transformed into an ephemeral shell, as transient as the moulting of an insect or reptile.

In a way, Wepler and Mahovsky's new work reverses this process, and doubly so. Rather than forming husks of consumer objects, they create solid forms of hollow packaging. Furthermore, the dull silver sheen of tinfoil is replaced by a minimal colour scheme; thus we have the red, green and yellow bands of a Hudson's Bay box, or the blue and white stripes of an Adidas shoebox.

Indeed, the panoply of objects on display at the CAG is both inspiring and depressing. They are inspiring in the range of sculptures: ketchup containers, Kleenex boxes, tin cans, kerosene cans, baking dishes, bricks, ear plugs, flags, drinking straws in "frozen" resin, coins, tokens, speakers, KFC buckets, cigarettes. And inspiring, too, for the delicate use of colour by which a wooden rod, for instance, suddenly signifies a cigarette, a white rod painted brown on the last inch to mimic the filter. Or stripes running on diagonally to signify a sneaker brand. Or black-and-white checkerboard atop speakers and the afrocentric red, green and yellow below, signifying, perhaps, ska and reggae music.

But there is also something profoundly depressing about Mahovsky and Wepler's work. A couple of things, actually. First of all, their exhibition — which is all arranged on a waist-high plinth, as if on a conveyor belt or work table at a recycling centre — confronts us with the detritus and throwaways and recyclables of our consumer culture. I don't mean this in the downer sense that we live in a disposable society. There's that, but more profound than such eco-pessimism is the realization of how so much of what we eat, wear, and do depends on its flimsy packaging.

And, then, it's also depressing to think that we can recognize brands (The Bay, Adidas, KFC) with just a few dabs of paint or an iconic shape. Are we such Pavlovian creatures that the mere appearance of a tub of chicken will, even for a vegetarian like myself, bring forth salivary memories of driving into Edmonton in the 1970s and seeing a

twirling bucket atop a 50foot-high pole? This is the minimalist lesson that Nike apparently learned a few years ago when they stopped using so many swooshes on their running shoes: “Less is more” works much better than semiotic overload.

But we should not shoot the messenger. And art should not be reduced to Cassandra-like warnings about global warming or overflowing landfills. Such concerns are the province of politics. For what we can also see when looking at this art are some witty juxtapositions. Thus a faux cigarette stands on a pop can, black ash smudging the can. Or ear plugs — dowels the same circumference as the fake cigarettes, but painted the orange of the Styrofoam originals — sit on a brick. The brick is the red of Ontario bricks, with three dark circles to represent holes. Ear plugs and bricks: working-class labourers?

Another brick lies atop a large black square, the square perhaps a nod to Russian avant-gardist Kazimir Malevich’s 1915 painting Black Square. A gesture of hostility? Homage? A brick through the window of 20th-century art? Or are these various stacks of objects closer to the kind of distracted sculptures we make when unpacking the groceries or, if we work at Costco or IGA, when stacking the shelves?

Other details of the sculptures are more subtle, yet perhaps also more rewarding. The tinfoil dishes in which you take home left-over kungpo chicken here are rendered with silver paint, the drips of the paint mimicking the folds of the foil. And the resin that imitates a frozen drink in the shape of a takeout cup is so shimmeringly real that you expect to see beads of sweat on it.

Mahovsky and Wepler have made work that rewards looking and thinking. Looking, for we cannot but think of the objects around us as we see their cousins under the bright glare of the gallery’s lights. Thinking, for now we will look at the world around us more carefully, and perhaps more thoughtfully.