

Didier Courbot at Susan Hobbs Gallery: Courbot's recast objects evoke prosaic poetics



A detail from Didier Courbot's needs series, here installing a birdhouse at a busy Paris intersection.

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...Meanwhile, at the Susan Hobbs Gallery, Didier Courbot looks less to grapple and more to uplift with a cross-section of works from his “needs” project, where, since 1999, he’s made sincere efforts to improve the circumstances of urban life.

They tend to be small in scale — a one-man civic improvement campaign needs to know its limits — but big-hearted all the same. In one photo in the gallery, Courbot installs a birdhouse high up a lamp post in a busy Paris intersection (he’s French, but his urge for public interventions links him nicely to Toronto, fertile ground for such impulses for more than a decade). In another, a park bench has been repaired and improved upon, its seat extended into a sectional, the better for impromptu conversation.

Courbot is an absurdist in the grand conceptual tradition of artist-as-urban-prankster and, wry as he is, it’s wrong to see his gestures as insincere. In Osaka, Courbot

repaired bikes left abandoned at the train station, and then left them unlocked and available for public use.

Meanwhile, Courbot manifests his good-vibrations prerogative here in a suite of furniture pieces — simple stands of various heights, bearing such things as a vase of fresh flowers, apples, a lemon and a lime — that have no function but to please (and maybe confuse a tad; what else is art for?). In the gallery, a pair of slight L-shaped wooden plinths hold coloured pencils that are precisely the same width. Like the stands, they seem to be saying: I'm here if you need me.

But the most potent works here are a series of perfectly made brass stands draped with the various leavings of Courbot's other projects: a curl of blue ribbon dangling from a brass T, a swatch of thick black paper slung over a slim brass bar, an irregular square of foam-core pressed between a pair of brass bookends.

Here, Courbot evokes old-school conceptualism: found objects and castoffs, without use or esthetic value, recast as art. He does it, however, with reverence, building unique, gorgeous objects devoted only to their service. It's a prosaic poetic filled with good humour and, above all, warmth. From all but the hardest hearts, Courbot gets back what he gives out. Really, what's not to love?

Didier Courbot continues to Jan. 18.