

Haim Steinbach's and Helen Marten's Solos at Bard College

Photo



Shelves of items that Haim Steinbach picked from the Hessel collection to mingle with his solo show at Bard College.

Credit

Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Exactly 100 years ago, Marcel Duchamp inverted a bicycle wheel, mounted it on a kitchen stool and anointed it as art. It was the first of his revolutionary ready-mades, so it is perhaps with that centenary in mind that the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College has come up with two substantial solo shows devoted to artists from different generations whose ties to the ready-made are complex and deep. Together their displays combust into a more than suitable celebration.

“Haim Steinbach: Once Again the World Is Flat” is a retrospective organized by Tom Eccles, the center’s executive director, and Johanna Burton, director and curator at the New Museum in Manhattan. It surveys the career of this 69-year-old artist, known since the mid-1980s for arranging store-bought domestic items and toys, along with the odd artifact, on jutting Formica-clad shelves. Mr. Steinbach’s Pop Art-meets-Minimalism combinations were briefly grouped with work of artists like Jeff Koons and Ashley Bickerton under the rubrics of Neo Geo and Commodity Art. But within any one piece, the differences and similarities in color, form, function and social purpose have a more resonant effect. At Bard, Mr. Steinbach’s exhibition offers a lithe account of his development before and since these works, including many little-seen early pieces.

The other show is “Helen Marten: No Border in a Wok That Can’t Be Crossed,” which originated at the Kunsthalle Zürich, organized by its director, Beatrix Ruf. The title’s playful promise of a stir-fry of meanings and mediums — wok also sounds like (art)work — is fulfilled by Ms. Marten, who is 27. This precocious British artist works in a light, frothy mode that might be called postmodern rococo. Against all odds, since the ready-made is one of the clichés of our time, she is extending its tradition in original ways. Her hybrid pieces include welcome mats made of cast Corian and little tables (the kind at hospital bedsides) in welded radial-bent, powder-coated steel, as well as food, liquor, clothing, trash and small hand-held objects (pens, matches). They merge two and three dimensions as well as mediums; make suave use of digital design and fabrication; and include wryly narrated digital animations.

Although she is well regarded in Europe — blue-chip dealers are lending (and supposedly selling) many of these pieces — this is her first exhibition in the United States. Especially where the fusion of digital and analog is concerned, Ms. Marten’s talent blazes, like Cindy Sherman’s at the start of her career and also Cady Noland’s, which sadly never got beyond beginning.

These shows face each other across the center’s big entrance foyer. Ms. Marten’s exhibition is in the spacious galleries of Bard’s Center for Curatorial Studies; Mr. Steinbach’s is in the center’s Hessel Museum of Art, an equally spacious wing inaugurated in 2006. Both exhibitions are strong individually, but what they form in tandem is a delirious, perhaps volatile exegesis on objects both real and digital; found, made and remade; art and nonart. The complex way objects stimulate memory and desire, drawing us into the past and pushing us forward, is also part of the mix.

Of course, it only adds to the free-for-all that artists who have solo shows at the Hessel are invited to select works from the Marieluise Hessel Collection to be displayed within their exhibitions. This stipulation has been embraced with gusto by Mr. Steinbach, who is in many ways as much a collector and curator as an artist. Like most of his predecessors, he has selected works sympathetic to his, including those by artists he has learned from (Joseph Kosuth, Barry Le Va); his contemporaries (Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler); and younger artists he may have influenced (Rachel Harrison, Mona Hatoum). The standout here is Sigmar Polke’s, a large pale drawing from 1970 festooned with potatoes: It looks like something Ms. Marten might have made.

Mr. Steinbach’s 80-work retrospective wends its way through art by others, revealing rarely seen Minimalist drawings and paintings from the first half of the 1970s. Most interesting are small paintings on particle board dotted with small black shapes that evoke the scattered geometric forms of Mr. Le Va’s sculptures.

But Mr. Steinbach seems to have an inborn attraction to existing stuff, to taking more than making. This led to paintings made from pieces of linoleum and, by 1979, installations consisting of objects arranged on several small shelves hung on walls covered with lengths of patterned wallpaper. The three examples here form intricate conversations, running vertically and laterally, about high and low, the trickle-down of exotic cultures (toward kitsch) and the sacraments of interior decorating.

By 1980, the combination stared mutating, minus the wallpaper, into single, more substantial objects displayed on sconcelike shelves. One piece here is a largish ceramic figurine of Lil' Orphan Annie and her dog, Sandy, on a shelf sheathed in overlapping Spider-Man masks. The combination's connectable dots include comic-book spinoffs, blank eyes, the color red, heroes male and female and our childish attraction to them (and, these days, Broadway shows).

These works look relatively nostalgic and Americana-prone compared with the sharper, shinier pieces that he has made since the mid-1980s, examples of which dot the exhibition. Two large pieces push the shelf concept to its limits. The 2005 "Influx" consists of two great lengths of industrial metal shelving sensitively arrayed with small artworks from the Hessel collection, as well as antiques-shop finds, junkyard outtakes and perhaps odd-lot remnants.

The other display, as Mr. Steinbach likes to call all his pieces, is double-story scaffolding laden with art from the Hessel's collection. Above is a Minimalist Mount Rushmore of works by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris. Down below is a more crowded, varied mix focusing on the efforts of subsequent generations of artists, including Mr. Steinbach, who learned from Minimalism but refused to let it hold them back.

The kind of diversity of objects that Mr. Steinbach has orchestrated around his art at the Hessel is effortlessly encompassed within Ms. Marten's strange, evocative installations. Like him, she is interested in beauty, in always giving the viewer plenty to look at while pondering her possible meanings. She also works with forms and materials that evoke domestic life, dipping in and out of different narratives and histories while never looking less than strikingly contemporary.

One of the first galleries of her show features four large works that resemble enormous watercolors but that the label identifies as screen-printed leather and ostrich fabric. Each depicts a pink-lipped, bewigged, unquestionably 18th-century fellow and has five bottles of apertifs hanging by string from its lower edge. Their shared title, "Geologic Amounts of Sober Time (Mozart Drunks)," reminds us that Mozart — who was said to have composed while drunk and who died young, at 35 — exemplifies the modern myth of creative types who burn their candle at both ends.

Like many younger artists of the moment, including Uri Aran, Cathy Wilkes and Carol Bove, Ms. Marten is in many ways an arranger of things, practicing unattached assemblage that is indebted to Mr. Steinbach. But while her objects can look as if they stepped out of a high-end shelter magazine or some wealthy residence, many of them are actually artist-made. The clearly digital precision with which they are produced only adds to the air of untouched domesticity.

Against this tasteful sterility, Ms. Marten pits less-than-perfect signs of life. Several sculptures — all titled "Falling Very Down (Low pH Chemist)" — consist of thick planks with slanting edges whose different sections are each made of contrasting woods or laminate. Kitchen counters, floors and dining room tables come to mind. Banal items like a silk sock, a Swiss army knife and a cast latex hand are nonchalantly placed on their surfaces.

Similarly, Ms. Marten fabricates two baskets from woven aluminum (one for a cat, one for laundry) that are so perfect they look like digital renderings; but she fills them with things like hand puppets and rolled gym socks. Sometimes these juxtapositions can seem a little obvious or Surrealist. But Ms. Marten is pulling a lot together, moving with impressive confidence along a continuum between the made and the ready-made, puncturing her perfect forms with unsettling bits of life.

“Helen Marten: No Borders in a Wok That Can’t Be Crossed” is at the Center for Curatorial Studies through Sept. 22, and “Haim Steinbach: Once Again the World Is Flat” is at the Hessel Museum of Art at the Center for Curatorial Studies through Dec. 20, both at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., (845) 758-7598.

A version of this review appears in print on August 2, 2013, on page C23 of the New York edition with the headline: Assembled in Planned Jumbles of Found Creation. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)