

UnFUNCTION

*Try not to become too consumed
With what's a criminal volume
Of oil that it takes to paint a portrait
The acrylic, the varnish,
Aluminum tubes filled with latex
The solvents and dye*

*Let's just call this what it is
The gentler side of mankind's death wish
When it's my time to go
Gonna leave behind things that won't decompose*

— Father John Misty
from “Now I’m Learning to Love the War”

Artists have been wrestling with ideas about “art for art’s sake” for over a century. But in a world where many objects are intentionally made to be disposable, what does it mean to make something precious? Does an artist need to justify their creation by imbuing it with a functional purpose? And if so, how does that affect the work’s reception as an objet d’art?

The function of a work (or lack thereof) often dictates our understanding of an object’s meaning. For example, the disparity between the connoted values of a cup compared to that of a painting is no small chasm. And though the artist leads the viewer with clues—visual and conceptual breadcrumbs—that allow for a deeper understanding of the work, the best art often leaves us yearning for answers.

The work in *UnFunction* tiptoes the proverbial line between underscoring and striking-through the values associated with “commercial” and “fine art” practices—often using function as a linchpin to swing in either direction. The very materials with which these (and many other) artists choose to engage reflect their particular understanding of the complex consequences of art as commodity.

Using affordable and abundant materials, subverting the semiotics of design, and serving a practical use are just a few of the artistic approaches by the dozen artists in this show. Participating artist Tracy Featherstone (who initially came up with the idea) approached me in the fall of 2016 to curate this exhibition. After several in-depth conversations about the limits of formalism and our current climate crisis, I was convinced and grateful for the opportunity.

It is my hope that this show demonstrates the ways in which artists, as makers of cultural artifacts, make decisions—willing, unconscious, pragmatic, or otherwise—that quite often act as barometers for broader societal concerns.

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