CALDER KAMIN

PLASTIC PLANET



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

O C T O B E R 1 - N O V E M B E R 10, 2016

A U S T I N, T E X A S



Plastic Planet Lynx, 2016, recycled styrofoam, plastic bags, glass eyes, and wood block, 18" x 19.5" x 18", photo by Madeleine Hanlon Cover Panel: Plastic Planet Red Fox, 2016, recycled styrofoam, plastic bags, glass eyes, and wood block, 12" x 18" x 11", photo by Philip Rogers

CALDER KAMIN PLASTIC PLANET

"I have a very optimistic view of human beings. We are very special creatures. We should be capable of doing amazing things." CALDER KAMIN

You enter the room, and immediately you're met by a frolicking coterie of playful animals. Here, a curious fox rambles over the crest of a fecund hill, her fur a saturated, cartoonish orange. Her ears appear to perk up at your arrival: she watches with jumpy interest. Over there, a plucky skunk pauses to sniff a clutch of carmine poppies that have sprouted underfoot, her young offspring following close behind. All around you, frisky creatures mug, pose, and nuzzle: a riot of Disneyfied color and romping energy. You approach these playful beings to examine more closely—they're sculptures, in fact, and each is covered with a fabulously textured, enormously intricate surface. It could be twisted fabric, you guess, but it's so shiny.

And then you realize that the title of the exhibition in which you stand—Plastic Planet—describes both the condition of the world in which we live and the materials from which these creatures emerge. In her making of these figures. Calder Kamin. the artist-educator-activist-thinker behind the exhibition, deploys the discarded detritus of our everyday world—plastic, a very young invention that has flourished in post-World War II systems of production. The ubiquity of plastic almost goes without saving: we consume and discard so much of the material as a matter of course that we hardly consider it at all. And yet its impact on our world is profound. The average American throws away nearly two hundred pounds of plastic in a year, choking our rivers and seas with colorful, inedible trash that threatens our wildlife. Chemicals from plastics leach into groundwater via landfills, contaminating human and

animal bodies and causing potentially harmful health effects. Floating gyres of plastic trash loom and churn in our oceans, ending up in the stomachs of marine animals and facilitating the spread of invasive species across huge expanses of water. Despite all this, our consumption of the stuff shows no signs of slowing; in fact, in the last ten years, humans have produced more plastic than in the whole of the last century.

But why are we talking trash at an art exhibition? Doesn't art exist in a rarefied realm of experience, mercifully separated from the drudgery and inherently depressing realities that comprise our everyday world? What about Matisse's idea of art—that it should be like a "good armchair, providing relaxation"? Not anymore. The contemporary conceit of art as a site of social engagement, as a place to face the social realities of our world, is today so ubiquitous as to be the default mode for many artists. Participatory art, social practice, relational art, relational aesthetics, community art, living-as-form: the generalized concept of a non-objectcentered socialized art experience bears as many epithets as it does physical manifestations. Further, as a medium, socially engaged art practice has in the last twenty years achieved canonization within our most distinguished art institutions. From Rirkrit Tiravanija's collective food preparation and consumption within MoMA's gallery space, to Tino Sehgal's "constructed situations" at the Guggenheim, to Carsten Holler's gigantic slide installation at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, art today can take as its subject—and its form—the very real inherent realities that comprise everyday existence, as opposed to some abstracted concept of beauty as communicated through painted canvas or cast bronze.

All of which is to say: Kamin's manipulation of plastic material into such magnetic, evocative sculptures, and her programming of a "Neocortex Classroom" to activate the gallery space with interactive educational activities, situates her work in lineage with these broader intellectual currents in the art world. And yet here, I want to draw a finer point on the artist's practice, which I believe stands apart from this lineage in important ways. The most strident and insistent apostles of socially-engaged art are typically not artists and makers, but rather critics and curators—thinkers like Claire Bishop. Nato Thompson, and Grant Kester. This is no accident. Embedded within their advocacy of social engagement is a barely suppressed neo-Marxist mistrust of contemporary systems of art production, dissemination, and consumption. For Bishop, participatory art positions itself against the rise of the spectacle in contemporary society: she relishes the idea that participation is important as a project because "it re-humanizes a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production." Likewise. Thompson decries the condition of spectacular viewing: for him, "typified by



Plastic Planet Fox Squirrel, 2016, recycled styrofoam, plastic bags, glass eyes, and wood block, 21" x 21" x 21.5", photo by Madeleine Hanlon



Plastic Planet, 2016, (gallery view including Neocortex Classroom, an installation where education classes for over 375 children and adults were held), photo by Philip Rogers

the image of an audience at a cinema passively watching television and film, the spectacle can be seen as shorthand for a world condition wherein images are made for the purpose of sales." While they claim to take issue with the spectacular condition induced by worldwide capitalism, what's really on trial here is the object itself. Individual, manipulable, consumable like so many cans of Campbell's soup, the art object cannot be trusted for these thinkers because of its willful, shameful alliance with the market.

But I contend that art like Kamin's, which makes a direct call on the viewer to activate his or her consciousness towards social change, demonstrates the persistent, resonant power of the beautifully-made object. As an art historian by training, then an educator by necessity, and now a curator by trade, I believe in the vital importance of objects and their capacity for meaning above and beyond their immediate contexts. I reject the notion that objects that don't fit neatly within the emergent canon of

"participatory art" can't incite meaningful conversation and subversive social action. Sensitive manipulation of materials, keen attention to formal concerns, and wellconsidered craftsmanship—all evident in Kamin's meticulously crafted creatures will always carry resonance in the observer's perception, because objects invested with such consideration transcend their workaday objecthood. Objects of aesthetic contemplation existed before the advent of worldwide capitalism, and people found meaning and comfort in them long before the west named them "art." Art historian WIT Mitchell, in his seminal text on the affect of images in our everyday lives, asked "What do pictures want?" In short, they want to be beheld, and further, they deserve to be reckoned with in all their nuance, formal complexity, and historical particularity.

And so here we find ourselves: wandering among Kamin's beautiful, twisted forest of transformed plastic. First, we are charmed. Then, intrigued. Finally, horrified: our

everyday actions are indicted by these works. But Kamin's practice, through its emphasis on education, empowers the viewer to transcend passivity, to take action. Harnessing the inherent power of her beautiful objects, the artist leads workshops for visitors in conjunction with local experts in the Neocortex Classroom. Through these courses, which focus on such disparate topics as dog/human relationships, raw material potential in local company waste, and salamander awareness, certain truths emerge. The world has changed under our stewardship, Kamin tells us. But her optimism persists: if we are capable of changing the world for the worse, we must also be equipped to transform it for the better. Her art perseveres in the admirable, ineffable pursuit of this overarching goal, asking us to find expansive, transformative beauty in the objects and ourselves.

Chad Alligood

Curator, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art



Plastic Planet Baby Raccoon, 2016, recycled styrofoam, plastic bags, glass eyes, and wood block, 14" x 24" x 3", photo by Philip Rogers

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	2008-2012	Kansas City Flat File, H&R Block Artspace, Kansas City	2011-2013	Charlotte Street Foundation Urban Culture Project



Plastic Planet Opossum, 2016, recycled styrofoam, plastic bags, glass eyes, and wood block, 17.5" x 32" x 7"

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists. Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 38th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,890 artists in 303 visual art exhibitions, 124 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 28 literary readings and 597 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, the New York Times, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 650

school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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