MARCH 2016 IN TERNATION A L

Miranda Lichtenstein

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Plastic bags have fallen on hard times since they stole the show in American Beauty (1999), in a scene reminiscent of Nathaniel Dorsky's film Variations from a year earlier. No longer the mesmerizing Isadora Duncan of refuse, reminding us of the surprising elegance stirring in the corners of parking lots and our lives, plastic is now understood to represent a growing crisis, leaching toxins and forming garbage continents in the ocean. In New York City, it's one more index of class—Whole Foods no longer uses plastic bags, but your corner bodega does.

Into this mix come Miranda Lichtenstein's alluring 2015 photographs of plastic bags, in her fifth exhibition at Elizabeth Dee. At first glance, this show appeared to take up familiar themes of her practice: the still life as experiment, an interest in surface obfuscations and misaligned systems of representation, and the photograph as a container of enigmatic presence. Lush and mysterious, these images' deep teals and complementary oranges, wet and weathered skins, sutures and flatness, kept reminding me of decoupage and even the stunning textures in the Alberto Burri exhibit simultaneously on view uptown. (The most abstract photographs were found in the side office, shadowy black-and-white prints whose titles—Bodega [Slash] and Bodega [Mirror]—carried a little heavier portent.) Their subject matter is actually thrice recycled: Over the course of two years, Lichtenstein has been photographing sculptures by New York-based artist Josh Blackwell, in which he's cut, painted, joined together, and hand-stitched, with fabrics and metal, classic takeout and deli bags—vibrant works that reflect the efficient ingenuity with discarded materials found in folk art around the world. Lichtenstein's photographs never show the complete object.

REVIEWS



Miranda Lichtenstein, Thank You (orange), 2015, ink-jet print, 40 × 26 ½".

In some, it's not clear you're even looking at a plastic bag anymore: Have a Nice Day (front) resembles the singed wing of some bird of prey. In others, the telltale font and wording make the material obvious.

The quietest collaborator was Anthony McCann, the poet whose lines from "Vow" give the exhibition its name: "more Me / than mine." If this was the motto of authorship in Lichtenstein's subtle photographs, language also served as found poetry throughout, quietly underscoring the social exchanges and environmental hazards of plastic bags. The works' titles borrow the stacked words found on so many, whose looping script and block letters are cheerfully grateful (Thank You! Have a Nice Day!) and alarmist (To avoid suffocation . . .). In Thank You (orange), we can just make out the fragment from Babies and CHILDREN and MAY CLING. You! repeats its title three times down the center of the photograph, the sentence fragment underscoring the strange serial refrac-

tion of self at the center of a plastic bag's economy. Thank anonymous you for spending money here—You! You!

These photographs overlooked an elaborate floor piece, *Welcome Water*, authored by both Lichtenstein and Blackwell, consisting of flatbed scans of Blackwell's sculptures that are ink-jet printed and, in places, cut away. The piece resembled a quilted island, stitched together with bright silk and wool and delicately silhouetted. But its beauty was at odds with another reference that came to mind, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, one of several "trash vortexes" in the world's oceans that are hundreds of thousands of square miles in size. (Blackwell has more effectively displayed his bag sculptures in trees, appropriating the space of trapped litter that flutters throughout cities while suggesting a repurposed release into the wild.)

The commitment of Blackwell's project is reflected by Lichtenstein's: To take two years to do anything in the art world today feels like an eternity, let alone to focus on someone else's work. This restraint doesn't sacrifice self. The original bags' text and material point to a subject that recedes but never disappears. The same is true in Lichtenstein's photographs, except they are all the better for it.

-Prudence Peiffer