Johnston Foster

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Inventions and Inventories

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The history of modern art can be reductively summed up as consisting of two particular modes of activity: acts of pointing and acts of making. That is to say, artists in a long and distinguished lineage from Marcel Duchamp onward have pointed, set aside, placed on display, and otherwise highlighted that which catches the perceptive eye (and attentive mind) of the artist. Duchamp called this the readymade, and its inheritors have included such movements as Pop Art, Appropriation, Arte Povera, ad infinitum. The act of making, however, involves offering instead of such critical distancing mechanisms a loving fabrication and reiteration of objects in the world through dedicated and painstaking craftsmanship.

To bring us closer to the subject at hand, Johnston Foster is, to put it bluntly, making in an era of pointing. However, his ambivalence and vacillation between these polarities as a sophisticated young artist of the 21st Century both enlivens and deepens the significance of his already formidable and well-wrought iconic constructions. Foster scavenges his surroundings for raw materials which he duly transforms into "new" representations, the readymade once removed via the artist's return to the studio.

In **Good 'n Plenty**, Foster creates a cornucopia of artfully constructed "refuse," yet however lavish and potentially critical, the artist uses this format primarily as an armature for his highly invested fascination with its intricate bits and pieces. The abundant display includes the following partial inventory: pizza boxes, soda cans, packing peanuts, plastic utensils, chicken bones, discarded junk food, crumpled wrappers, and lengths of twine. All of this splays out from a worn, black rubber tire, forming a dissected and disrupted fountain of junk.

Several historical antecedents spring to mind when addressing Foster's work. His approach has something of the energetic, cacophonous quality of Robert Rauschenberg's combines or Claes Oldenburg's quirky objects sold in the "Store" or his later, flaccid ghosts of the everyday. Much like the latter artist, Foster fixates on the particularities of things rather than in the case of the former some bizarre thriftstore-Neodadaist concoction.

Foster's approach also recalls to a certain degree the Californian assemblage artists of the 1960s, such as Ed Kienholz and Bruce Connor. But beyond a shared fascination

with pop culture and an inclination towards rickety, provisional installations and tableaux, Foster's work stops short of the darker idiosyncrasies of those artists. For example, the title of his monumental sculpture **Seasons in the Abyss** draws upon the heavy metal band Slayer rather than Rimbaud. Such a reference nails the fact that Foster's occasional gloom is more goth than gothic, and that his work veers with frequency towards intentional ridiculousness. The yearning yet satirical edge of an earlier generation seems light years away for this emerging artist.

Nevertheless, Foster's work exhibits a clear attachment to a rather anachronistic iconography coupled with the wholly out-of-time hand crafting of his material forms. Foster's America draws from old-school post-war plastic synthetic simulacra.

Why so? Probably television. One can especially discern the legible influence of animated cartoons from Hanna-Barbera to Chuck Jones, that is to say, from the clunky proto-suburban cave dwellers, the Flintstones, to the balletic grace of Bugs Bunny. Foster portrays a suburbia whose characteristics have been so thoroughly digested and sampled by the artist that as viewers we come out the other side into a wonderland of disjunctive yet vertiginous, spiraling matter.

Such is the case in the aforementioned **Seasons in the Abyss**, which features an enormous Xmas tree composed of olive shag carpet remnants, the surviving vestiges of split level sterility. Foster's tree is then garlanded in part by a Calderesque mobile, supporting an eclectic assortment of meticulously constructed sculptural objects: a hammerhead shark, a partially consumed pizza, a Jack O'Lantern, a pot of gold/rainbow, a static-ridden television, a hamburger, a globe made from a Wilson basketball, a lifejacket, a chainsaw, a gasoline can, a microscope, a lobster...

Foster's clearsighted yet frequently complicated recent sculptures have developed out of a period the artist spent creating kinetic—and highly comic—works. These include the absurdist **Untitled (Machine)**, which released balloons to the ceiling only to be immediately punctured, or **Untitled (Tree and Hive)**, an odd amalgam of Winnie the Pooh and Rebecca Horn, in which a bright yellow hive is suspended from a tree, alongside a clattering group of mechanistic hovering bees. Foster is certainly no neo-Minimalist, as he pays a maximum amount of attention to the minutest details, without either sending his pieces out to fabricators or delegating tasks to assistants. Although by no means an overtly political artist, Foster's work bears the evident traces of his attempts to redefine an artistic identity in a post 9/11 context. In fact,

Foster, after completing his BFA at Virginia Commonwealth University, moved to New York City to attend Hunter College in the fall of 2001, just before the cataclysmic events occurred—as if what to say and how to say it weren't already such pressing and perplexing questions for any graduate student, without the manifold pressures of that particular historical setting.

One of the major projects undertaken by Foster during his MFA studies was the creation of a tree house (and its supporting tree), a collaborative venture with two painters then colleagues at Hunter: Jules de Balincourt and Andy Cross. This team of young artists proceeded to replicate and reconfigure the archetypal children's retreat, in the process incorporating decidedly painterly flourishes, such as a psychedelic color scheme for its trunk, recalling the striped canvases of Gene Davis more than any Boy Scout manual. On one level, this life-size vehicle for nostalgia becomes an altogether appropriate method of taking stock of the creative world circa 2002, a simply painted and constructed installation becoming a set for potential interaction and dialogue, opening up the piece considerably from its initial novel appearance.

Foster has linked several of his pieces via the notion of the prank. An early and notable gesture of his involved "borrowing"

plastic toys left out in a residential yard, setting them up for a documentary photo, and returning them to the scene of the crime. More recently he has investigated the phenomenon of the urban legend, specifically the tall tale that feeding seagulls Alka Seltzer tablets can result in explosions, due to a kind of internal combustion. This incident is memorialized in his sculpture **What the Flock?!**, depicting some one-hundred seagulls, a number of them simultaneously launching and detonating.

Foster has also focused his attention upon certain of the most blatantly outlandish signifiers of American excess, such as

the golf course and golf itself, an island of affluence mocked and impotent in its trappings. In **Universal Soldier** a mildly pathetic flag lurks and leans from its hole in preposterous fashion. Similarly, **You Can't Always Get What You Want** features donkey-and-elephant club covers erupting from a golf bag, directly beneath a menacing crow, its body fashioned from woven bicycle tubes, with a metal rake for a tail. Here, Foster clearly alludes to the climate of diminished possibility and lack of agency found in electoral politics today. Golf, of course, remains a triumphal sport of the rich, which serves very often as the modern day social equivalent of the notorious smoke-filled room.

Johnston Foster has created visually captivating works which both take note of and function as an inventory of many of our current fears, dilemmas, and predicaments. Moreover, in so doing, he has invented a variety of subtle and intricately layered constructions belying the notion that postmodern culture is characterized only by its vapidity and blankness. Foster exhibits instead an obsessive attention to detail, leavened by convivial humor, encouraging the viewer to share in the experience of his wandering investigations of the visible world and its sheer plenitude.