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Review Object lessons at Torrance Art Museum's 'Another Thing Coming'



Shirley Tse's "Quantum Shirley Series: Pattern Is the Eye of the Beholder," 2011, mixed media. (Los Angeles Times / Christopher Knight)

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"Another Thing Coming: New Sculpture in L.A." is the kind of exhibition more museums should do, and more often. It checks in on the status of a misplaced but provocative artistic thread, providing a welcome update.

Nine years ago, the UCLA Hammer Museum made waves with "Thing," a survey of 20 younger, L.A.-based artists. The show chronicled a return to prominence of object-sculpture — an artistic category that had taken a back seat to installation-oriented sculpture, video, photography and even painting since the 1970s.

"Thing" surveyed a new generation of artists, most barely born when art historian Rosalind Krauss wrote "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." That widely influential 1979 essay charted the general demise of traditional object-sculpture in favor of Land art, photo-documentation of performance

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events, video and perceptual environments, installation-oriented sculpture and other "almost infinitely malleable" interpretations of what had hitherto been conceived as discrete items made of stone, metal, clay or wood and existing in static space.

As three-dimensional form approached the condition of architecture and landscape art, it became an agent for exploring physical, social and psychological space. Goodbye, Henry Moore; hello, Robert Smithson.

The Hammer's "Thing" used the more alien-sounding synonym for "object" as its title. Encountering a gallery full of "things" subtly suggested how strange this recent proliferation of sculpture seemed to be.

Of course, it wasn't entirely so. Object sculptures by artists as diverse as Joel Shapiro, Liz Larner and even Jeff Koons were not exactly obscure. Yet the new proliferation was nonetheless surprising. The exhibition packed a wallop.

The Torrance Art Museum's "Another Thing Coming" shows that, a decade later, object-sculpture is alive and well. If it doesn't have the punch of the Hammer show, that's probably because it lacks the earlier outing's element of discovery and surprise. Instead, guest curators Jason Ramos and Megan Sallabedra take satisfying note of a continuing evolution in the work of 14 artists.

At least two recurrent themes turn up. One is a consideration of traditional crafts in relation to sculpture. The other is an emphasis on hybridity instead of purity. Both are often encountered in a single work.

Emblematic is Shiva Aliabadi's "Spindle." Lengths of white yarn dipped in blue, black and orange pigments are suspended from ordinary spinning wheel rods that are stuck into a wall. The yarn trails all the way to the floor, where small puddles of migrating color are formed. Like a painting in the midst of unraveling into its component parts, "Spindle" is also part sculptural wall-relief, part traditional weaving.

The use of glazed clay by Mary Hill and Christopher Miles — the former to pile sexually suggestive bananas and melons on a broken phallic obelisk, the latter to fashion crypto-mechanical floral creatures — extols the handmade virtues of ceramics, sculpture's oldest manifestation, to ruminate on distinctly up-to-date questions. (Miles, perhaps not incidentally, was a co-curator of the Hammer's "Thing.") In "Psychic Grotto V," a lumpen little cave of hand-formed strips of muddy brown and dark green clay, Anna Sew Hoy fashions a grim little model for an anti-Romantic hideaway from modern life.

Woodworking is at the core of Joshua Callaghan's altered doors, one of which has been cut into pieces and reconfigured with brass hinges so it seems to be kneeling in a viewer's presence. The word "Office" is still evident on the front of this salvaged door, its supplicant posture confounding official expectations of artistic authority.

Hobby-craft is likewise essential to "Less Paul," an exquisite doppelganger of a 1957 Gibson guitar lovingly made from ordinary laminated plywood and crummy medium-density fiberboard. There would have been no wild rock 'n' roll as we know it without the original instrument, but a half-century later the solicitous version by sculptor Andrew Lewicki poetically memorializes rather than incites. (Commemoration is just about as traditional a function as sculpture has.) Even the layers

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of plywood exposed on his sculpture's slightly curved surface recall the rings of an ancient tree, counting the passage into history of long-gone eras.

Picasso's famous 1912 "Guitar," assembled from bits of cardboard, paper, wire and string, launched a revolution in Modern sculpture. Lewicki's guitar is a postmodern homage.

Sometimes the craft emphasis feels rather wan, as in Ashley Landrum's merger of Minimalist geometry within honeycomb paper in several tabletop works. The commercial and industrial forms of Minimalist sculpture have always been seen as embodying a rhetoric of masculine power, but merely tamping it down with something fragile is not convincing.

The hybrid nature of many of such works, where different traditions collide or merge, gets an occasional boost from wacky Surrealist juxtapositions. A menacing bald head resting atop a geometric plinth is ingesting (or perhaps spewing) a cluster of eyeballs in Tanya Batura's occultist work, one of the few frankly figurative sculptures here. More often the human figure is an absent reference, as in the prop-like objects shown on stage-like platforms by Torbjorn Vejvi; they await our imaginative use.

Hooks in the shape of bent human fingers probe the space around a chunk of burlled birch in a creepy-funny wall-work by Eve Wood. A sign-like monolith devoid of useful information is encased in white gypsum by Michelle Carla Handel, as if a ubiquitous pop culture artifact were a reverent cast of a classical sculpture.

Shirley Tse gives the old ball and chain a run for its money, using the surprising vehicle of a chamber concert. She has draped three music stands with chain-link that connects seemingly random small spheres strewn about the floor — notes in a musical score made weirdly physical. Composed of stone, moss, wire, plastic toys, firearm shell-casings and more, the linked spheres are like episodic fragments of life orchestrated into an inescapably cryptic whole.

In "Another Thing," shades of "Thing" are most evident in Noah Thomas' sculptures. Handmade forms are integrated into the limbs and branches of fallen trees in works loosely reminiscent of sculptures by Krysten Cunningham and Lara Schnitger from the earlier show. But Thomas takes off into his own peculiar dimension by inserting tiny electric fans within the tree limbs, turning a sculpture suspended from the ceiling into a cross between a Calder mobile and a military hovercraft.

Perhaps the simplest yet most evocative works are a beautiful pair of hybrid wall reliefs by Marco Rios. Wooden picture frames hold empty picture mats swathed in blood-red silk. Passion, danger, violence and pomp are encoded in the crimson color.

Yet, sorrow engulfs it: Rios has glazed the works behind glass that swells into a drooping, bulbous, teardrop shape, bending light and distorting reflections inside the empty picture frames. "No ideas but in another thing," to bowdlerize the poet William Carlos Williams, who hovers in the conceptual background of Rios' marvelously materialized veil of tears.

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