

REVIEW

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Fr: Communications

A New View

A LABOR OF LOVE at The New Museum through April 14th

I'll make it easy for you this first time around by starting with *A Labor of Love* at the New Museum. This show is adorable, absolutely adorable, but for someone like me with a vested interest in discriminating between craft, outsider, fine, and folk art, it is frustrating. (What validity is there for the continued existence of a craft museum, after all, if there isn't any difference between craft and other artforms?) In the accompanying catalogue, curator Marsha Tucker describes her show as "an exhibition of labor-intensive and/or handcrafted work that challenges the definitions and categories that have kept the worlds of craft, folk, outsider, and decorative arts apart from that of the fine arts, and have created a stifling polarization between so-called avant garde and traditional artistic practices."

This may be true, but how does blurring distinctions between the ghettoized arts (craft, folk, and outsider) and so-called fine art help the situation? And there's no succor in sight when it comes to elucidating the curatorial program or the very jumbled chronology in walltexts and "chats." A casual, almost naive-looking, painting by a highly sophisticated painter named Bill Copley is set amidst obviously finely crafted objects like Kazumi Tanaka's discreetly mechanized cabinet, Josiah McElheny's conceptualized blown glass, and Jane Kaufman's gorgeously bead-drenched folding screen. The highest level contemporary craft, represented by Dale Chihuly's blown glass *Seaforms*, is enshrined within a huge plexi vitrine, but resting on a coffee table(!) as if it were in a collector's living room. On the other hand a group of crudely crafted pots by the abstract painter Mary Heilman are lined up unprotected by vitrines on a massive dining table, and monochrome vases shaped by Beverly Semmes's feet are massed on the floor like Roman ancestor figures. Paralleling the film *Beat the Devil*, everyone (and everything) seems to be playing against type, except for the beautifully crafted sculptures by Sana Musasama, Michael Lucero, and Daisy Youngblood which looked exactly right for a museum setting.

For me and, it seemed, for most viewers, the high points of the show came at either end of the scale range where the truly obsessive nature of this "other" art was most obvious: Either in Liza Lou's full size, fully beadcovered kitchen, a dazzling result of five years of mad beading on the part of a woman who intends "to bead the world," or in the truly minute but equally labor intensive pieces by Larry Krone (wisdom teeth transformed into tiny costumed dolls), Jacob El Hanani (drawings comprised of ink lines so fine they can barely be discerned without the aid of a magnifying glass), Michael Harms (micro-furniture carved from soap), and the microscopically tiny embroidered scenes by Raymond Materson. For these and a few other pieces, the guards are kept busy handing out

magnifying glasses, while they offer info-bytes about the artists' lives (particularly their prison records) and how long it took them to make the work. The exhibition closes April 14th.

by April Kingsley