

reviews

Les Christensen
Clough-Hanson Gallery
Rhodes College
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For lessons on simultaneous vulnerability and strength, see Les Christensen's exhibition titled "Passion." Contradictions between brittle and durable materials, between titles and their referents, and between desired security and inevitable risk abound in Christensen's constructions. Often her materials prove unlikely candidates for the functions suggested by her titles. *Shield #7* talks tough with its martial shades of red, but it is constructed of false fingernail tips, laid domino-style in an outward spiral. The long, pointed nails call to mind a catfight, but their careful arrangement, in smooth bands of graduated width,

Les Christensen
Passion, 1999. Wood, broken bottles, paint, hooks, 45" x 42 1/2" x 7 1/2".
Courtesy of Clough-Hanson Gallery.



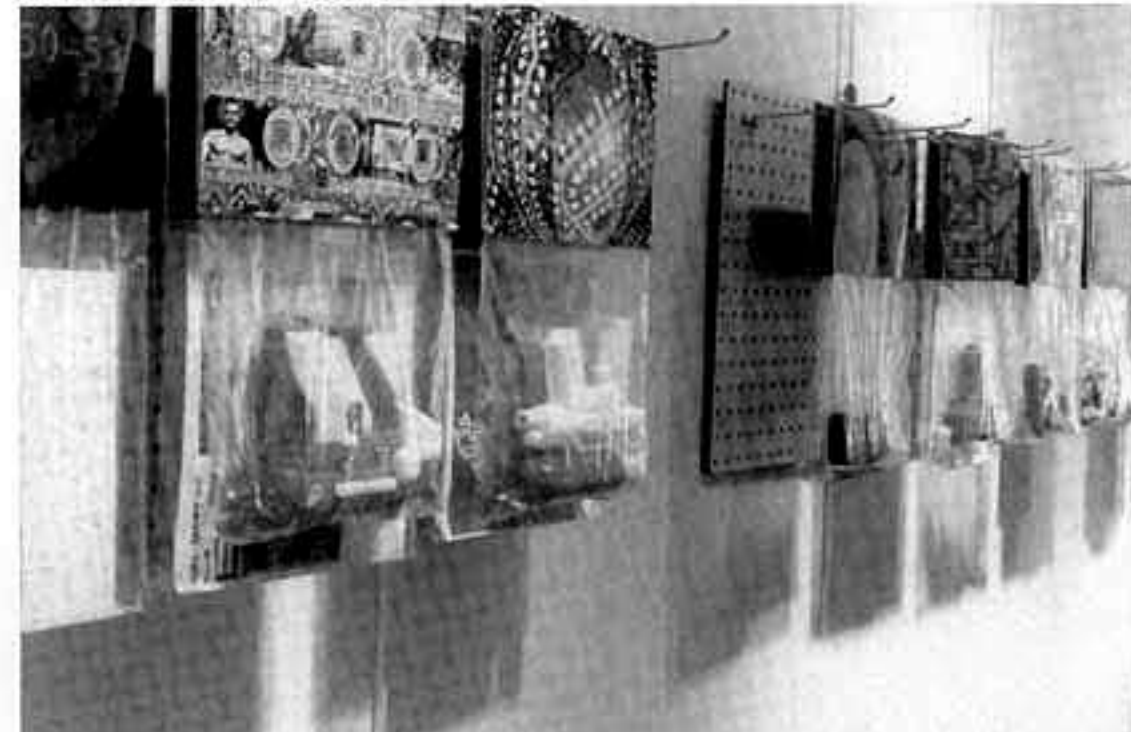
tennessee

betray a more finicky spirit rather than that of Xena, Warrior Princess. Conversely, *Shroud* is more armor than soft wrap. Two-inch lead squares spread over the wall in a tight grid, each dotted on all four corners with red-tipped bullets that look like bolts. Though the piece resembles a quilt, the rigidity of the sharply cut lead and bullets removes any warmth. *Blanket*, too, confounds expectations of comfort. Also hung in a grid, smooth unpainted wood frames enclose panes of glass, each marred with a bullet hole. If you weren't already aware of it, these pieces drive home a sense of your own defenselessness; even the chain-mail-like *Shroud* sports gaps between its lead tiles. Vulnerability, however, does not equal powerlessness, but opens into an emotional honesty that is perhaps stronger than brute force. Christensen uses a touch of this force as well. Many of her works are reconstituted from fragments of glass or crockery. *Passion* depicts a big valentine heart, almost four feet high and painted red. Broken bottle necks hang by

thick wire from hooks, making the heart jut out as much as seven inches, all jagged edges. Like *Shield #7*'s femme-fatale press-on nails, the bottle necks threaten to fight dirty, but the giant, sentimental heart mitigates their harshness. Even as it menaces, *Passion* speaks poignantly of loss, of things broken and (just barely) held together again. The richest range of emotion comes from *You Don't Love Me (Yet)*, another broken and rebuilt heart. This plaster heart wears a coat of handles from shattered coffee mugs. The ceramics vary in hue from white-gray to white-tan to white-pink, and in style: there are boxy handles, fluted, narrow, and curly ones, and handles with special thumb tabs. This piece reaches out rather than bristles, but even in this action it remains reticent, offering only the handles. It invites the viewer to take hold in a manner that is both passive and aggressive, doubtful and confident. With its mournful/optimistic title embracing both extremes, it strikes a balance with profound grace.

Christina Huntington is a writer living in Memphis.

Mark Cooley
American Dreams (detail), 2000.
Courtesy of Performing Arts Center.



south carolina

Mark Cooley
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A new installation by North Carolina-based artist Mark Cooley, "American Dreams" presents us with material evidence of new communication technologies and their role in current social, political, and psychological life. On first look, "American Dreams" recalls the laconic aesthetics of much conceptual and institutional critique-based art. Material is displayed in a utilitarian, didactic manner, leaving the framing to the gallery space. What one reads into the work is of course another matter. There is an apparent dichotomy here—between the vernacular and the esoteric, and between design and activism—the boundaries of which dissolve on ingestion and regurgitation. For Cooley, each is ideologically charged and relevant to critical discourse.

"American Dreams" consists of panels of peg board displaying either rows of typed text, or computer printout images and cheap commercial goods hung in plastic bags. As its title suggests, the work attempts to represent a consumer fantasy that is both utopian and apocalyptic in true American fashion. Cooley employs materials and production techniques common to the celebrated world of personal computers and communication devices. A series of high-resolution color prints depict various artifacts of Americana and advertisements for the Army. These striking images serve as labels for the plastic toys and other mass-produced goods in their Baggies. We are led to make associations, some loose, some more hermeneutic, between objects and textual information with the help of bar-coded labels. Closer inspection reveals the names of countries that were targets of U.S. bombing campaigns, like Afghanistan and Guatemala, subtly printed over the imagery on the labels. One might assume that the products under the labels are produced in those locations. But where a political treatise might simply find fault with imperialism, Cooley looks for everyday desire behind acts of power.

In another part of the installation, a compact-disc recording of testimonials from workers in the semiconductor industry may be heard through headphones. Taken from audio files on the Internet, these statements represent the less-than-exemplary conditions faced by these workers, offering someone else's (usually bad) experience as private entertainment. This conflict between private freedoms and social costs (the loss of such freedoms by others) is symbolized by the everyday act, implied by the personal audio device, of someone listening to music in the solitary personal environment of headphones.

Just as Cooley directs our attention to the tense dynamic of public and private, he also asks us to consider the myths of the Information Age. The world of virtual reality as portrayed by this installation is still structured by the same long-held beliefs about race, class, and gender present in the "real world," and has yet to deliver on its promise of environmentalism. The opposition between utopian acceptance and reactionary fear of emergent technology seems to offer little in the way of constructive discourse. "American Dreams" was produced in large part with digital technology, using the Internet as a source of information and desktop publishing as a way to display this information. Cooley champions information as an equalizer of inequalities. But information is no match for desire. It is easy to put on our headphones and listen to the latest in post-punk social conscience and believe that with the right information exposed, our technocratic culture will inevitably become more democratic. Maybe it will, but I'm glad there are those such as Cooley who aren't counting on it.

Ryan Griffis is looking for a job.

wisconsin

Donald Lipski
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"All art is quite useless." Oscar Wilde's bald preface statement to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* laid a foundation of questions about beauty, morality, and the function of art that dwells as a pale phantom throughout his novel. Wilde's pithy observation was equally at home in this mid-career survey of sculpture by Donald Lipski, which featured both single pieces and excerpts from larger installations. The exhibition, "A Brief History of Twine," displayed the sardonic elegance of his work in a cogent and intelligent manner, with each of the 24 pieces

from 1983 to 2000 configured in a high Modernist, isolated splendor. *Untitled #90-11*, a pickax whose thick and worn metal blade is held by a glass handle, was mounted opposite *Untitled #90-7*, which at first seems a delicate mandala or Victorian ladies' carriage wheel, but on closer inspection is revealed to be composed of flyswatters. Tromp l'oeil tree trunks command their own spaces: made of fake wood bent into impossible shapes, works like *Exquisite Corpse No. 17 (First Loop)* are equally evocative of Marcel Duchamp's deadpan wit, Martin Puryear's grace, and Lipski's own brand of shamanism. *In Memory of Silent Deeds* is a lone massive bell anchored by three wheels. Incapable of any self-generated sound, the bell is encrusted with a number of little bells; parasites that ring several tunes, they usurp the function of their dignified host, or maybe their wiring just holds the big guy together. Lipski's work is characterized by well known and singular sleights of

Donald Lipski
Exquisite Corpse No. 17 (First Loop), 1994.
Mixed media, 46 1/2" x 21" x 46".
Courtesy of Madison Art Center.

