

A Meticulous Ferment

On the sun-drenched afternoon of August 17, 1661, Sun King Louis XIV attended a magnificent party in his honor at Vaux-le-Vicomte, the remarkable château of France's Finance Minister, Nicholas Fouquet. The party included lavish displays, feasting and the unveiling of extravagant new gardens. Unbeknownst to Fouquet, the King had secretly been working against him for months and the enviable grandeur of the party would ironically contribute to his final undoing. After completing a turn of the gardens, Louis remarked to Fouquet "I'm surprised" to which Fouquet famously responded "I'm surprised you're surprised." Three weeks later Fouquet was arrested on numerous charges notably including lèse majesté, the crime of damaging the dignity of the sovereign.ⁱ

Although the true role of the fête in Fouquet's downfall may be more myth than reality, the story resonates because it plays into anxieties surrounding opulence, beauty, and superabundance. Similar concerns over time have resulted in a variety of developments from sumptuary laws to popular tales like *Citizen Kane*. The ubiquitous moral is that the consequences of grandeur are often destructive. One might think of the fall of Icharus, who, like Fouquet, conceited to approach too near the sun.

This exhibition is not, however, a moralistic gathering, cheaply chiding the viewer for indulgence. The title *A Meticulous Ferment* evokes a carefully structured dissonance. The noun *ferment* is defined as "a state of unrest, agitation, excitement, tumult" and as "the painful or disturbing transition from old to new." The related process of *fermentation*, "a chemical change accompanied by effervescence," also feels wonderfully appropriate here, as this darkly surprising collection of objects teems with an insidious undercurrent.ⁱⁱ

Stripping

Beth Lipman's monumental glass sculpture *Bride* assumes the form of a five-tiered dessert stand. The conical structure approximates the silhouette of a veiled bride who is sparkling, immense and impressive. Five levels of glass descend from a crown of luminous candles to neatly ordered stemware to lower layers that become increasingly disordered as they approach the ground. Objects as ordinary and extraordinary as candlesticks, plates, chalices, bowls of fruit, vases of flowers, octopus tentacles, and rabbit legs are amongst the array of objects crafted by the artist in clear glass. Choreographed in levels, *Bride*'s upper registers are pure and ethereal. The lower regions are messy, chaotic, bodily and uncontrolled. The contrast suggests several collisions: mind and body, male and female, order and disorder, aspiration and failure.

Lipman's work brings to mind another earlier bride: Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) commonly referred to as *The Large Glass*. These two *Brides* emerge from diverse origins but share a network of unlikely

connections, the most obvious being their titles, use of glass and relative dimensions (Duchamp's work towering at 109" and Lipman's just slightly larger at 112").

Both *Brides* unfold in a grand tale of frustrated verticality. Duchamp divides his work into two framed sections of glass, with the bride at the top and her suitors below, amounting in what Linda Dalrymple Henderson refers to as "the overarching collision between the goal of the bachelors and the position of the Bride, high above them and forever beyond their reach."ⁱⁱⁱ Duchamp's *Bride* is an anthropomorphic sex machine with unlucky results. He never finished the sculpture nor repaired it after being broken, and thus his bride remains forever pure and unstripped, despite her machinations.

While Duchamp's wedding is a party that can't get started, Lipman's has already passed. Her bride appears to have been devoured and abandoned by an anonymous mob of revelers. They leave behind an abundant dowry of luxurious waste composed of spilled champagne, half-eaten trays of oysters, a murdered but untouched hare and carelessly discarded broken items from either the ceremonial table or the gift registry. One can virtually witness the bride broken and consumed in the tumult of ceremonial detritus (and perhaps literally so, as in old wedding traditions where consummation took place as a critical component of the day's events). That this tumult is painstakingly choreographed in the meticulous media of glass upsets the chaos of the narrative. This is not a crime of passion. It is cold, calculated and pre-meditated.

Slipping

Duchamp's *Bride* is the subject of a failed attempt at stripping. *Slipping* presents another relevant failure. Stripping and slipping both create revelatory ways of observing: one by removing an obscuring exterior, the other by revealing the richness of a new context. Stripping and slipping both expose the object to change the subject— a ferment of sorts.

Lipman's work is full of such slippage. She presents a discord that moves the viewer away from the object itself and toward the *idea* of an object. That she uses such extraordinarily elaborate methods of construction makes the transition all the more slippery. In the pair of sculptures entitled *Whatnots I* and *II*, Lipman presents two tiered forms that resemble Victorian drawing room curios filled with lustrous black glass reproductions of the artist's personal collection of keepsakes. It is important to note that Lipman did not mechanically cast the objects; she sculpted each from loving memory or personal observation. In their haunting black hue, the copies loosely appropriate the form of the artist's collection, but they are not exact. More like a clone than a twin, these replicas present a symbolic version of the object devoid of origin, texture, intended function and the patina of time. Lipman wrests her own collection of *things* into general signifiers, transformed from objects of personal memory to objects of shared meaning. This transformation brings about a sense of loss for the original and the experience it embodies— a loss heightened by the *Whatnots* overwhelming blackness and the endless depth of their mournful reflection.

Lipman's photographic work slips further into multiple levels of removal. For *Still Life With Bottles, Melons, and Bowl of Fruit*, Lipman fabricates a collection of glass objects and arranges them in a manner reminiscent of a historic still life. She subsequently photographs her three-dimensional composition, prints the image on transparent plexiglass and then disassembles the physical collection of objects. This act involves a series of shifts: from object to the representation of the object to a photographic image of that representation. The object crafted in glass is replaced by the object rendered in glass. Printed on a transparent material, *Still Life* also slips to the edge of the visible—the shadows cast on the wall by the printed imagery are hauntingly apparent through its invisible glass field—further blurring the conflict between image and material. This is a deceptively attractive dissonance. According to Lipman, glass “foils the viewer's eye; it frustrates efforts to claim and own what is seen.”^{iv}

Twisting

Kirsten Hassenfeld's *Blueware* impress, at first, with the authority of an antique porcelain centerpiece. Closer inspection reveals that these are not heirlooms in porcelain—a material seductive enough to inspire centuries of mystery and international desire—but ordinary paper. *Blueware* are constructed from numerous strips of paper twisted upon themselves to create beadlike forms which are later painted and immersed in a glossy acrylic coating. The result is a remarkable transformation of material. What at first seemed to be crisp and pristine is actually chaotic, a construct of irregular forms and vibrant blue ornamental patterns languidly bleeding across the surface. What began as a slip has now made a complete turn.

Blueware are reminiscent of familiar objects but defy precise definition. They are ornamented with loose interpretations of historic china patterns but cannot be categorized as *Willow* or *Wild Rose*. Their bleeding blue is reminiscent of the Flow Blue style that emerged as English potters attempted to reproduce the crisp forms of hand-painted Chinese ceramics into mass production. Technical failures resulted in an eerie tint that hazily leaks out of designs and often blurs the failings of the transferware process. Originating as a flaw, it became a popular style. Hassenfeld's *Blueware (Plaques)* cleverly play on this defect. She uses a similar technique—perhaps defective, or perhaps not—to mystify the viewer. Her plaque patterns hover between exoticized Eastern landscapes (like the English copies of the Chinese) and maddeningly random doodles. Their blend of confidence and disregard upsets identification. Despite their insouciant appearance they manage to retain a powerful sense of luxury and a mysterious otherworldliness.

Hassenfeld also twists the relationship between the botanical theme of ceramic patterns and their sources in nature. *Blueware (Garden)* is sited on the floor like a bed of flowers that has been carefully arranged and pruned. *Blueware (Espalier)* references the espalier garden technique by which trees are trained to create rigid two-dimensional patterns. Whether practical or aesthetic, espalier forces the perfectly engineered form of a natural tree through an oddly artificial evolution to suit the desires of the gardener. With an

equally forceful flourish, Hassenfeld trains her strips of paper into a rigid tree. She references both the natural origin of her media (paper) and the natural origin of the pattern (tree).

Two installations twist ever further.

A sprawling landscape of tiny parts, discarded and found, compose Hassenfeld's installation *White Treen*. Inspired by *treen*, 17th to 19th century turned wood and ivory forms, Hassenfeld strings together a motley assortment of scavenged treasures into vertical columns suspended from the ceiling. En masse they take on the form of a luminous low-hanging cloud in white and gold. The nature of the arrangement's upward gesture creates a marked contrast with its humble materials. Nearby, the installation *Black Treen* consists of a compilation of black found objects set on the ground atop a medallion of antique cut-glass mirrors. The reflection completes the arrangement of forms. Paired in a visual dialogue, *White Treen* rises transcendently while *Black Treen* sinks into an illusory depth. Neither claims the earthly middle ground of the object.

Hassenfeld's materials seem to be simply but painstakingly sorted and arranged by appearance. One can imagine the artist carefully studying each item to contemplate its impact under intimate scrutiny and the glint of its distant effect as a component in a larger landscape. As Fouquet's vast gardens have proved, accumulation and arrangement have a power that can surprise.

As with *Blueware*, closer inspection of *White Treen* and *Black Treen* disassembles the illusion. What appeared sublime from a distance is actually an assortment of buttons, ashtrays, poker chips, bottle caps, jar lids, thread spools, tape cores and napkin rings. The more detailed the examination the less impressive the object becomes and yet the greater the twist. For at least a century artists have attempted similar transformations of the everyday artifact: from Duchamp's readymades to Cornell's constructions to Italy's Arte Povera movement to contemporary artists like Tara Donovan and Haim Steinbach. Hassenfeld's work is not the result of a miraculous transformation. She does not pretend to be a magician. She is a storyteller, and the closer we look, the more she allows us to unravel the tale.

Both Lipman and Hassenfeld present a narrative. For Lipman the story lies beyond the object. Her magnificent constructions point away, leading you somewhere far beyond their compelling materiality. Hassenfeld's objects, on the other hand, point precisely to their making. They are as expansive as Lipman's, but do so inwardly—collecting what was there from the beginning.

-Lauren Fensterstock

ⁱ Thompson, Ian. The Sun King's Garden: Louis XV, André Le Nôtre and the Creation of the Gardens of Versailles. New York: Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 13- 25.

ⁱⁱ "ferment" Def. 2a and b, and "fermentation" Def 1a, Webster's Dictionary. Phillipines: Mirriam-Webster Inc) 1986. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henderson, L. D. "The Large Glass Seen Anew: Reflections of Contemporary Science and Technology in Marcel Duchamp's "Hilarious Picture" [Duchamp in context: science and technology in the Large glass and other related work; book excerpt]. Leonardo v. 32 no. 2, 1999, p 113-26

^{iv} Beth Lipman, artist statement