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Repurposing Readymades: A Conversation with David Baskin

David Baskin, STORE-BOUGHT, 2023. Installation view at Freight+Volume. Courtesy the artist and Freight+Volume, New York.

By PAUL LASTER, March 2023

A sculptor working with readymade objects, David Baskin transforms appropriated commodities by repurposing the original while altering its intended meaning and use. Cleverly commenting on consumer culture, the Cooper Union grad had his solo show debut at New York's SculptureCenter in 1999 and has been featured in engaging exhibitions at Marianne Boesky Gallery, Carolina Nitsch, Carriage Trade, Flag Art Foundation, Brooklyn Museum and Freight+Volume over the years. The Brooklyn-based artist recently sat down to discuss his current solo show, STORE-BOUGHT at Freight+Volume, in the context of his broader body of captivating sculptural works.

Paul Laster: What first led you down the conceptual art rabbit hole?

David Baskin: Well, I really don't think of myself as a conceptual artist or my work as conceptual art per se. At least not in the sense that the idea, or concept, behind the work is more important than the manifestation of that idea, as can be seen in work by artists like Joseph Kosuth, John Baldessari or Mel Ramsden, a member of the Art & Language artist collective. Rather, for me, the idea or concept dictates the outcome of my work and becomes an intrinsic part of the sculpture, installation or whatever I may be working on. For example, with my current show, STORE-BOUGHT at Freight + Volume Gallery, I purchased corporate produced generic art that is sold online through big box stores like Home Depot, and I felt it was important that every aspect of the project, from production to display, should reference consumer culture and the cultural codes embedded in the work.

David Baskin, STORE-BOUGHT, 2023. Installation view at Freight+Volume. Courtesy the artist and Freight+Volume, New York.

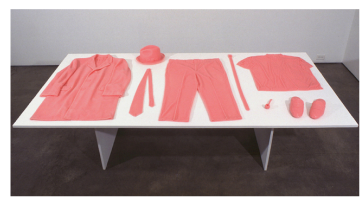
PL: What attracted you to the readymade object as a point of departure for making art?

DB: My first experience thinking of commodities in terms of readymades came from considering their behavior as objects in retail spaces, whether they were boutique shops or large shopping malls. I started to see how designers and producers incorporated aesthetic strategies to sell products, especially on a formal level. Whether it was a vacuum cleaner that had a striking resemblance to Brancusi's *Bird in Space* or seeing certain retail displays that, for me, recalled Dutch Golden Age vanitas paintings, where an abundance of commodities was shown in enticing arrangements.

David Baskin, VANITAS, 2019. Private Collection.

PL: Has your primary interest always been sculpture and, if yes, why that medium for exploring ideas?

DB: As a student at Cooper Union, I studied both painting and sculpture. After graduating I continued to do both for many years, but it wasn't until the early 2000's that I became fully engaged with only sculpture. At that time, I was making very personal work by using vestiges or remnants from my family history. I found that by using actual objects, in this case artifacts; furniture and clothing, was a powerful means to express my ideas. And this process of incorporating or recontextualizing chosen objects or products in my work has continued to this day.



David Baskin, FIGURE 54. (Grandparents Furniture Suspended), 2003. Courtesy the artist (L). David Baskin, RUBBER CLOTHING, 2003. Courtesy the artist (R).

PL: Besides suspending your grandparents' furniture as a sculptural installation, you also recast specific pieces of the furniture at life-size in plaster to transform them into non-functioning objects. Was this the beginning of your use of the casting process to transform everyday objects into works of art?

DB: Yes, this work was one of the first pieces that the mold making process was an essential conceptual component, and not just a technical consideration.

Typically, mold making is used to create replicas or multiples of a desired form. In this case, it was the alteration of the existing form, and this was an important distinction. Molds were made from the furniture and in the process, the original objects were destroyed. An entirely new piece emerged, isolated from its original context, and given new meaning through the transformation of the mold making process.

David Baskin, FIGURE, 2004. Courtesy the artist (L). David Baskin, FIGURE, 2004. Courtesy the artist (R).

PL: To what degree do you have to change the original object for it to become a work of art, or what Marcel Duchamp dubbed an assisted readymade?

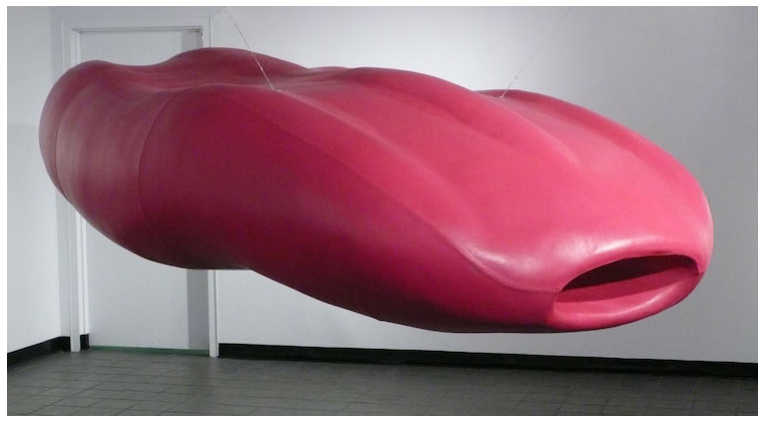
DB: Well, I suppose in the true Duchampian sense, any object can be a work of art if the artist simply deems it so. Which is a very powerful way of reframing reality and was a radical notion then and is still today, at least from an ontological standpoint. The degree of change or transformation of an object for me will depend on what I want to say. For instance, with the furniture it was important that the transformed object had a level of verisimilitude. The new forms had to be almost indistinguishable from the original furniture. Every detail had to be exact, yet, with the destruction of the original, a radical transformation took place.

David Baskin, STILL-LIFE (Cast Cosmetic Bottles), 2007. Private Collection.

PL: How many different ways have you achieved this transformation?

DB: Different projects will determine different results. For the work in my current show the attempt was to recontextualize the store-bought sculpture as a mass-produced product, art for the "masses" so to speak. Casting them in Pop-colored plastic signified mass-production and consumer culture. With STILL-LIFE (Cosmetic bottles) the challenge was to cast the bottles with the same level of clinical detail as existed in the original manufactured product without changing the design and form. However, by simply casting them in a pink colored flexible rubber a shift occurred, and a latent eroticism was revealed. What once was benign shampoo and deodorant bottles have been transformed into sex toys.

With other projects like the VACUUMS or JAG. I began with the original products, but the transformation took place by altering the forms.



David Baskin, JAG, 2010. Private Collection.

PL: Is this process really about experimentation with materials, which is the same process that most sculptors are relatedly investigating to a different end?

DB: For me there is content in the material, or a semiotics of material. Every material signifies something. Marble signifies rarified opulence, wealth, power and has certain cultural connotations. Plastic can be seen to signify the opposite, ubiquitous cheap consumer goods, mass production, rubber is fetishistic, etc. So, it's not about experimentation or process but rather about finding appropriate materials that speak simultaneously to both form and idea.

PL: I'm beginning to see that all of your works are basically still lives, which are conceptually related to those of the Dutch Golden Age, a period that you earlier referenced. The aim of the Dutch Golden Age vanitas artists was to paint the objects so realistically that the viewer would be overcome with desire—as though they could actually eat the delicacies or possess the fine objects on view. Are you trying to recreate that level of desire or are you more interested in creating an object that critiques consumerist culture?

DB: I initially became interested in the notion of the "still life" through my interest in consumer culture and retail display strategies. Dutch Vanitas paintings showed the abundance of commodities offered through mercantile trade and I saw this as having a direct relationship to our current consumer culture. These paintings, depicting a range of "consumer goods," recalled retail stores and malls where a seemingly endless number of products are on display to entice consumer desire.

I also saw the 17th Century Calvinistic rejection of earthly possessions as a kind of early consumer critique. The historical vanitas paintings represented a moral lesson that would have been understood by early Dutch viewers. The message had religious overtones that emphasized the transience of life and the need for moderation and temperance, particularly when it came to amassing wealth and possessions. The irony here was that many of the paintings were commissioned by the merchant class and became highly prized as valuable possessions in themselves. A kind of meta-fetishization occurred, reinforcing the idea that an artwork isn't separate from a market economy.

David Baskin, VACUUM (Bird in Space, After Brancusi; Nemo; and Duck), 2008. Private Collection (L). David Baskin, VANITAS, 2019. Private Collection (R).

PL: The artists of that period could achieve such results in painting but rarely in sculpture, unless it was finely formed ceramics. How have modern techniques of casting —and, in a more contemporary sense, digital scanning and printing—made what artists like you do more realistically possible?

DB: The advent of the computer has been remarkable for the creation and production of objects, whether it is 3-D printing or CNC capability. I had the casts of the store-bought sculptures enlarged by a 3-D scanning and printing process, but I see this technology as a tool in the service of my ideas, not an end in itself.

PL: Since you don't see yourself as a conceptual artist—although I do, because of the way that the contemporary idea of conceptual art is more related to the work stemming from the concept, in the style of Duchampian readymades, Warhol's Brillo boxes, Koons's recast kitsch and Hirst's cut-up animals—how do you see your work in relation to appropriation art?

DB: By using pre-existing objects in my work, I am engaging in similar strategies that are associated with appropriation art. My work also addresses issues of authenticity, authorship and draws inspiration from popular and consumer culture. The difference is the degree of transformation from the original object or readymade. Often, I will physically change the chosen object to the point where it is "removed "from its original source. Whereas much of appropriation art incorporates the original object or image with little or no transformation applied.

David Baskin, STORE-BOUGHT, 2023. Installation view at Freight+Volume. Courtesy the artist and Freight+Volume, New York

PL: Besides being thought-provoking, is there humor at play in your work? Or is it meant to be more ironic?

DB: The humor in my work is a kind of byproduct of altering an object's ordinariness so that what was once familiar is now seen in a different light.

PL: What do you hope the viewer's takeaway will be?

DB: If the viewer can get a sense of the ideas behind a particular work through their visual or aesthetic experience of it, then I feel I've been successful.

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PL: Are your artworks designed for now—the present—or for the future? As they seem to have the pared down feeling of art from futuristic interiors, such as the minimal sci-fi sets from films like Gattaca or Ex Machina.

As the title of my current show at Freight + Volume suggests, the objects in STORE-BOUGHT are based on casts from sculptures originally purchased from a big box store.

They do look like futuristic designs from the Atomic Age or something stemming from Googie architecture and signage. What intrigues me is the Populuxe nature of the designs and how they signify a time of middle- and working-class prosperity in America. With that prosperity gone and a neoliberal order in place, perhaps these corporate produced artworks can be seen as props for some dystopic sci-fi movie set. **WM**

David Baskin: STORE-BOUGHT is on view at Freight + Volume in New York through March 25, 2023.

PAUL LASTER

Paul Laster is a writer, editor, curator, artist and lecturer. He's a contributing editor at ArtAsiaPacific and Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art and writer for Time Out New York, Harper's Bazaar Arabia, Galerie Magazine, Sculpture, Art & Object, Cultured, Architectural Digest, Garage, Surface, Ocula, Observer, ArtPulse, Conceptual Fine Arts and Glasstire. He was the founding editor of Artkrush, started The Daily Beast's art section, and was art editor of Russell Simmons' OneWorld Magazine, as well as a curator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1.

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