A Throwaway? Not From This Angle

During his Surrealist period, Giacometti referred to some of his small sculptures as “disagreeable objects.” They were “without pedestal and without value” and, as he implied by attaching the French words “à jeter” to their titles, meant to be thrown away. Why was he so dismissive toward his own work? The trauma of war had something to do with it. So did the idea of l’informe, or the formless, pronounced by Georges Bataille. The sense was that art making should be an act of debasement and destruction: a breaking down, rather than a building up.

The group show “A Disagreeable Object,” at the SculptureCenter, uses Giacometti’s phrase to lend some context to a present in which casual attitudes toward sculpture have become commonplace (as in Gellin’s current show at Greene Naftali, which invites viewers to topple artworks). “A Disagreeable Object” continues through Nov. 26 at the SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 361-1750, sculpture-center.org.

Anicka Yi’s glass piece “The Possibility of an Island II.”

A Disagreeable Object
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plaster in a range of skin tones, you may wonder whether the wearers have been vaporized by a nuclear attack. Likewise, Ailsa Barembom’s arrangements of hardware covered with goopy, translucent gel, titled “Leakage Industries,” conjure a post-technological society. And in Camille Henrot’s “Objets Augmentés,” humdrum instruments like golf clubs and pliers become wickedly fetishistic when wrapped in thick layers of earth and tar.

Many of the show’s 20 artists are arch manipulators of found objects. And their version of Surrealism venerates Jeff Koons and David Hammons, alongside Giacometti and Duchamp. You can see that in Anicka Yi’s misshapen glass bottles holding contact lenses and saline solution or in Martin Soto Climent’s two basketballs ensnared in fishnet stockings.

Works in the handmade category, though scarce here, are impressive. They include Alexandra Bircken’s intricate wall of magnetized steel cutouts, as well as Johannes VanDerBeek’s decorative furnishings of paper pulp, metal mesh and matte medium, which brighten the SculptureCenter’s cryptlike basement.

In the basement you will also find the best of the show’s three video works: Aneta Grzeszykowska’s “Headache,” in which disembodied limbs make uncanny, violent and sexual gestures before reattaching to a torso. Shot in black and white, with the help of several dancers, it shares the elegant but deeply disconcerting aesthetic of Man Ray’s photographs. (The catalog reproduces a striking Ray image of a bare-breasted woman caressing Giacometti’s “Disagreeable Object.”)

Recent group shows at the SculptureCenter have tended to feel clubby. But this one, organized by the center’s newish curator, Ruba Katrib, ventures out of the Lower East Side-Chelsea circuit. Among the less familiar figures are the Norwegian Ann Cathrin November Haibo, whose draping of brightly colored track pants and thread over toilet paper holders exhibits a streetwise formlessness, and the Berlin artist Alicia Kwade, whose altered wall clock (with its rotating body and second hand permanently set to 12) seems to destabilize the whole gallery.
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Here, too, are some established sculptors like Sarah Lucas and Charles Long, who have the confidence and chops to make direct allusions to Surrealism; witness Mr. Long's very Giacometti-like clusters of river sediment, papier-mâché, plaster and debris on metal scaffolds, and Ms. Lucas's seated nude fashioned from a concrete block and stuffed nylon tights.

In other words, there's a healthy mix of artists here, and an intriguing dialogue between object making and object tweaking that may be one of the underexplored legacies of Surrealism. (As Ms. Katriub observes in her catalog essay, “The Surrealists imbed mass-produced and handcrafted objects alike with origin myths, erotic desire and destructive impulses.”) This is the kind of show that, while short on new ideas, dusts off some old ones worth re-examining.
"A Disagreeable Object" at the SculptureCenter, New York
October 17–2012

Taking its title from Alberto Giacometti’s surrealist sculptures, "A Disagreeable Object" explores themes of desire and repulsion, the familiar and the unfamiliar. The surrealist object was situated at a remove from its status as an artwork; it operated in direct response to, and simultaneously influenced, social and cultural attitudes towards developments in art, industry, design and commodification. This exhibition brings together a group of international artists who similarly posit the object in relation to capitalist culture and technology, as well as the gendered oppositions between interior and exterior space. Strategies implemented by the surrealists such as the uncanny and incommunicable, have a newfound relevancy, although the current context has shifted. This exhibition examines these impulses in current art and poses questions about relationships between the present-day status of the economy, the body, domesticity, technology, and eros.
“A Disagreeable Object”

“A Disagreeable Object” had a simple premise: Surrealism’s afoot. More difficult was the proof. Arguing for an avant-garde’s renewed relevance first entails defining the original movement—no easy task when that avant-garde was exceptionally long-lived and riven by factionalism from the start. Instead of honing a signature style, Surrealism stockpiled strategies, aesthetic techniques devised to trigger that exhilarating condition known alternately as the marvelous or uncanny. Curator Ruba Katrib resolved this preliminary dilemma by borrowing her exhibition title from a 1931 work by Alberto Giacometti. It’s an astute, even poetic, choice, since Surrealism’s orthodox and dissident factions both laid claim to the wood, metal, and plaster premonitions Giacometti produced during his brief but fevered Surrealist phase.

An approach that “A Disagreeable Object” invites, then, is to read the work through Giacometti’s articulation of various Surrealist tropes. For the orthodox side of Surrealism, Giacometti’s quotation of knick-knacks and tribal artifacts accords to the doctrine of Surrealist “popé” André Breton, for whom flea-market finds were keys for reading and releasing unconscious impulses. Ergo, in Objets Augmentés, 2012, Camille Henrot encrusted assorted tools and equipment—a radio, a drill, mugs, a bicycle seat—in a thick cake of earth and tar, rendering them black and grossly bulbous; for 2700 M.i. Moor, 2009, Martin Soto Climent weds a broomstick to a tangled blond wig, a consummately Surrealist coupling that swaps function for frisson. For the dissident side, Giacometti gave inspired plastic expression to Georges Bataille’s concepts of basseuse and informe—terms glossed with stunning succinctness and force in Alisa Baremboym’s Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit, 2012. Like Giacometti, Baremboym enacts the lowering operation of basseuse by orienting her sculpture along the horizontal axis of the base—one consisting of gelatinous petroleum that seeps into the pieces of unfired ceramic clay laid over it. As if that toxic sweat weren’t sufficiently emblematic of the informe—a transgressive collapse and contamination of divisions and differences—Leakage Industries also incorporates a hardware variation: a flash drive and snapping USB cord outfitted with “gender changers,” supplements that alternate “male” and “female” ports.

Comparison and citation alone don’t make an argument, or answer the animating question: Why Surrealism now, and how does this recovery differ from those prior? It seems particularly important to distinguish this exhibition’s rationale from that of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’s 1996 show, “L’Informe: mode d’emploi” (Formless: A User’s Guide), which also privileged Giacometti. Katrib’s catalogue essay points to technological transformation, and the birth dates of her selected artists cluster around the Carter administration and Reagan’s first term—that is, the generation that came of age with control societies and are just old enough to recall a time before the information economy so thoroughly grafted itself onto the body. We could further bolster Katrib’s thesis by splicing it with one of Breton’s: In a 1935 lecture, he cast Surrealism as a departure from modernist abstraction’s “inner perception” and a return to the “visual residues” of external reality. Abstraction and the Surrealist object are both now serving as precedents for artists giving material expression to technology’s seemingly immaterial effects. (In the former category, consider the digital abstractions of Tauba Auerbach or Wade Guyton.) A crucial difference between these two precedents, however, is that abstract painting extends a humanist tradition that Surrealism aggressively troubles. For Breton, Surrealism’s task was liberation, a romanticism he failed to reconcile with the darker insight of Bataille, that a subject unbound might also come undone. Whereas pixelated variants of modernist abstraction risk presuming and preserving an autonomous subject, the split subject of Surrealism is ripe for various post- and anti-humanist takes on technology’s effects, embodied here in Pamela Rosenkranz’s skin-toned silicone poured into Asics sneakers, the spindly blue golem that emerges from Michael E. Smith’s melting of Bic plastic pens, and the pupil-enlarging contact lenses floating in Anicka Yi’s bubbling perfume bottles. Today’s “visual residues” are synthetic, carcinogenic, branded—disagreeable objects indeed.

—Colby Chamberlain
NEW YORK
“A Disagreeable Object”
SculptureCenter // September 15–November 26, 2012

The exhibition takes its title from Giancotti’s Surrealist sculptures, and like these objects, the works here oscillate between desire and something more sinister. Curator Ruth Katrib departs from the subversive power that the uncanny held for the Surrealists in a show that interrogates this force in the present tense. The 20 artists included all ask questions that are colored by the implications of technology, but rather than implying a break, the exhibition draws upon traces of Surrealism in contemporary practice.

Marta Eto’s contribution here is the one that most directly recalls the Surrealist aesthetic. Her series of prints, “The Equation of Desire,” 2010–11, created by rolling and folding vintage magazines and subsequently photographing them to form new images, calls to mind the Surrealists’ practice of “a process of removing layers of visible planes to reveal hidden images” and collage (a cumulative process).

Several works imply a blurring of the boundaries between bodies, labor, and products. Pamela Rosenkranz’s “Awesome Power,” 2012, a circle of white sneakers filled with silicone in a range of flesh tones, eerily resembles a living body—but one that is embedded in a product. Similarly, Anicka Yi combines the manufactured and the corporeal in her sculptures “The Possibility of an Island,” II, and III, all 2012: small plastic bottles with colored contact lenses, inorganic sheaths for eyes, floating in a bubbling saline solution.

Many of the other pieces on view contain fruitful juxtapositions that recall Surrealist approaches. Rather than opposing destruction and creation, Camille Henrot’s “Objets Augmentés,” 2012, created from objects found in New York and coated with earth and tar, teased out an ambiguity between these two forces. Sound from Ian Cheng’s video “This Papaya Tastes Perfect,” 2011, a reenactment of a fight via motion-capture technology, infects the basement. The adjacency of Cheng’s guttural audio has a haunting impact in the corridor where Johannes VanDerBeek’s speckled papier-mâché works recall archaeological artifacts and relics orinery shapes from nature.

Also in the basement, Areta Grzeszko’s bloco “Headache,” 2008, is a strong anchor for the exhibition. The body appears segmented, and individual limbs appear to move with a thing-like quality against a black background, each part animated with its own agency, creating a sequence that is mesmerizing.

Though they employ different processes and proceed with distinct goals, the artists here share certain attitudes of formal languages that go beyond the exhibition. The strength of “A Disagreeable Object” is in its departing from a grounded set of questions while allowing for an uneasy order and unexpected exchanges. —Clara Halpern