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Galleries: Transforming everyday objects into a range of artwork

By Edith Newhall
For The Inquirer

Making handmade copies of objects and figures has to be one of the oldest tricks in the artist's book, but no one is getting tired of it. In fact, the art world seems to have a growing appetite for verisimilitude, as well as for the more altered truths of such artists as Robert Gober, Evan Penny, and Charles LeDray. For example, those who've admired little else in Urs Fischer's survey at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art (through Feb. 7) say they were immediately drawn to and fascinated by his facsimile of a sawdust-speckled "tongue" that darts out of a small hole punched in a wall.

The everyday objects-turned-artworks that make up Joseph Hu's show at Pentimenti Gallery do nothing so technologically astounding. They're as plain as Shaker furniture, and Hu does little to render his painted paper-and-cardboard versions of a bell pepper plant or a few New Yorker magazines convincingly real. The unexpected magnetism of Hu's work lies in its unaffectedness and untrickiness, but, you realize, especially in his attention to the whole picture. His choice of environment or placement for each work is key to the poetic solitariness that seems to emanate from it.

The small things to notice that give the work its uncanny realism: Chocolate Bell Pepper (2010) leans toward the light coming through the gallery's front windows; the black "coffee mug" with a blue interior, Coffee Mug, After P.D. (2010), sits on a shelf, abandoned-looking, as if Hu or a gallery staff member put it down during the show's installation and forgot to take it away; the pile of New Yorkers on a low pedestal that comprises Briefly Noted (2010) looks exactly the way a pile of magazines does before someone neatens it up.

Hunter Stabler, whose intricate, hand-cut paper pieces also are on view at Pentimenti, has taken the yantra, a geometric design used in meditation, as his point of departure.

When Stabler's intention is humor - as it must be in Schweinfurt Yantra of Black Thursday/The Flying Fortress of Solitude (2009), into which he has worked patterns of fighter planes, or Magic Kruller Alefbet Lamne of the Golden Dawn (2009), which resembles a Victorian astrology chart - he gives a viewer a lens through which to appreciate his ideas.

Some of Stabler's pieces incorporate one layer of cut paper mounted in a deep Plexiglas frame; others have two layers of paper encased in one frame, with one complex cut pattern in front of a different cut pattern. The latter works, which presumably represent the mind as it becomes increasingly focused, suggest depth through their physical arrangement. You sense that if you studied them for a certain period of time, you might attain a meditative state of mind, but they are hard to access in the short term - as in gallerygoing.

By contrast, Stabler's single-paper piece, Oracular Sepsirotic Heliospectrascopigram (2008), which depicts an enormous globe shape of swirling cut lines and is the largest in his show, makes an immediate strong impact.



"Chocolate Bell Pepper," by Joseph Hu, a work in gouache and acrylic on paper at Pentimenti Gallery.

Pentimenti Gallery, 145 N. Second St., 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays, 12 to 5 p.m. Saturdays. 215-625-9990 or www.pentimenti.com. Through Feb. 27.