

Conceptual Materials

by Polly Ullrich

The art in *Not of Iron* crisply embodies the syncretic* tendencies in contemporary visual culture today. *Not of Iron* is not so much about pluralism as it is about fusion. Its attitude – by avoiding the worn-out bitter irony in much of contemporary Postmodern art – is instead gentle, negotiating existential themes from a standpoint of synthesis, idiosyncracy and wit. *Not of Iron* is an exhibition about accretion, not reduction or essence; the art work is primarily created through additive processes, not subtractive. In making their art, most of the five artists have sorted through, collected, re-configured and combined thousands of wayward, sometimes cast-off artifacts but with unexpectedly poetic results-- that is, art forms which embody a sense of unity, not disintegration. The title, *Not of Iron*, refers to the homely, flexible, ordinary materials used in this art. In this way the exhibition affirms that what we consider to be vernacular or commonplace in the world also holds the promise of the mythological, or the extraordinary. In *Not of Iron*, it is the art's sensuous hybridity, its emergence from improbable blendings and mutations, which makes room for new ways of thinking about science, about human identity and about the environment.

The work of these Illinois artists — Bill Smith, Michael Ferris Jr., Yvette Kaiser Smith, Lucy Slivinski and Jeffrey Michael Grauel — most likely comes out of an art lineage forged in the late 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Lucas Samaras, Eva Hesse and the Arte Povera group who opened new frontiers in sculptural form and content with what seemed then to be aesthetically impoverished materials. Artists at that time were rebelling against the cerebral purity and rigid stringency of Minimalism with gestural art of humble, often pliable, materials fabricated from repetitive, craft-based activities. It is interesting that thirty years later the art in *Not of Iron*, with a similar emphasis on materiality and process, also exudes a startlingly fresh sense of liberation. Perhaps that is because, at the turn of a millennium steeped in de-materialized digital processes, improvisational art forms based in the dense, physical stuff of the world in which we live our daily lives still stand as important paradigms to uncover aesthetic meaning and contemporary narratives.

Hybridity – a supremely Postmodern characteristic – indicates in-betweenness, a blending of boundaries that could be geographical, ideological or ethnic, and three syncretic traits bind all five artists in *Not of Iron*. First and foremost, a singular hybridity of style abounds in this art.

*syncretic: a reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief, as in philosophy or religion, especially when the success is partial or the result is heterogenous.

Michael Ferris Jr.'s impassive sculptures, for example, with inlaid wooden surfaces that express a vivid, Byzantine sensibility, are a cogent blend of the ornate look of outsider art with the long-standing Western tradition of the stoic portrait bust going back to ancient Rome. Jeffrey Michael Grauel's art, composed of items such as macaroni, match sticks and acrylic yarn that have been arranged with the help of computer images, is a tender reconciliation of the intimacy of daily life with technical sophistication and the wider world of art history. Looking at Grauel's art, we immediately grasp what the commonplace materials were at first, but through the intercession, the skill, of the artist, the stylistic expectations of the work profoundly mutates: the prosaic items of everyday life become an art form.

Second, the five artists in Not of Iron exhibit a reawakened sense of the physical that is richly integrated with language and concepts. For most of these artists, their materials stand both as sensuous and as intellectual statements, and their art is visceral as much as it is semantic. This sensibility acknowledges the inherent qualities in materials (not ideas placed on top of them). It acknowledges that materials themselves position meaning within the art, and that whatever materials the artist pragmatically and sometimes serendipitously finds at hand contain the potential for expression.

The extraordinary art of Bill Smith, for example, blends the intimacy of gesture with the awesomeness of scale through the sheer accumulation of bits and pieces of thousands of found or recycled items which Smith then engineers into gossamer, biomechanical, kinetic sculptures and installations. Smith has identified these darkly gentle, machined art works as "systems" which are not meant to replicate but instead allude to the life processes of living organisms. His purpose, he has said, is to teach us "to see the natural world with clarity, depth and reverence" — an environmental message that pointedly strikes home with the cast-off, junkyard materials. Yvette Kaiser Smith also acutely plays off biological and social conventions within a nicely nuanced choice of art materials: Kaiser Smith crochets strands of industrial fiberglass painted in odd chemical colors into large-scale sculptures of female, organic images — a wry juxtaposition of women's bodily-based gender identity and female work (crochet) within the effluvia of an industrial world.

Finally, the work of all five artists displays an abiding interest in the process of making – whether it is creating art "from scratch" or collecting, then modifying and assembling found objects. Repetitive hand labor – such as the wood inlays in a Ferris head or the tiny, hot-glued macaroni shards in a work by Grauel – conveys a psychic depth and a physical density that emerges from the amount of time compressed into the work by the artist's hand. This emphasis, however, establishes another aspect of the exhibition's hybridity: that is, process and making are more than technique--they become a conceptual part of the art. In Not of Iron, how things are made becomes in a literal sense their very meaning.

Lucy Slivinski, for example, visits old dumps, recycling centers and forests to assemble a huge and diverse collection of junk — items which are then beaten, woven, bound, wrapped, cemented and plastered into sculpture of barely suppressed energy. Her technical methods – based on the activities of recycling and reclaiming – underline clearly her conceptual purpose, that is, to acknowledge and affirm the connection between nature and the most outcast objects of human civilization. It is a radically improvisational approach: Slivinski, like a number of artists in Not of Iron, invents many of her techniques, and these procedures inevitably stamp the art with irrepressible and evocative meaning.

Not of Iron, then, with its improvisatory approach to technique, its wide-open attitude to materials and its emphasis on the inextricable blend of physical form and de-materialized idea positions contemporary art as more than a mere declarative statement, more than a straightforward, disembodied vehicle for communicating concepts. The synthetic, visceral and idea-laden art works in Not of Iron are physically evocative, visual investigations into some of the most complicated and conceptual issues in Postmodern culture.

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