

METRO PICTURES

Tilley, John Martin. "Made in _____," *OfficeMagazine.net* (November 6, 2018).

office



Objects have personalities. Part of what builds their character is their backstories—their origin, their function, their inherent grace or lack thereof, their sense of humor.

Objects made by hand were once the only kind of object, other than those which occur naturally. Now the handmade object seems to possess an intrinsic value—as if because they were created and handled by another human hand they contain a powerful physical energy: the plot line of another person's life, however far away, has now intersected with our own, through this handmade object.

Objects made by machines embody a seamless fluidity that, we assume, cannot be achieved by the human hand—they cue to cold perfection, mechanical precision, robotic transcendence.

What happens when the two meet? office spoke with artist Nina Beier to find out.





'Plug,' 2018.

Tell me about the installation at Metro Pictures.

This show is very much a sculpture show. It's a culmination of interest in materials and objects that I have had in my practice forever, but somehow it's been crystallizing in this very direct interest in objects that travel, and how a material is extracted from wherever it's from, and how it's traded, how it's taking shape, and the intentions that go into the making of these objects as opposed to how they're used, and how we then understand or interpret them, and how they can then turn into symbols over time. So, this travel of objects—how everything that happens to the object along the way somehow glues or sticks onto that object and the way we understand them—with some objects being very problematic and having been problematic, or emerged from a state of being problematic, I tend to be interested in these objects that involuntarily have changed the way we understand them.

So, for example, I've worked with baguettes in many sculptures, that's just one example of something that from one perspective is basic nutrition, the most basic thing, but then it's also become a symbol of colonial power and the way French culture has traveled all over the world and made a mark everywhere. So, the object has a different identity depending on how you look at it—it could even just be a sculptural material because it is shaped by hand and made into particular forms.



'Baby' installation view.

And you use sinks in this show?

For the installation downstairs, I have a lot of ceramic bathroom sinks that I've been collecting that are all in this same kind of pastel colors that were mainly popular in the '60s and '70s. Then they're stuffed with hand-rolled cigars, so again, an object that carries a lot of weight in itself, both as a good that has traveled the world and a power symbol, but also as a problematic trade object with a certain history. Another thing that attracts me to the cigar is the fact that it's hand-rolled—the human effort attaches itself to how we perceive the value of the object. This is something I've worked with a lot. I've worked with Persian rugs with an interest in exactly this—in how value is perceived and all these narratives that attach themselves to the objects, and then they are traded based on that.

Do you feel like there's a comparison between something that's made by hand and something that's mass produced?

Yes, there's something about these ceramic sinks, which are mass produced, but are extremely sculptural in their shapes. They're also design objects. So, when you look at it from the top, from the front, this is the design object—this is where the attention has been focused—and then, when you look at the underside of the sink, there's a lot of form there based on practical issues—all the piping and tubing, the hanging systems, which have come about from a practical motivation. So, these two ways of giving form are meeting in this one object, and depending on what side of it you're standing on, you'll experience one or the other. But they actually go together so well. It's such a voluptuous shape in the end—it can almost only reference a body.



'Plug,' 2018.

Which is kind of like the title of the show—*Baby*.

It's also the title of this piece that is made out of waterbed mattresses that have been filled with water, pebbles and coins. So, there are these muddy pebbles that have been pushed in through the little hole of the waterbed where the water goes, and they're hanging on the wall, heavily carrying all this content.

How did you come upon this idea?

I watched these videos of waterbeds—the advertisements for waterbeds where they have tractors running over them without them breaking. I guess the big fear within the waterbed industry, which is a shrinking one—another part of why I'm interested in it—is the fear that they will break. So, the most important thing is to prove that they won't—that they can really hold a lot. So, how an object like that, a big hat that promises to hold whatever you put into it was a sculptural proposition that I couldn't resist. This is how I usually work: I get interested in a material, my studio is overflowing with stuff that I collect, some stuff returns, like Persian rugs or human hair wigs, there are things that I can't seem to finish, or they're around my studio—I don't know what it is, but they keep popping up. I don't always know why, when I start collecting objects—sometimes I need to live with them for a while, and then they find their way into being a sculpture.

Have you ever actually slept on a waterbed?

I've actually never slept on one, no.



'Man's Mind,' 2018.

I love the sinks because they look like little people smoking.

I think the idea is the meeting of the materials, but I love when this thing happens—there is a very direct logic of the plug, the drain hole and you close the drain, but a compressed bit of tobacco is also called a plug. I think I was thinking of these almost as ears, with the plugging, like a very straightforward gesture. But the fact that so many images come to mind once the object is there with the plug inside—there's a broad range of references that pop up, from sexual imagery to the digestive system. Some people see corroded pipes, like rusty pipes. So, it has this potential to show you things about yourself.

I'm thinking of a little cartoon character, and the title being *Baby*.

So, a baby smoking a giant cigar?

Yeah! Have you ever seen *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*? There's that baby that smokes cigars. That's what I picture.

I've never heard that before. That's good! But that's what I really like, or what I'm interested in—if you focus on different aspects of these objects you can have different experiences. If you just think of them as materials, or if you just think of them as currencies in this world, or if you think of them as design objects, or if you think of them as symbols, you'll have different things to take away, and I like that those can coexist without any of these understandings having any authority over the others.



'Mars,' 2018.

I love the pun with 'plug'—it's a fun reference to wordplay and language.

We just finished this work—it's the most impossible object that I started collecting, but there were these marble lions, the guardian lions that stand in front of buildings. I have a show up in Copenhagen with some of these works, and here I have one, as well. I've been collecting the beards of all the guys working here at Metro Pictures—I got them all to shave. So, I made a little nest in one of the creases of the lion, so the crease is holding this little nest, as if an animal had collected this material, if it had been raining beard trimmings and landed in this area. But it also creates this image at the same time, that goes very directly to this illustration of Freud, called 'What's on a Man's Mind,' where you see a naked woman in his face. I was reminded of it while I was looking at it. But the nest of beard trimmings makes the whole lion into a female nude—your mind, all of a sudden translates this marble, which is an organic shape, into a different organic shape because of this marker of the pubic hair.

Which is an actual organic material.

It's also a nice reference to the fact that we never see pubic hair depicted in marble. It's the one material that cannot be represented, for different reasons through history—there's both a very practical one, and a bunch of other historical reasons.



'Baby' installation view.

It's so conceptual and fun that you interacted with members of the gallery to remove their hair.

They were donors! It just so happened that quite a few of the people here have beards.

But it's funny too, because it's men's hair and you're saying it recalls a female form.

There's something about a beard that is really a mystery to someone who is not able to grow it. I've always had a deep fascination with this material, so I kind of needed to own some somehow. I've been wanting to work with beards for a long time. Now, I finally got a chance.