

ARTFORUM

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MUNGO THOMSON AT MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

by Christopher Miles

In his third solo show at Margo Leavin Gallery, Mungo Thomson extended a practice based on the double-take. He encouraged us to look again at familiar types and styles of images and their intertwined manifestations in mainstream and alternative culture; fine and folk art; artisanal and industrial production; consumerism, politics and faith.

In the gallery's entryway were a number of seemingly simple yet actually complex and diffuse works: *Freak Flag (USA)*, 2004, an inverted stars and stripes stitched from used denim that reduces the original to a faded blue monochrome; *Black Chimes*, 2004, a cluster of IKEA-ish modern wind chimes made of birch and aluminum, but all clad in black and hanging eerily silent; *Levitating Pentagon*, 2004, a drawing of a building literally distanced from the nation it purportedly serves; and a collection of variously lifelike George W. Bush piñatas.

Works in two further rooms also explored a jumble of themes: spirituality, politics, and art, Americana, Americanism and the international. In a small space, orblike Coin Lamps made of soldered US currency elevated folksy handicraft to the heights of modernist purity in globe-mimicking form and provided dim theatrical lighting to accompany a slide presentation of tourist shots taken on the Empire State Building's observation platform. In these images, diversity and individualism are lost as the photographs' subjects repeat the same pose against the safety bars, blocking out that for which they came--the grand view from on high out across the city and, by implication, the country and the world.

Entering a third space required navigating around a wall--suggestive of Minimalist sculptures, designer screens, and defensive barriers--constructed from stacked black foam bricks of the sort used as positioning aids in yoga studios. If the yoga shtick seems too clever, the wall, visually dense and imposing yet soft and ready to crumble, stands as a compelling open metaphor. Behind it the room opened to a meditation upon a strange melange of objects that traversed cultural categories, national boundaries and socioeconomic strata. Along one wall hung handwoven rugs depicting the Jack Daniel's label set against monochrome and graded color backgrounds. Across from these quasi-transcendentalist artifacts, a cluster of drawings derived from photographs and magazine layouts intertwined references to the whiskey, rock 'n' roll (Van Halen's Michael Anthony shredding on his custom JD bass), folk music, and examples of both mainstream and subversive Americana. Also among these drawings were images of ancient Incan artifacts--juglike ceramic whistle-bottles--and assorted JD bottles and jugs, which have all been used as folk instruments. In the center of the room Thomson displayed hand blown and formed replicas of JD bottles and ceramic jugs, functioning in this installation as makeshift candle holders and vases.

In its weaker moments Thomson's project seems to drift into a culture-scanning conceptual practice, comparable to those of Richard Prince and Sam Durant, which appears maverick but risks blurring into the generic. And like the world of those artists on an off day, Thomson's may sometimes be reduced to just so much riffing on easy targets. But at least, as seen here, Thomson emerges as a genuinely individual voice whose call to arms is a call to thought. This was an exhibition that left one chuckling but haunted nonetheless by a sense of trepidation. And while the current national and global situations only add to this sensation, Thomson also reminds us that this nervousness is hardly exclusive to the here and now. In ways sweet and charming, dour and troubling, this show was a wake-up call.