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AN OBJECT LESSON IN AMERICANA

by Holly Myers

Mungo Thomson's last exhibition at Margo Leavin Gallery two years ago was a promising but fragmented affair, containing many clever moments but few lasting epiphanies. It revealed Thomson to be a Conceptual artist of great intelligence and humor, but one who had yet to reach the full potential of his ideas. It's not a point that one should be expected to reach too quickly—not if those ideas have depth. But Thomson's current show at the same gallery suggests that he's happily on his way.

The work takes more or less the same form as that in the earlier show, with an even mix of drawings and objects (some personally or collaboratively fabricated, others mass-produced). It embodies many of the same attributes, including a playful sense of humor, a crisp visual style and a fastidious, even virtuosic, talent for seamless imitation. In the last show, for example, Thomson handcrafted a dozen or so standard-issue yellow pencils and commissioned the production of several dozen lead-crystal beer bottles. Here, his fabrications include an assortment of wind chimes, a series of earthenware jugs branded with the Jack Daniel's whiskey logo (these produced in collaboration with Juan Guillermo Vega) and several dozen photographically realistic drawings.

What distinguishes this show from the last, however, is the consistency and complexity of its thematic through-line, which might broadly be described as an exploration of Americana. Behind all the work, one senses, is an abiding fascination with those objects that have come to define some aspect of American culture. Thomson reproduces these objects with fetishistic accuracy but generally tweaks one element in such a way as to dislodge the assumptions they typically inspire, or else set unlikely objects in relation to one another.

Although the breadth of this theme allows for a good deal of free-associative rambling — and this rambling is one of the show's pleasures — several distinct strands do emerge, deftly interwoven.

Many of these begin with the protest culture of the 1960s. There is an American flag made of denim and flown upside down, for example; a drawing of the Pentagon levitating several stories off the ground (an allusion to a peace demonstration organized by the Yippies); and several drawings of folk musicians and folk music paraphernalia, such as a "Zimmerman for President" bumper sticker and a Bob Dylan/Grateful Dead backstage pass. This strand weaves into drawings of Ecuadorean folk art (much of which happens to be jug-shaped) and into drawings of American jug bands—which then leads to all those Jack Daniel's jugs, as well as to a series of hand-woven rugs emblazoned with the Jack Daniel's logo and to several drawings of John Belushi chugging the stuff.

And it goes on like this, winding around to encompass allusions to the Ramones, Van Halen, Syd Barrett, the death metal band Deicide, the guy who helped fabricate

the jugs and the Saraguro Indians of Ecuador. Also incorporated is a slide show of snapshots taken by strangers at the top of the Empire State Building and a series of piñatas fabricated in the likeness of President Bush.

Throughout, one begins to sense Thomson moving toward a new level of complexity, employing his talent for virtuosic reproduction as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The connections speak for themselves.