

Let's Go Pop

By David Brickman *Extra-Ordinary: The Everyday Object in American Art...*

NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM. THROUGH JULY 16

HO-HUM-ANOTHER EXHIBITION of museum-quality pop and post pop artists comes to the Capital Region. Who would have thought it possible even a few years ago to be bored at such a prospect? But now, events like this are amazingly-becoming routine around here. Just recalling two shows from the last couple of years—*Strangely Familiar* at the New York State Museum, which featured postmodernist work from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, and the Tang Teaching Museum's outstanding show drawn from the Sonnabend collection in 2002—makes the point pretty clear.



Ordinary DO more: Neil Widokur". Telephone.

Yet, *Extra-Ordinary: The Everyday Object in American Art*, which is the 13th installment in the Bank of America (formerly Fleet Bank) Great Art series at the State Museum, is still cause for celebration. Incorporating just over 40 pieces by 22 artists, the earliest a 1938 Man Ray ink drawing and **the latest a 2000 graphite on canvas by Shimon Okshteyn**, the show is a treasure trove of (mostly) witty and masterful works by some of the best artists of recent times, all culled from the vast holdings of New York City's Whitney Museum.

Curated by the Whitney's Dana Miller, and accompanied by a nice color brochure with several reproductions and an informative, clearly written essay by Miller, *Extra-Ordinary* aims to "[illuminate] unexpected facets of the familiar. ... through artworks that compel us to see our surroundings with fresh eyes." This goal is both apt and achievable by the show—except for the likelihood that we've seen these works, or ones much the same, over the several decades since Dada and pop swept away the old conventions.

For many visitors to the museum, this will be their first experience of this kind of art. But, for me, the show was more a case of revisiting numerous dear, old friends. With some, I shared nostalgic reminiscences, with others a new conversation was begun—and then there were a few first-time encounters, adding spice to the experience.

Among those, perhaps the freshest was that with Okshteyn, whose extremely large pencil rendering of a battered metal can bestows upon the subject 'both a monumentality and a microscopic scrutiny that rattles back and forth between coldly observant and passionately loving. This sort of relationship to objects is the standard M.O. of pop art, and appears in many of the pieces included here.

For example, the only photographs on view, three each by Ed Ruscha and Neil Winokur, take a similar, dead-on approach to manufactured products by setting them up on a studio tabletop and placing them in the center of the frame. But Ruscha and Winokur (working in 1961 and 1985, respectively) apply almost opposite esthetics, and achieve very different results- Ruscha's somewhat soft-edged black-and-white images of a SuQMaid raisin box and a SPAM can appear almost naive in contrast to Winokur's slick, vividly hued Cibachromes of a Brownie box camera and a telephone. Jim Dine, a great, somewhat underappreciated contemporary of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns (who are represented here by one piece each), has two large paintings in the show, both from 1962. *A Black Shovel, Number 2* updates Duchamp by placing a slyly modified shovel (its handle is far longer than could be practical) across the middle of a long, horizontal canvas. Both are painted soot-black, roughly, conjuring up the brutish toil of coal miners and ditchdiggers. Dine's other pie has a far lighter tone. It presents four variations on a toaster in the neat quadrants of a very large vertical canvas; mirroring his contemporaries and certain predecessors, Dine has placed the actual toaster in one of the rectangles where the others have images of it. This painting resonates with one by Vija Celmins (they hang roughly back-to-back in the four-room space) from 1964 that presents a glowing space heater as if it were an altar (which it may very well have been to the young painter in her chilly studio).

Other common objects that get the star treatment here include a handtruck with wrapped package by Christo from 1973; Alexander Calder's 1972 *Chock*, which transforms a coffee can into a flying heron; a stunningly realistic 5-foot-tall fiberglass sculpture of a simple paper bag by Alex Hay from 1968; Johns' lush, liquidy 1985 ink-on-plastic *Two Flags*; and a Jeff Koons showcase presenting four Hoover vacuum cleaners as if they were in the Smithsonian.

No one, however, can outdo Claes Oldenburg when it comes to elevating the common object to the level of an icon. The show is, in fact, dominated by 12 Oldenburgs (a few give credit to his collaborator Coosje van Bruggen), all of which are pretty delightful in varying ways. Of these, probably the most iconic is his model for a 45-foot clothespin, fashioned in stylish Cor-Ten and stainless steel. A same-size pencil sketch for the 5-foot model is also included, as is a related sketch, in color, of a project for a huge safety pin sculpture. These are classic Oldenburg: If you like his mix of blatant humor and sweet reverence, you'll love these and the others in the show (including several particularly significant soft sculptures, as well as several really fine graphic pieces). I find Oldenburg more than just amusing, and his technique is very impressive in whatever medium-but there is a bit of the flash-in-the-pan about some of his ideas.

The show also includes excellent examples of two- and three-dimensional work by Richard Artschwager, Robert Gober, Marisol, Fred Tomaselli (my favorite, actually) and Robert Moskowitz - plus, of course, Andy Warhol, I highly recommend it.