

Time- and labor-intensive works
reveal imaginative impulses

'A Labor of Love' Focuses on the Artist's Heart as Well as Hand

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ALABOR of Love" at The New Museum of Contemporary Art here is an exhibition with an agenda. A common element of the more than 100 works in various mediums by 50 contemporary American artists is the labor-intensive handicraft required to produce them.

Labor alone does not make fine art. Otherwise, ships-in-a-bottle would be museum staples. But curator Marcia Tucker makes the point that these artists — some considered "outsider" or untrained folk artists — deserve respect rather than condescension. Artisans may also be artists.

jars with copper beads and a spinning barrel that gradually reassembles the shards of a shattered porcelain cup. The fact that the cup has an acquisition number on its bottom and that the cabinet's design echoes the architecture of the Metropolitan Museum of Art are tip-offs to a deeper meaning.

The artist critiques the power of cultural institutions, whose imprimatur canonizes ordinary objects like a Grecian urn as high art. Genco's machine rumbles as the wheel picks up speed, like a juggernaut crushing dissent on what constitutes value.

The show's installation departs from museum practice in thought-provoking ways. Objects are displayed in a homelike setting, with folk music playing and comfy sofas and coffee tables scattered about, to overcome the elitist aura of museums.

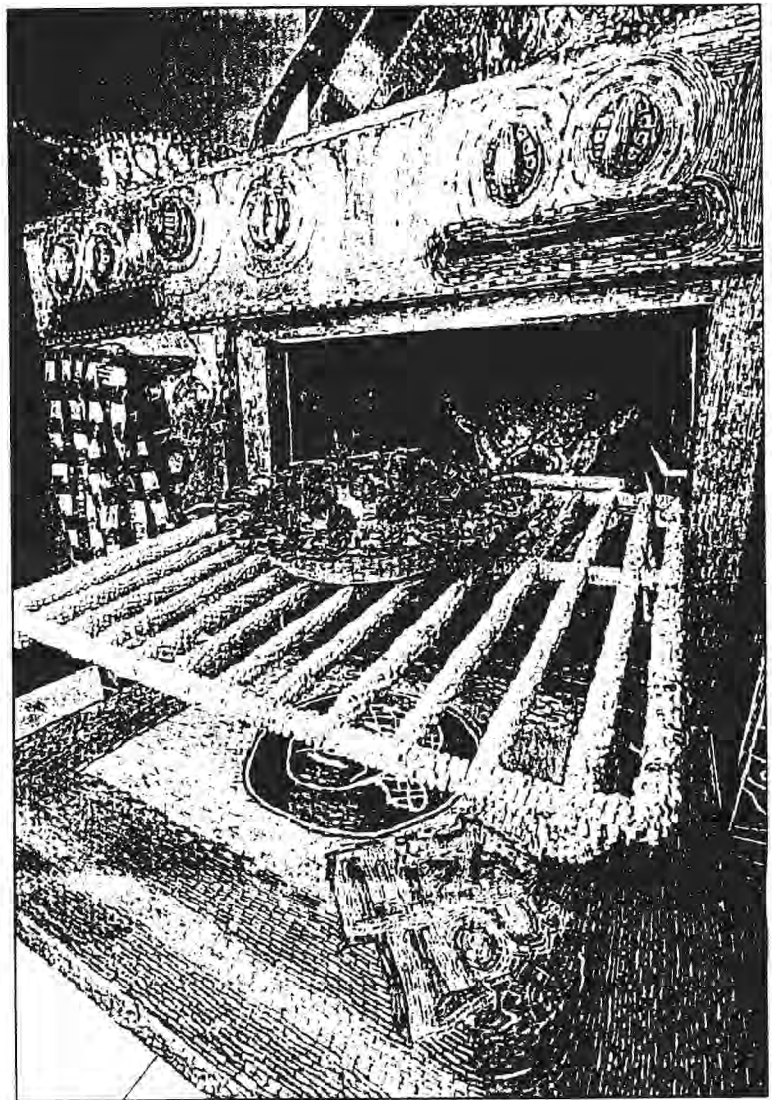
Wall labels do not distinguish between recognized artists validated by museum shows — like Faith Ringgold or outsider artist Bessie Harvey — and hobbyists like Michael Harms, a prison inmate who carves elaborate miniature chairs out of soap. Without the context of such information, viewers must independently evaluate each work as either art or curio.

A recent trend among artists is to reclaim devalued handicraft skills like needlework. Embroidery, for example, has been labeled mindless women's work or craft rather than sanctified as fine art like, for example, Gobelins tapestries. Several "Labor of Love" works revive traditional needlecraft while injecting innovation through idiosyncratic materials or a modern message.

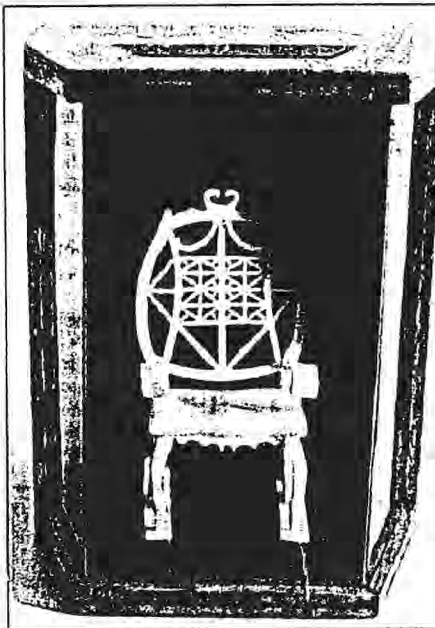
Nòle Giuliani sews banana peels together to make Persian slippers, while Raymond Materson embroiders tiny scenes out of threads he unravels from Orlon socks. Larry Krone's beaded dolls with painted faces on wisdom teeth are, he says in an artist's statement, "in the tradition of clothespin, wooden spoon, and wrinkly-apple-head dolls; in the spirit of something-from-nothing crafts in general."

Elaine Reichek's subversive "Sampler (Dress Suitably)" of 1992 begins as a conventional cross-stitch scene. Instead of a sappy homily, however, it speaks to urban anxieties: "Dress suitably in short skirts and strong boots, leave your jewels in the bank, and buy a revolver."

Diego Romero's "American Highway" (1995) is a post-industrial Pueblo pot. Encircled by a traditional geometric design is



'KITCHEN' DETAIL: Liza Lou pasted beads on papier-mâché-and-wood appliances and surfaces to depict a life-size kitchen as a tribute to the unsung domestic work of women.



SOAP CHAIR: Michael Harms carves miniature chairs out of soap bars. The exhibition makes no distinction between recognized artists and artisans.

Gaudy and sparkly are not adjectives usually attributed to fine art. Should pleasurable, appealing works be deemed inferior to avant-garde "real" art, which often alienates viewers? Regardless of the answer, and although detailed surface ornamentation may not suit every taste, there are visual delights galore and plenty to think about in this show.

Chuck Genco's "Influence Generator/Transmuter" (1987-92) serves as the show's metaphor. It took five years to construct this replica of a turn-of-the-century static-electricity generator. The wood-and-glass cabinet contains Leyden

a painting of a factory belching smoke.

The expressive form of Richard T. Notkin's "Pyramidal Stone Teapot: Military Intelligence I" (1989) transforms a teapot's cozy connotations into fear and paranoia. Shaped like a tank, the teapot has a riveted gun turret at its peak.

Charles LeDray's "Untitled" (1995) presents a poignant vignette based on a

which every object is covered with 10 million glass bugle beads. The cherry pie, broom, refrigerator, and linoleum squares are a tour-de-force of three-dimensional painting in beads. Blue "water" swirls in the sink in this dynamic composition.

Explosive, too, is Lou's purpose: to take the decorative to its epitome and transcend mere decor. The five-year-long process required to produce the scene is an impressive part of the product. The artist comments on the unsung domestic work of women — cooking, cleaning, and beautifying the home — a never-ending task. In a statement, she compares her effort to "the astonishing feats of labor, testaments to the human spirit" required to build a cathedral or, more mundanely, to keep a mopped floor looking shiny.

This show questions the movement toward conceptual art that began in 1913 with Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades," such as the bottle rack he displayed in a museum show. Instead of valuing thought over feeling, the works at the New Museum put the artist's hand and heart back into art-making. They assert that, while concept and intellectual content are crucial, so is labor inspired by love.

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diminutive boy's suit. The outfit, including a silk bow tie and neat handkerchief, literally unravels as the eye progresses downward. Sleeves, shirttail, and pants disintegrate into tatters. An implicit message concerns the thin veneer of civilized manners over the wildness of childhood.

The *pièce de résistance* of this array of works combining sensuous appeal and critical comment is Liza Lou's "Kitchen" (1991-95). This mind-boggling tableau is a life-size 14-by-14-by-12-foot kitchen in

■ "A Labor of Love" is at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York through April 14.