

Revised January 10, 1996

A LABOR OF LOVE

A "labor of love" is a phrase which describes a task--often arduous, lengthy, and complicated--whose doing is its own reward. The reason for performing such work is built into the very process of its execution, and its inherent value lies in the pleasure which results from both making and sharing it. It's work that's done for love rather than for money, sometimes by an individual, sometimes by a group of people working together. A labor of love, whether it ultimately becomes an object, an experience, an activity or a tool for others to use, is unique; it takes considerable time, effort and skill to produce, often an entire lifetime. Simon Rhodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles is one example; Hale House, founded by Clara "Mother" Hale, is another. For most artists, the great majority of whom do not, unfortunately, make a living through their work, the very practice of making art is a labor of love.

This exhibition of handcrafted, often labor-intensive work by American artists from varied cultural and artistic backgrounds is an investigation of some of the ways in which art and the everyday are inextricably interwoven. These are works of art in which process and product, sensuous appeal and critical content, tradition and innovation, are inseparable. The work in the exhibition destabilizes the categories that privilege "fine" arts over "folk" and "outsider" art, decorative arts, and craft--also collapsing the arbitrary, but longstanding polarization of so-called avant-garde and traditional artmaking. This is work that's highly "aesthetic," that's extremely pleasurable to look at and that has its origins in humble and quotidian practices; however, it also provides an important means of analysis and critical commentary about who we are and the world we live in. The work in *A Labor of Love* harnesses traditional techniques and attitudes about artmaking not to return to the past, but to analyze, critique and understand the present.

The creation of a mind/body dichotomy, a legacy of the late 18th century Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, continues to separate the formal from the informal, the sublime from the decorative, thinking from feeling, the intellectual from the corporeal, high art from all other popular forms--and to value them differently. The work in the exhibition resists these kinds of hierarchies by using popular skills, intrinsic values and visual pleasure as sources of resistance and inspiration, constantly returning to viewers a sense of their own ability, creativity, and imaginative potential. Artistic expression, after all, is part of everyone's existence, whether it's manifest in the way we dress, organize our living or work spaces, cook, or spend our leisure time.

The work has been installed in a variety of quasi-domestic settings for several reasons: first, people tend to ignore art world hierarchies when they arrange the art and objects they own in their homes. Second, comfortable surroundings encourage viewers to spend time looking, listening, talking, and making work of their own. Third, an informal setting allows us to include other modes of expression, such as popular music and body ornamentation, that aren't typically recognized as "art," and are therefore unlikely to be seen in a museum of fine arts.

As is evident, live and recorded programs of traditional music are an essential part of the exhibition, since "old-time" music shares a number of important traits with the material objects in the exhibition. Like the visual works of art in the exhibition, traditional music is process-oriented, each song potentially having hundreds of variants depending upon how and where it has traveled to over time. Virtually everyone makes some form of music and virtually everyone enjoys it; the origins (and usually the practice) of folk music are non-commercial, beginning in people's living rooms, parlors, and front porches. Traditional musical expression is an important and powerful examination and celebration of the everyday, as well as a tool for social criticism, protest, ridicule, commentary and, of course, unity.

--Marcia Tucker