A Labor of Love

Project Description

Overview

A Labor of Love is a multi-layered exhibition project designed to examine the problematic and shifting definitions of art, artists and artistic practice today through the medium of hand-made, often labor-intensive works by contemporary American artists. The exhibition will address the ways in which craft, folk, "outsider" and decorative art traditions are being used in trenchant and critical ways by artists whose work defies such classifications. Among the key issues to be addressed by A Labor of Love are:

- the influence of popular culture, vernacular modes, and everyday life on contemporary artistic production
- changing attitudes toward the value of handwork in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century
- how, by whom, and for what purpose the distinctions between "amateur" and "professional," "trained" and "self-taught" artists have been established
- the relationship of class, race and gender to aesthetic value

The exhibition will constitute a visual inquiry into those codifications, classifications, and hierarchies by means of which some works of art are seen and valued as part of a high art tradition, while others having similar characteristics are marginalized as "native," idiosyncratic or naïve expressions. It will show the ways in which artists today are recouping once denigrated skills and processes in order to critically examine and recontextualize the relationship between the visual arts and the concerns of society at large.

Background

In pre-Industrial America, quilting, knitting, weaving, embroidery, forging, carving, gold and silver-smithing, beading, glass-blowing, and other varieties of handwork that were either necessities or markers of status and wealth later became rare and devalued in the wake of an expanding reliance on new technologies. Despite the success of the Arts and Crafts movement in establishing an ideology of simplicity, functionality, and "good" design, the kinds of skills that once were once a commonplace of daily life ultimately became obsolete. Hand work, especially that which used intensive, repetitive, fine-motor skills, came to be seen as extraneous and of recreational or meditative value only.
Today's fine arts community continues to rank most forms of craft, popular culture, and folk art as inferior to work in the high art tradition, valued only insofar as they can be appropriated to mainstream aesthetic concerns. In part, this is due to the conventional Western distinction between process and product, whereby the functions of applied arts, craft, hobby, folk art, and popular culture (in which process and product are inextricable from each other) have come to be considered as different from that of fine arts (wherein product is generally privileged). For many artists of Latino, African, Asian, and Native American descent, however, non-academic artmaking traditions are part and parcel of their cultural heritage, making such distinctions immaterial to their work. Nonetheless, these categories are still used by others, effectively keeping this work out of the marketplace and away from mainstream audiences.

Recently increasing numbers of contemporary artists of all kinds have been using traditional craft-oriented skills and/or processes--many of them learned early in life, from older family members--in innovative and content-driven ways. At the same time, artists coded as "outsiders" or "folk" artists have become more vocal about their attitudes and motivations, refusing to have themselves or their work defined by others.

The Exhibition

A Labor of Love will consist of a single work or series of works each by 50 American artists from a wide variety of communities and backgrounds. Pieces will be arranged so as to clarify complex and critical differences among them, to emphasize each artist's unique qualities and intentions, and to complicate and problematize definitions of high and low, popular and elite, ordinary and extraordinary.

The pieces will be installed in a variety of quasi-domestic settings so that visitors can spend time looking, listening, talking, or making work of their own. Chairs, sofas and tables will encourage a less formal, more familiar relationship with the artworks. The installation will be designed to encourage extended, multi-faceted and repeated visits rather than temporally condensed and singular ones.

Also integrated into the exhibition will be:

- recorded and live folk music programs about labor and laborers, featuring traditional American songs of the field, mine, railroad, prison and mill (including those deriving from Latino, African, Asian, and Native American traditions)
- Three Saturday events in which the Window on Broadway will serve as a place for the public practice and display of such body crafts as razor design haircuts, manicure art, and Yemeni body painting
- informal workshops in doll making taught by artists in the exhibition and others; the finished dolls, made by the public, will be displayed on shelves covering the walls of the Workspace Gallery and donated to such institutions as The New York Foundling Hospital when the exhibition ends.
Catalogue

The catalogue will consist of:

- a critical and historical essay by Marcia Tucker
- photographs of the works in the exhibition
- a selected bibliography
- short artist statements in narrative form written by the artists
- a book jacket (available in March) with installation views and excerpts from the two symposia organized in conjunction with A Labor of Love
Invited Artists

Chelo Amezcua
Imogene Jessie Goodshot Arquero
Alan Belcher
Robert Brady
Darren Brown
Bette Burgoyne
Larry Calkins
Rene David Chamizo
Dale Chihuly
Pier Consagra
William Copley (CPLY)
Jacob El Hanani
Tom Emerson
Dianna Frid
Carmen Lomas Garza
Chuck Genco
Nole Giulini
Michael Harms
Bessie Harvey
Mary Heilmann
Oliver Herring
James Hill
Indira Freitas Johnson
Jane Kaufman
Larry Krone
Paul Laffoley
Dinh Le
Charles LeDray
Liza Lou
Michael Lucero
Raymond Materson
Josiah McElheny
Sana Musasama
Richard Notkin
Manuel Pardo
Elaine Reicheck
Faith Ringgold
A.G. Rizzoli
Diego Romero
Richard Rule
Alison Saar
Kevin Sampson
Beverly Semmes
Judith Shea
Kazumi Tanaka
Kukuli Velarde
Margaret Wharton
Robin Winters
Willy Wayne Young
Daisy Youngblood