CURATOR'S FORWARD
DOMESTICITY REVISITED
RICK KINSEL

The four artists included in this inaugural exhibition at Pen + Brush come from very different social and professional backgrounds, and prior to this show, they had not met or seen each other's work. Two are originally from South Korea, one is from the United Kingdom, and one is from central Italy. Hosting these artists together in a group show seemed like a convenient but forced melding of four unrelated artists, but in the end, it turned out to be just the opposite: an exhibition in which the artists, however different, all concern themselves with objects, ideas, and sensations relating to the domestic scene and explore the theme of home.

All of this came about unintentionally. My initial goal was simply to select the best and most interesting visual-arts works out of the one hundred–plus portfolios that had been submitted to Pen + Brush. It was only after choosing these artists that I realized (admittedly, with some alarm) that all four chose to work with domestic objects and materials in their practices of making art. As a male curator reviewing the work of female artists—and, moreover, doing so for an organization that aims to boost the visibility of women artists and writers—I was strongly conscious of the fact that by choosing works of this sort, I may seem to be overemphasizing the traditional relationship of women to the realm of the home and homemaking.

However, I must note that I, too, am deeply invested in that subject, for I first came to the contemporary art world through graduate studies in the decorative arts, and the decorative arts continue to interest me even now, as the executive director of the Vilcek Foundation. Since the work of each artist is so very different from that of the others—not only in choice of media, but also in scale, approach, and overall effect—the show demonstrates the wide range of possibilities inherent in such subject matter.

The world of contemporary art has shown an interest in home-related arts, including arts of pattern and decoration, for some years now. The relationship of this kind of art to traditional ideas about femininity and, alternately, to pioneering ideas of the feminist movement was first expressed by an artistic movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, now known as the Pattern and Decoration movement, which formed partially in response to the male-dominated art world of the time, as well as to that masculine-identified art movement, Minimalism. The artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement included both men and women—Miriam Schapiro, Joyce Kozloff,

Robert Kushner, Valerie Jaudon, and Ned Smyth among them—who actively questioned the exclusion of color, pattern, and decoration from avant-garde art practice and, at the same time, celebrated its inherent expressiveness and beauty. But Pattern and Decoration was a political movement as well—one which suggested, in visual terms, that the world would be a better and more beautiful place when it allowed for greater inclusiveness and celebrated diversity.

Today, nearly fifty years later, the ideals championed by the Pattern and Decoration movement are an accepted part of the social and political mainstream. Likewise, the work of these four artists, similarly concerned with domestic themes and decorative materials, is far less controversial than the work of the original movement. As a result, these artists present us with pieces that are less overtly political and instead more spiritual and autobiographical in orientation. The four artists draw on other art movements of the past century as well, including Dadaism, Surrealism, Installation Art, Conceptual Art, and Fiber Art. Their work is also influenced by that broad and continually evolving movement known as Postminimalism, a style that draws from simple materials and everyday objects to form a basis for aesthetic experience.

Tricia Wright, who is both an artist and a museum guide and educator, takes her exploration of the familiar and domestic in a different direction. Her work is based in Dadaism and Surrealism, specifically in the absurdist juxtaposition of found objects, or readymades. The idea of the readymade was first introduced into the twentieth-century art dialogue by artist and intellectual Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who made tentative explorations of female identity through his alter ego Rose Sélavy, and also through his more sexually explicit—even shocking—works such as *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) and his final masterpiece, *Étant donnés*...(1946–1966), an installation suggestive of rape, murder, and sexual voyeurism. Wright's work also recalls the art of an under- recognized female Surrealist, Méret Oppenheim (1913–1985), whose works were similarly based on everyday objects and explored themes of female sexuality and its relation to society.

In this series, entitled *Marginalia*, Wright, who is from England, revisits the Duchamp readymade from a feminist perspective, doing so in a way that is at once immediately likable and slightly disturbing. As she explains, she takes "commonplace materials associated with the domestic environment [and] with little or no cultural value; materials that are considered trivial, ornamental, and are generally associated with women," and "employ[s] these decorative materials in formalist ways, colliding domestic space with formalist space and sometimes parodying formalist concerns." The result are pieces that observe the traditional subjugation and trivialization of women through domestic duties—including duties related to decoration and beautification. In Wright's vision, doilies, gift wrap, ribbons, and wallpaper are positioned as works of art, thus emphasizing the distance between culturally valued art and unvalued (or minimally valued) women's home handicrafts. And as with Oppenheim's famous fur teacup (*Object [Le déjeuner en fourrure]*, 1936), certain of Wright's works carry macabre or disturbing undertones: a drainpipe laced with lingerie fabric, or another drainpipe stuffed with a dainty handkerchief. Wright's wide-ranging body of work features painting-based assemblage, sculpture, and photography and includes works that document the sculptures as color photographs because, as she explains, "In re-presenting my own sculptures as photographs, I am implying another imagined space, one that extends beyond the frame and which is fed by possible narratives associated with the objects juxtaposed in each piece." And, as with Yun Koung Shin, the materials Wright employs often have a deeply felt personal connection—most notably the embossed wallpapers once common in the homes of nineteenth-century England. Like Jee Hee Kang, Wright presents *Marginalia* as a combination of artwork and photo-documentation.

These four artists, considered together, seem to me an explosion of talent, imagination, and diversity. They demonstrate the multiplicity of ideas and approaches that women artists are taking as they respond and react to art they have experienced—art that is not only within the dialogue of contemporary art, but also out there in the larger world of all art, including handicraft, decorative arts, folk art, and illustration. While it would be wrong to make any specific claim about these artists being part of a new or emerging movement, it is nonetheless worthwhile to note their shared interests: spirituality, home, handicraft, and the steady transition of women out of the domestic roles previously dictated by societal norms, even while they recognize the importance of domesticity to the soul. They seem to be pointing us, in visual terms, toward a new world, one more generous in its allowance of all artists—male and female—to enjoy greater freedom, flexibility, and opportunities in the practice of their art.

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