# : reviews



"CELLPHONES," 2013, **Ferit Kuyas**
ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT, 32" x 40" PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

**SAN JOSE**
**"Relics"**
**at San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art**

"Relics," at the San Jose ICA, is a quietly provocative group exhibition featuring a diverse selection of local and international artists. Neither celebratory nor simply nostalgic, "Relics" makes the history of technology visible on a short timescale and advances questions about the human relationship with technological change. The title of the show becomes unexpectedly slippery. Does the term "relic" refer to the technological object, or to the data that it preserves? A relic, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "an object or artifact held sacred by some other religion or culture," not to be confused with the "reliquary," which is made to house this sacred object. This distinction can be made of every artwork in the exhibition: is it a technological object rescued from the past and re-presented here in order to highlight its formal qualities or cultural associations? Or has the artist used the object as a symbolic representation of the information that it contains? Marx holds that all commodities speak to us, but the 16 artists in "Relics" suggest that technological objects call out in many different ways, drawing on personal as well as cultural connections.

Several works in the show waver between venerating the object versus its contents. Ferit Kuyas's color photograph, One Meter of Useless Data (2013), features three tall stacks of silvery CDs and DVDs, the contents of which have been backed up elsewhere, we are told. Kuyas, who is based in Switzerland, photographed the towers against a plain white background, their iridescence reminiscent of postmodern architectural renderings. But, at least according to the work's title, Kuyas is not only interested in the objecthood of these nearly obsolete storage media. They have been saved because they protect data, albeit now useless. Similarly, in a photograph by the San Francisco-based Victoria Mara Heilweil, 47 Years: my mother never learned how to drive or use a computer (2012), the artist points to a pile of outmoded technological devices, cords wrapped around their boxy forms. This picture, part of a series documenting Heilweil's mother's apartment after 47 years of occupancy, looks further back into the technological past than Kuyas's, yet displays a similar reluctance to fully abandon the past. This corner, next to an old cathode ray tube TV, is the apartment's technological purgatory.

Another dominant trope in the exhibition is the tabletop shot, which decontextualizes old media in the vein of product photography. Two photographs by Kuyas, Cellphones (2013) and Found Film (2010), exploit this technique to interesting effect. Cellphones, a collection of eight old phones on a flat white background, highlights the disjunction between the professional lighting and the decrepit objects. Soft lighting and a deep black background lends the aura of Dutch still lifes to a grid of nine photographs of vintage egg beaters by the Bay Area artist David Pace.

In the other camp, of artworks that privilege the object over the data it contains, are two photographs by the Houston-based collective MANUAL (Ed Hill/Suzanne Bloom) from a series called Now & Then (2013). The frames of these large-scale prints are filled with paper-mounted slides and black Polaroids, in which no images are visible. MANUAL's interest is focused on the sheer quantity of these objects and their uniformity, as opposed to their personal associations. Likewise, a series of obsolete technologies (records, eight-track tapes) encased in resin by Northern California-based Lucy Puls literalizes the inaccessibility of data stored on these media. Puls' Pinguis (MAC 512, complete) (1999), an old Macintosh desktop computer and keyboard, emphasizes the bulky physicality of the computer as object. A related interest in the design of technological objects is explored in the casein-on-plywood painting, Organized Stack-CDs (2007), by the Scottish artist Shona Macdonald.

The exhibition's curator, ICA Executive Director Cathy Kimball, concludes this smart show with a selection of discarded printers, scanners, and desktop computers. The knee-high cluster nearly fills a small gallery in the back of the exhibition hall, which without the theatrical lighting is reminiscent of the many storage rooms pictured or imagined throughout the rest of the exhibition. This is a canny curatorial move. It drives home the show's themes by asking that visitors participate, either by documenting the display and posting to #RecycleRelics or by contributing unwanted technological relics to the pile, which will be recycled at the end of the exhibition.

The historian Jonathan Sterne has written that, "Technologies are repeatable social, cultural, and material processes crystallized into mechanisms." Indeed "Relics" reminds us that our sometimes irrational affection for technological objects has much more to do with the personal and cultural experiences that these relics signify, rather than the cheap plastics or trendy colors that fade so quickly into obsolescence.

—KIM BEIL