

NEWS

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MORE THAN TWO DOZEN ARTISTS REVISE, CRITIQUE, AND UPEND VERNACULAR FORMS IN *THE SPECTACULAR OF VERNACULAR* OPENING JANUARY 29 AT WALKER ART CENTER



Marc Swanson
Untitled (Looking Back Buck), 2004
 crystals, polyurethane foam, and adhesive
 36 x 18 x 18 inches
 © Marc Swanson
 Image courtesy Richard Gray Gallery

“The mass culture of today is the folk art of tomorrow.”—Mike Kelley

Minneapolis, December 30, 2010— Embracing the rustic and the humbly homemade as well as the clash of street spectacle and commercial culture, the Walker Art Center exhibition *The Spectacular of Vernacular*, opening Saturday, January 29, explores the role of vernacular forms in works by more than two dozen artists. On view through May 8, 2011, the exhibition focuses on pieces made since the 1970s that incorporate—and at times revel in—craft, folklore, and roadside kitsch, while exploring some of the impulses and strategies behind artists’ ongoing fascination with the often-overlooked relics of daily life. A Walker After Hours preview party—On Ice—on Friday, January 28, invites visitors to shake off their cabin fever and slip on flannel for an indoor-outdoor party featuring hot dishes, chill tunes, and a one-of-a-kind ice bar on the plaza. A complete listing of related events follows.

A singular brand of material culture, the vernacular has stood out since the 1960s as an abundant source for artists’ critical interrogations. Never before has there been such a profusion of purchased, found, and otherwise inherited surplus, or such an array of categories by which artists might process and understand this wealth of commodities and castoffs. Too rustic to be called “Pop,” the vernacular represented—and still does represent—something more humble and, significantly, homespun: enduring artifacts such as handmade welcome plaques, amateur snapshots, knitted afghans, and other folksy items that, for better or worse, often carry sentimental associations. Such objects also suggest a world of cozy comforts and heartwarming family moments—associations artists often feel compelled to revise, critique, and upend in ways both humorous and unsettling.



Mike Kelley
More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin, 1987
 handmade stuffed animals & afghans sewn on canvas backing; wax candles on round base
 Courtesy of the Artist, Metro Pictures, and The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Dario Robleto
Demonstrations of Sailor's Valentines, 2009
 cut paper, various seashells, colored wax, cartes de visites, silk, ribbon, foam core, glue
 59 x 52 x 6 in. (149.9 x 132.1 x 15.2 cm.)
 Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections; Purchased with funds from the Ellen Pray Maytag Madsen Sculpture Acquisition Fund, 2009.75

The Spectacular of Vernacular brings together 26 artists whose work fosters a dialogue between contemporary art and the creative manifestations of lay culture. Many draw upon distinguishing qualities of a place—cultural markers visible in the churches, houses, and roadside attractions—or call attention to rituals and traditions in unusual or provocative ways. Among them, Minnesota-based artists in the exhibition look to rural architecture and culture. A large covered bridge, which can be traversed by visitors one-at-a-time, offers an elevated view of the surroundings in an installation by Twin Cities artist Chris Larson. Aaron Spangler's autonomous, intricately carved, black-painted sculptural objects tap a dense field of aesthetic references even as they lay claim to a knowledge that comes from his direct experience of living in rural northern Minnesota and making art about and within that condition.

Just as some artists build on a sustained connection with architecture and other physical features of a specific place, others explore the vernacular through objects and everyday rituals that vary from culture to culture and region to region. Marina Abramović's 2005 video *Balkan Erotic Epic* interprets pagan fertility rites as a performance of sorts, in a manner at once tongue-in-cheek and undeniably serious. Marc Swanson deals with the gendered nature of boyhood customs such as camping and hunting from the standpoint of an out adult. In his 2010 sculpture *Antler Pile*, a formation of rhinestone-encrusted antlers evokes disco balls and nightclub décor—a far cry from the taxidermic trophy icons of his New England youth. And Dario Robleto's art, inspired by letters and notebooks of the past, is in visible dialogue with 19th-century mourning rituals such as the making of memorial wreaths, labor-intensive objects whose creation was an act of healing. These "extinct" vernaculars live on through his work.

In contrast to older models of vernacular meant for things that wore the patina of age and tradition, another definition was developed in the 1970s that responded to such dramatic shifts in the American landscape as a rise in residential developments, billboard advertising, and strip malls. Decidedly loud, visually pervasive, and dominantly commercial, this newer subgenre is exuberantly embodied by Lari Pittman's massive painting, *A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation #30* (1994). Beckoning with its ballast of colors and slogans, it offers a spectrum of services to be bought and bartered: sex, love, and fast cars, brought to you by two ubiquitous credit card companies whose logos appear on the edges of the canvas like discreetly placed cash-register decals.

In some ways, to understand the vernacular is to accept that objects can contain values reflecting prevailing beliefs, class and social standing, and personal background. In this sense, the vernacular is strikingly effective in perpetuating established modes of conduct; hence its frequent association with tradition, simplicity, and craftsmanship—or, in Pittman's case, consumerism. Yet artists are typically resistant to such assimilation, producing their work to expose the perversity of what is taken for granted in culture. *The Spectacular of Vernacular* exposes this dynamic between comfort and its subversion with artworks that may appear playful, rambunctious, or cheerfully familiar on their surfaces, but often reveal darker complexities upon closer investigation.



William Eggleston
Untitled (Back of Black Car in Green Vines)
from the *Los Alamos Project*, 1965-1974
dye-transfer print
© Eggleston Artistic Trust
Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York

The Artists

Marina Abramović, Siah Armajani, Louise Bourgeois, William Christenberry, Shannon Ebner, William Eggleston, Walker Evans, Rachel Harrison, Matthew Day Jackson, Butt Johnson, William E. Jones, Mike Kelley, Chris Larson, Kerry James Marshall, Ree Morton, Laura Owens, Jack Pierson, Lari Pittman, Faith Ringgold, Dario Robleto, Jim Shaw, Lorna Simpson, Aaron Spangler, Marc Swanson, Jeffery Vallance, and Kara Walker.

Exhibition Catalogue

The new Walker-designed catalogue features more than 50 color plates as well as an essay by Darsie Alexander exploring artists' interest in the vernacular as a means to address aspects of folk ritual, amateur craft, and sense of place in their work; a reprint of a text by John Brinckerhoff Jackson from his seminal 1984 reader *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*; and a reflection by artist and curator Andy Sturdevant on the evolution of roadside vernacular and attendant histories of heartland America where it is so abundant. Also included is a reading list from the cross section of art criticism and cultural studies.

Distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 155 Sixth Avenue, Second Floor, New York, NY 10013, 800.338.2665 (phone), 800.478.3128 (fax), artbook.com, and available at the Walker Art Center Shop, 612.375.7633 (phone), 612.375.7565 (fax). ISBN 978-0-935640-99-1 \$19.99 (\$17.99 Walker members).

Travel Schedule

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston
July 23–September 18, 2011

Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey
October 8, 2011–January 1, 2012

Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
January 14–March 18, 2012

Exhibition Curator

Darsie Alexander is chief curator at the Walker Art Center. Before her appointment, she served as department head and senior curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, where she worked for seven years. Her recent exhibitions include *50/50: Audience and Experts Curate the Paper Collection* (2010), *Event Horizon* (2009), *Benches & Binoculars* (2009), *Franz West, To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work, 1972-2008* (MIT Press, 2008), and *SlideShow*, the first major exhibition to explore the history of projected slides in post-1965 art (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

Acknowledgments

The Spectacular of Vernacular is organized by the Walker Art Center.

The exhibition is made possible by generous support from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Helen and Peter Warwick, and the Margaret and Angus Wurtele Family Foundation.

Sponsor



Additional support is provided by Accenture and Briggs and Morgan, P.A. Media partner *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine*.

Hotel partners



RELATED EVENTS

Opening Weekend

Walker After Hours Preview Party: On Ice

Friday, January 28, 9 pm–12 midnight
\$30 (\$20 Walker members)

Shake off your cabin fever and join us in celebrating the opening of *The Spectacular of Vernacular*. Dress for comfort for this special inside/outside version of Walker After Hours! Enjoy cocktails from our outdoor ice bar or warm up with some hot cocoa and complimentary hot dish appetizers from Wolfgang Puck. Chill to the tunes of DJ Jake Rudh and join our Flickr photo album of “sweaters that tell a story.” The most “Minnesotan” wins a prize.

New Walker members receive a free party ticket (or other premiums) for joining, while supplies last.

Opening-Day Gallery Talk: Darsie Alexander

Saturday, January 29, 2 pm
Target Gallery
Free with gallery admission

Join exhibition curator Darsie Alexander for a conversation about the role and range of vernacular forms in contemporary art.

Mack Lectures are made possible by generous support from Aaron and Carol Mack.


Target Free Thursday Nights

Thursday, February 17

WAC ATTACK: Art-Making, 5–8 pm, Free

Cargill Lounge

Embrace the homemade in this do-it-yourself craft activity presented by the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council (WACTAC), inspired by the exhibition.

Target Free Thursday Nights sponsored by 

Artist Talk

Mack Lecture: Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw

Sunday, March 13, 2 pm

Cinema

\$10 (\$8 Walker members)

Share in a conversation between exhibition artists Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw as they discuss ways that everyday kitsch, their hometown of Detroit, and thrift stores have influenced their work.

Mack Lectures are made possible by generous support from Aaron and Carol Mack.

Special Event

MN Made

Saturday, April 9, 11 am–5 pm

Free with gallery admission

The distinction between art and craft are blurred in this daylong celebration of Minnesota's material culture that brings together the handmade and homespun. Highlights include live music, D.I.Y. workshops on the hour, guided tours of the exhibition, hot-dish samplers, and shopping at the MN Made Mart. Etsy and mnartists.org will be on-site to share their broad array of resources supporting artists.

Gallery Hours and Admission

\$10 adults; \$8 seniors (65+); \$6 students (with ID)

Free to Walker members, teens, and children ages 18 and under.

Free with a paid ticket to a same-day Walker event.

Free to all every Thursday evening (5–9 pm) and on the first Saturday of each month (10 am–5 pm).

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday 11 am–5 pm

Thursday 11 am–9 pm

Closed Mondays

Premier Partners



StarTribune



The Walker Art Center is located at 1750 Hennepin Avenue—where Hennepin meets Lyndale—one block off Highways I-94 and I-394, in Minneapolis.

For public information, call 612.375.7600 or visit walkerart.org. Stay connected via your mobile device and follow us on Twitter and Facebook.