AROUND THE GALLERIES

*Wonder at the everyday; Lynn Aldrich's whimsical spirit takes shape in a retrospective*

By Sharon Mizota

Dec 13, 2013

With objects as diverse and mundane as kitchen sponges, steel downspouts, T-shirts and garden hoses, Lynn Aldrich has been crafting whimsical sculptures and installations for more than 20 years. Her exhibition at Art Center College of Design is a delightfully quixotic retrospective in keeping with the eclectic spirit of her work.

Visitors are greeted by a rain of steel downspouts, hanging vertically over the entrance to the galleries. Varying in length, their insides are painted in various shades of blue. Although they don't touch, they welcome viewers with a suggestion of sound, like a giant wind chime heralding one's arrival.

Inside, sculpture after sculpture displays inventive, charming takes on everyday objects, often with an eye for the way our lives are textured by mass production. "Shell Collection" from 1994 is a series of white T-shirts in adult to newborn sizes, hardened with resin and placed one inside the other from large to small. The sculpture lies on its side so that viewers can read the shirts like tree rings. It's a life story as written by the clothing industry.
A similar approach can be seen in "Wormhole" from 2003. A huge cornucopia that curves across the floor, it's made from nesting cardboard cylinders that range in diameter from about 1 to 4 feet. Each cylinder is lined with fake fur in a different rainbow hue, forming a wondrous, shaggy cavern at the wide end. But on the exterior, Aldrich has left the tubes' yellow labels in place, reminding us of their status as commercial products. It's like something you might find on a Muppet construction site.

The strength of Aldrich's work is this ability to find wonder and whimsy in the pre-set categories by which consumer culture defines and segments our lives.

"Ray" from 2005 is composed of 150 threads strung in a sunbeam shape from the ceiling to the floor. Each thread is a different stock color, evoking light's rainbow spectrum, but also prompting us to marvel at the abundance (or decadence) of our consumer choices.

Other works also nod to the natural world. Aldrich builds coral reefs out of sponges, toilet brushes and plungers. Clusters of garden hoses twist and spout in wave-like shapes reminiscent not only of the water they carry, but of shiny green snakes. "Bouquet" from 2008 is a short cluster of pastel-colored downspouts, their curved ends forming curious flowers.

"Bouquet" can also be read as a machine-age jab at the still life tradition, and Aldrich takes on other artistic orthodoxies in works like "Western Civ" from 1990. Three stacks of paper plates, each 80 inches tall, bend and slump against the wall like wobbly Classical columns. "Waxing, Waning" from the same year mimics swags of carved marble drapery in rolls of wax paper, unfurled and suspended between two plastic paper towel holders.

Yet Aldrich's work in general isn't really a critique of art history or mass production. It's a different take on our advanced consumer society, mining and enhancing its inadvertent loveliness.

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