

# Unambiguously Uncertain At the Hirshhorn, Nine Sculptors Offer Bright, Cheery Takes On the State of Art: It's Grim.

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By Blake Gopnik  
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To get a sense of where contemporary art is heading, you could make art magazines your bedside reading. That would either bring you up to speed or finally cure your insomnia.

But a better way is to take in "The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas," at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum. The ambitious show fills the museum's second story with works by nine contemporary sculptors. There are also galleries with objects chosen from the Hirshhorn's permanent collection by three of them.

To the extent that the art world has a direction, this is it: At first glance, at least, these artists' works are cheery, colorful, brash and peculiar.

Mindy Shapero, a 31-year-old artist from Los Angeles, presents a crude wooden half-oval on the floor, shaped like a dining room rug that's been cut in two. It is covered with fine rainbow stripes of garish acrylic paint, brushed on with a visible wobble. A dozen steel rods, bent into wonky arches eight feet high, spring up from one end of the piece. Everything looks as handmade, even sloppy, as can be, but also cheerful and delightfully insouciant.

The same goes for the work of Brooklynite Andrea Cohen, who is 36. Her charming "Step Lively" begins with a fragment of a bright yellow tube of foam -- the kind used as a swimming floatie -- cut to

form a bracket. That helps support a twisting agglomeration of old branches and twigs, some covered in pink and orange Styrofoam dots or in white cotton balls. They in turn support several tiny poufs or pincushions crudely sewn from pink and orange felt. It looks like Dr. Seuss's take on the welded constructions of a modern master like David Smith.

Rachel Harrison, a 40-year-old who also lives in Brooklyn, gives us a piece called "Shelley Winter." It could almost represent a severed dragon's head, covered in pale blue iridescent paint and so crudely rendered it becomes an almost abstract mess of blobs. That "head" sits on an Ikea kitchen table -- so specified in the wall label -- with a potted houseplant perched wig-wise on its top and spilling tendrils down its sides.

Franz West, an Austrian who, at 59, is the senior artist in the show, presents huge papier-mache blobs or heads, slathered and splashed with brightly colored paint and raised up on decrepit shipping pallets. Work by Evan Holloway, 39 and from Los Angeles, includes what could be a plaster caterpillar, a couple of feet long with old batteries for legs. Isa Genzken, a German who is 58, assembles all kinds of detritus -- colorful acrylic chairs, polyester turtles, plastic patio garlands -- then glues it around and on top of classic white museum pedestals. Where Rodins used to perch, we now get playful junk.

"Play" could be a catchword for all this art, along with "fun," "charming," "lively," "irreverent," even maybe "direct," "unassuming" and "blithe." A quick visit to the exhibition puts a spring into your step.

Stay longer, and think harder, and that bounce disappears.

This exhibition's cheer is all show. The true subject of its art is the

emptiness of art, the futility of meaning, the pointlessness of almost any effort. And, strangely, the decision to go on making efforts, anyway. It is Samuel Beckett's "I Can't Go On, I'll Go On," but without his angstful, existential edge. This art's signature gesture isn't a roar or a groan but a wan smile.

There's energy in all this work, with its proliferating parts and colors and conceits, but it isn't directed. It's stuff piled on stuff, color splashed on color, idea beside idea, just because there's nothing else worth doing.

The work refuses to make a decipherable point because it's saying that the whole idea of "deciphering," even of a "point," is unavailable today.

In her catalogue essay, Hirshhorn curator Anne Ellegood speaks of "a feeling that beliefs and meanings are continuously unmoored and in flux" and of how her artists' works "embrace an uncertainty of meaning, multiple meanings, and meaning in flux." But what happens when artists take this as a rule to make art by? Once meaning goes entirely adrift, all that may be left is fiddling around with trash and craft supplies to make amusing stuff. It's fiddling meant to speak of impotence and failure as the standard artistic condition. It produces art that is profoundly anti-profound, committed to being noncommittal. Slightness is this art's reigning principle, as the only principle that's left. It's a brave stand that rejects the possibility of courage.

That's why this show is so important. There's a crucial "what if" here -- "What if art and meaning are dead ends?" -- that cannot be ignored. You don't have to buy the answer, but you can't deny the question's force. In a world that almost no one thinks is getting better, and where art is more than ever on the margins, it's the art world's optimists and activists who may need to prove their case.

Even when the Hirshhorn sculptures borrow from the great art of the past, as most of them do, it's to argue that, in a world void of ideas or originality, there's no good reason not to be derivative. In fact, copying becomes a strong statement of how impossible original creation is -- at least in a medium with as long and venerable a history as sculpture.

West's mushy heads have the molten blobs of Jean Dubuffet, the French champion of postwar "art brut," as a crucial precedent. (Dubuffet could be this show's reigning deity. Richard Tuttle, a pioneering sculptor from the 1970s who transfigured scraps of wire, could be its patron saint.) Cohen and Genzken were anticipated 85 years ago by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a striking figure on the New York dada scene. Her "Portrait of Marcel Duchamp" consisted of a wineglass holding a teetering pile of stuff, including feathers, a clock spring and bits of ribbons, wire and thread. Other dada artists pioneered the childlike play, haphazard juxtapositions and in-your-face absurdity that the Hirshhorn sculptors have as central strategies.

There is a crucial difference, however, in what dada forms were originally supposed to mean and how they're being used at the Hirshhorn. The absurdities of dada stood for rage at the madness of World War I and at the sureties of "enlightened" European culture. Used today, the same untidy forms are absolutely safe, hallowed by art history. They boil down to mess just for the sake of mess. Using them may go further than that: It may deny the importance of the art that's being borrowed from. In the new works at the Hirshhorn, venerable styles are being treated as another neutral art supply, like Styrofoam or cotton balls, that can be cobbled into pleasing work.

When three of the artists in "Uncertainty" pull neglected objects from the Hirshhorn vaults, there's a similar ethos at work. There's

plenty to learn from their peculiar choices, and lots to like in them. But there's also a sense that these great unknowns aren't being held up as alternatives to art history's big names, or even as correctives to their dominance. It's more about an effort to undo the whole idea of quality and influence.

The Hirshhorn sculptors don't seem to be going to bat, for instance, for the genuine excellence of the largely forgotten work of Pablo Serrano, a Spanish sculptor born in 1908, or for his notion that his awkward bronze blob from 1964 expressed the "Contradictory Duality in Man Between His Inner Ambit and His Outer Configuration," as its title claims. They're taking lighthearted pleasure in such pieces, as an example of the only kind of pleasure that there is to take today.

In the 1950s, when Robert Rauschenberg accumulated stuffed goats, used ties, live clocks and old tires into his pioneering painting/sculpture "combines," which have strong echoes all across this show, there was a sense of commitment and ambition in his move. It said, "Watch me, I dare."

When the Hirshhorn crop of art works borrows from Rauschenberg, the commitment and ambition have evaporated. There's no transfiguration possible in their many Tuttle-esque moments. Or rather, the new work acts as a defiant, willed rejection of ideas such as "commitment," "ambition" and "transfiguration." And maybe also of ideas like "defiance," "will" and "rejection."

We live in a world that can seem almost leached of meaning and purpose. Terrorists hit and we go shopping, as we're told to do.

These sculptures have the nerve to hold up a mirror to that world, even as they willfully -- or will-lessly -- refuse to reflect on it.

Reflection, they seem to say, was for eras when there was still a difference to be made -- in the world, or in art.

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