Lisa Lapinski
MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES
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LISA LAPINSKI MOVES regularly among media and craft traditions in her work, drawing from a wide variety of artistic and architectural images, models, and methodologies—often combining seemingly incompatible iconographies and motifs. As a result, the artist places enormous importance on the audience’s consideration not only of objects but also of the theoretical and cultural glues bonding disparate things together. In this regard, her aggregated output could be said to recall the concept of “systems esthetics,” articulated forty years ago in these pages by Jack Burnham. “We are now in transition from an object-oriented to a systems-oriented culture,” the writer and curator observed at the time, arguing that a radical change in art and its social context was enacting “not from things” but rather from “the way things are done.”

Yet, following Burnham, one best discerns that significant turn in Lapinski’s practice when considering Moussey Python Proceeds Dangers and Dragons, 2008, the centerpiece of her recent survey exhibition, “Lisa L. Lapinski: The Friet and Its Variants,” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Intricately constructed of walnut, beech, and poplar, finished or painted white in places and elsewhere left raw, this three-section, fence-like structure combines disparate forms of decorative details ranging from a pair of eyeglasses, graphically rendered in black paint on white panel lofted above the viewer like a shop sign, to a framed square of bright red carding mounted at eye level. The whole suggests impassiveness—it is, above all else, a barrier diverting the viewer’s body from straightforward navigation of the gallery space—while also serving in this context as a reminder that magnification is typically overwhelming at the borders. Boundaries and divisions are often symbolic and unresolved, isolating two cultures or ideologies only as they touch and intersect. If Burnham proposed a “systems esthetic,” Lapinski’s work, it seems, offers a belief in systems aesthetic that runs along such symbolic borders.

Among the typical effects of the artist’s densely layered installations has been a consistent challenge to quick apprehension, posing to viewers a question of where to begin—both physically and analytically—without a guarantee of release or resolution. This exhibition of floor-based sculpture, photographs, and works on paper proved no exception to that rule, even when it came to the earliest effort on display: three small, maquetelleike sculptures of mosques—Mosque of Mecca, Mosque of Sandbout, and Mosque of Barr, all 2001—each one constructed with walls of layered wallpaper (ranging from Deco-revival zigzags to Moulie Rouge) and outfitted with spiny, canistered roof. Lapinski placed them here on three low trapezoidal pedestals (Three Stands for Mosques, 2008) patterned with poppy black-and-white stripes or dots; the elegantly crafted plinths stood in contrast to the rather roughly assembled, somewhat childlike objects they supported. To offer some guidance for audiences considering the latter, the artist has said that the mosques were inspired by Arthur Rimbaud’s travels in northern Africa, where the poet came to attempt to learn all knowable trades and disciplines, from astron

Lapinski’s entire systemic logic is less circular than accumulative: What at first seems hermetically sealed is often surprisingly generous upon sustained investigation. Only to mineralogy. “Only a symphonic poet would have the idea to make everything in the world,” Lapinski recently noted in an interview, suggesting that Rimbaud’s itinerant scholarly work was no less ambitious. While she hardly seems guilty of such overreach—indeed, the symphonic poet serves only as a symbolic model for the artist—it is nevertheless apparent that her own approach is also more one of accrual than synthesis. Objects and beliefs overlap rather than cohere, and boundaries continue to shift.

One finds such fluidity in Lapinski’s use of structure and decoration, which are often found switching places, reflecting a synthetic trajectory that traces back through art history. In Happy Birthday! I Hope You Like Animal Prints, 2008, layers of wallpaper provide a substrate for six ink-and-collage works on paper, recalling the process-oriented drawings of Barry Le Va. As with the multifaceted fence, meaning here is layered. In fact, notable among the various designs is a print of tigers. Though it may at first seem trivial to mention how this detail recalls the tiger-skin motif recently employed by painter Will Fowler—Fowler, the artist’s husband, has been working with an image picking a tiger-skin rug once employed by El Lissitzky—the congruence suggests an intersection between the personal and historical that appears throughout Lapinski’s oeuvre. Another such instance is found in the quietly unsettling photograph Untitled (Version A), 2008, in which an eccentrically shaped Rosso Italian bottle—designed to look like a punch-drunk clown, with a bright pink nose as its bottle cap—sits on a chair’s carved wooden frame, against a background of garish floral wallpaper. The image pulls together a number of Lapinski’s familiar materials and tropes—an early piece by the artist, which actually adorns the MCA catalogue cover, features a clown as well—at the same time that it slyly evokes Warhol’s flowers and Duchamp’s anappel of Paris air.

At such moments, it becomes clear that Lapinski’s entire systemic logic is less circular than accumulative: What at first seems hermetically sealed is often surprisingly generous upon sustained investigation. For instance, the photograph Untitled (from Litz Wedding Songs), 2007–2008—hung diagonally across the gallery from the other photo, with Monte Pyton... in the middle—documents a provisional sculptural work by Lapinski situated amid overgrown succulents outside a typical Los Angeles adobe bungalow. The sculpture, in turn, frames a Patrick Nagel–inspired painting (another recurring theme) with patterned, off-the-shelf concrete blocks—again crossing structure with decoration. Fittingly, the two photographs mark the opposite ends of the installation—endings that are also, surely, beginnings.}

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