



View of John Monti's exhibition "Fancy," 2004 at Elizabeth Harris

John Monti at Elizabeth Harris

John Monti has exhibited regularly in New York since the mid-1980s. Against a fluctuating backdrop of stylistic convulsion he has single-mindedly pursued his own ideas.

Monti's work is ingeniously devised and fabricated. His earliest wood sculptures, suggesting unlikely mergers of Constructivism and West African ethnographic objects, displayed joinery worthy of a piano builder or luthier. The artist's later, soft-edge Neo-Minimalist work--which hung off walls and flattened onto floors--recruited industrial ingredients (rubber and fiberglass) and similarly pushed the inherent limits of its materials.

His recent exhibition at Elizabeth Harris raised the technical bar. The scrupulous fabrication of the low-relief wall ensembles in this show approaches the perverse. Drawing from manufactured consumer products, the painstakingly handmade components are all but indistinguishable from machine-made objects.

Reverse molds, fiberglass, resin, polycarbonate plastic, pigmented urethane rubber and metal fasteners compose semi-bulbous gatherings of oversize medallions that would be at home adorning carnival thrill rides. In the larger of the exhibition's two rooms, the walls are arrayed with crazy-daisy like rosettes, running from 21 to 30 inches in diameter, and buckshot scatters of diminutive rubber ellipses. Black and white stacks of liling, arm-length arabesques converge in the corners. Cast-rubber asterisks optically pinwheel in a variety of garish synthetic hues. The overall tone of the installation is one of joyous and unapologetic ornamental riot.

In the smaller room, the 44-by-56-by-8-inch Tangerine Smile (2004), a fulsome, sherbet-colored swag made of fiberglass over foam, hung pendulously from the wall. A smaller freestanding version, Smile: Magenta (2004), balanced on its counterweighted bottom at the room's center. The 22-inch-wide piece reportedly served (in the studio) as a rocking horse for the sculptor's preschool son. The two flanking walls each contained Beauty Spots, five-lobed polyester resin nodules embedded in flexible multicolored nimbuses. Beauty Spot: Green (2004), at 35 by 35 by 6 inches, has a radiant pollen green protrusion whose contours are sinuously reiterated by its pink and aqua rubber coronas.

Monti's beguiling exhibition casts a broad associative net. Finish Fetishist Craig Kaufman comes to mind as do radial painters Beatriz Milhazes and Glenn Goldberg. The clamor and abundance of primary shapes obliquely recalls Pattern & Decoration's best moments. Art history--from Matisse's cutouts to the material speculations of Art & Technology--blends with bright plastic playthings and three-dimensional signage borrowed from consumer culture. One can linger and cerebration or simply step in for a retinally intoxicating spin.

-Roger Boyce