

ARTSEEN

NOVEMBER 1ST, 2018

Sedimentations: Assemblage as Social Repair

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THE 8TH FLOOR | JUNE 21 - DECEMBER 8, 2018



Jean Shin, *Spring Collection, Looks 14*, 2016. Leather remnants and t-pins. Courtesy the artist.

“A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist. To organize this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids, and subdivisions is an aesthetic process that has scarcely been touched,” explained Robert Smithson in his 1968 essay “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects.” *Sedimentations: Assemblage as Social Repair*—a brilliant group exhibition that strikes the perfect balance between

unconventional forms of beauty and thought-provoking mediations on history, consumerism, and labor—breaks down the methods for such a process. In doing so, the exhibition, organized by the 8th Floor’s executive and artistic director, Sara Reisman, embraces residue as its primary source, presenting what the eye tends to ignore in startling juxtapositions and myriad narratives. “How do we extend the use of the resources we have?” Reisman said to the *Rail* over email. “Fundamentally, this seems to be the way forward in extending the lifespan of humanity.”

Thoughtfully selected so as to constitute an overall curatorial manifestation while nonetheless maintaining their distinct *raison d’être*, the works contain remnants from their materials’ previous lives and traces of gestures made by their artists’ hands.

Meandering the gallery’s vast gallery space, the viewers encounter bottle caps, leather scraps, feathers, chains, and discarded books, revitalized in charming yet assertive fashions. The exhibition’s subtitle further illustrates why twelve artists have turned to such discarded objects for creation, rather than crisp, blank canvases or fresh clay. Used materials carry hints from their pasts, akin to wrinkles on an aging face, and contribute layers of experience and history onto tactile surfaces. The artists meditate on histories, molding their embodiments into alternative forms fluctuating between past and present. For example, El Anatsui’s *Metas II* (2014), a tapestry of flattened bottle caps weaved with copper wire, rewinds the dynamics of labor and consumption, transforming relics of waste into a monument of diligent work. Sharing similar thematic concerns with Anatsui is Jean Shin, whose “Spring Collection” series (2016) repurposes leather scraps from high-end handbags into topographical forms with fluid borders and geometric hollows. Their resemblance to islands seen from bird’s-eye view resonates as a poetic utopia, challenged by their true status as crops of consumerist desires that would otherwise dissipate.



Michael Rakowitz, *May The Obdurate Foe Not Stay in Good Health - Ceramic tile, Turizi Compound (Damascus)*, 2016. Syrian and other Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue. Courtesy the artist and Jane Lombard Gallery, New York.

Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz arguably delivers the most vivid example of “social repair” throughout the exhibition with *May The Obdurate Foe Not Stay in Good Health* (2016), an ongoing series of minuscule sculptures made out of newspaper and packaging materials from the Middle East. Held together with glue, these moderate objects replicate artifacts looted from the National Museum of Baghdad in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion in 2003. Rakowitz, who had previously constructed a Vladimir Tatlin sculpture—one that was never built—with construction debris from the Aboriginal Housing Company in Sydney, is no stranger to methods of repositioning bygone histories through reconstruction of historical monuments. “Is it possible to reclaim what is stolen?” the artist asks; however, his question is a rhetorical one through which Rakowitz contemplates loss through what is accessible and momentous. He challenges hierarchal assumptions on value by using the mundane to recreate the valuable. Amongst various three dimensional concepts, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's landmark project *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1979 – 80) poignantly appears in photographic form, chronicling the artist's hand-shaking performance with 8,500 New York City Sanitation workers in attempt to emphasize overlooked labor and privileges taken for granted. The photographs' grid-style hang constitutes an immersive and engaging impact, revitalizing a historic performance in another genre.