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'AMERICANANA'

By Holland Cotter

The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery

At Hunter College

Lexington Avenue, at 68th Street

Through Saturday

This smart group show, with its spit-and-polish “Antiques Roadshow” look, comes at an apt moment, as various constituencies across the political spectrum, out of hope, anger or nostalgia, claim something called America as their own. The artists in the exhibition make no such claim, but they clearly understand that the very concept is a loaded one.

A few objects keep their politics to themselves. H. C. Westermann’s “Dustpan — Douglas Fir” from 1972 is pretty much what it says it is, a sculptural version of a domestic cleanup item. A knotty pine chair designed by Donald Judd sends out some Shakerish vibes but settles for being part plain, comfortless furniture and part homely period art.

Beyond that, things get strange. A wall piece made from segments of aluminum by Greely Myatt is patterned like a quilt but suggests a slicing-dicing machine. A bronze butter churn by Robert Gober is covered in barnacles, as if it had been submerged in a wreck.

A sampler by Elaine Reichek carries a bleak quotation from Edith Warton’s fatalistic New England novel “Ethan Frome.” The black American flags in a 1980 Jasper John’s print seem to be obscured by static.

The show has been organized by Katy Siegel, chief curator of the Hunter College art galleries and a teacher in the college’s art program, with assistance from some of her students: Firelei Báez, Shawna Cooper, Caroline Lagnado, Kylie Lockwood and Karli Wurzelbacher. If the installation is too neat and clean to reflect the America we know, the project’s blend of collaboration, instruction and criticism is — ideally at least — very much in the American grain.

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