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500 WORDS

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Katy Siegel

10.11.10



Views of Americanana, 2010. Left: Josephine Halvorson, *Cabinet*, 2009; Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1994-2010. Right: H.C. Westermann, *Dustpan – Amaranth*, 1972; H.C. Westermann, *Dustpan – Douglas Fir*, 1972; Kara Walker, *Jockey*, 1995; Elaine Reichek, *Sampler (Above the Fields)*, 1999; Donald Judd, *Chair*, 1991/2002; James Turrell, Nicholas Mosse, and Bill Burke, *Lapsed Quaker Ware*, 1998.

Katy Siegel recently organized "Americanana" for the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at New York City's Hunter College, where she is an associate professor of art history. This fall, London-based Reaktion Books will publish her latest volume, Since '45: the Making of Contemporary Art. The exhibition is on view until December 4.

AMERICANANA. Everyone leaves off the last "na." They think it's a typo. But I wanted it to evoke the absurdity of European settlers using Indian words to name soccer clubs and suburban streets, or the new urban woodsmen butchering pigs in Brooklyn, or the countless other attempts in our culture to recover a lost past. The title also echoes *Indianana*, a not very well-known work by Mike Kelley, and so it's a little tribute to him.

The artists in the exhibition are not reproducing Americana in a straightforward way. Instead they are self-consciously coming out of it and reiterating or reworking it in some new fashion—whether for some social or political purpose or just with the consciousness that this is something they are recovering. You can see it in Robert Gober's butter churn covered in barnacles. It's like something old that has drifted away and then returned crusted with time.

The idea for the show came out of research for my new book. I realized that there is a strain of American contemporary art that is focused on American history, production, and social values. That's not as emphasized in the book itself—it's a minor motif. Yet among all the social histories I covered, this was the most vibrant in terms of visual material, and it deserved an exhibition.

"Americanana" doesn't go off on a lot of tangents. And we're not talking about folk art—there have already been good shows about *that* old weird America. This is an exhibition featuring artists who are interested in common American objects—painted signs, quilts, butter churns, rubber stamps, and copper kettles—and particularly in the way they are made. These are things anyone could make without being a professional artist or going to a fancy school; though they require skill, they are not fussy, labored, or self-conscious. This is a tradition Donald Judd, for instance, wrote quite a bit about, and it's very evident in his work. No one has really studied this subject, but Judd's library contained many catalogues of Shaker objects and furniture, available because these things were undergoing a revival in the US as part of American taste-making in the 1960s.

Part of what drew me to this subject is that postmodernist theory was bad at addressing the fact that American history is a history of revivals, and also its traditional anti-capitalism. Today we see—correctly—America as one of the chief countries imposing capitalism on the world. But in the nineteenth century, capitalism was seen as European and as something that was being imposed on America, at the cost of the traditional independent man, the artisan and farmer, and on communities like the Shakers. It is this pre-superpower America that comes back again and again in contemporary history and culture.

I think today's resurgence is sparked by the feeling that capitalism is collapsing. The global business culture that seemed so permanent to people ten years ago now offers limited rewards. There's also the decline of America as it becomes one nation among many, which allows us to see more clearly the particularities of America and American history. Just as Japanese artists have attended to what is Japanese, or as Korean artists have considered Korea, American artists are now looking at their country through local lenses.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler