

Bertozzi & Casoni: Cardi & Co - Milan

Philip Auslander

The gallery seemed to be piled with garbage--dead car batteries, torn boxes, kitschy animal statuettes, and feces--with snails crawling all over. It was only when you realized that what seem to be assemblages of found objects are actually ceramic sculptures that the work revealed itself as a tour de force of a medium pushed in unexpected directions. By playfully describing themselves as a ceramics production company operating in an art context, Bertozzi & Casoni locate their work in the gray zones between artwork and product, fine art and craft, exhibition and decoration. It is entirely fitting that the centerpiece of the show was a perverse homage to that most famous of "factory" artists, Andy Warhol. Brillo & Archie (no. 368) (all works 2001), depicts Warhol's dog in an environment constructed out of torn and stained Brillo boxes and littered with broken Christmas decorations, an empty Campbell's soup can, and feces. The tone of the piece, as of all the pieces in this body of work, is elegiac--a horned animal skull spilling out from one of the boxes serves as a memento mori, and the absence of Warhol himself is palpable. It's as if Archie, left to fend for himself after Andy's departure, had constructed a living environment out of what was at hand in an act of canine bricolage, even going so far as to make a crude doghouse for himself out of some leftover Brillo boxes.

Animals forced to negotiate the refuse left behind by absent human beings also populated the two other major works in the show. *Composizione numero uno (cicogna con bombe no. 369)* (Composition number one [stork with bombs no. 369]) showed a stork perched in a nest atop a stack of used car batteries, trying to hatch hand grenades. The albino gorilla of *Albino al bar (no. 370)* (Albino at the bar [no. 370]) sits on a Saarinen table surrounded by pill bottles and medications, a little blue pill visible on its tongue. Although these pieces suggest that human beings have made such a mess of the world that they've rendered themselves extinct, there is no sense of redemption in nature's reclaiming of the environment. Storks may be associated with birth and fecundity, but this one is not going to be delivering any babies. The animals are left to dean up our mess--the gorilla even holds a dustpan. But they seem unequal to the task, more likely to be swallowed by the accumulated garbage than to find a way of living in it.

While the detritus of human civilization is rendered in these sculptures with extraordinary trompe l'oeil bravura, the animals are reminiscent of kitschy ceramic figurines. In the context of this work, with its grim vision of an entropic world careening toward chaos, the presentation of kitsch is neither deadpan nor ironic. Whatever irony this work possesses is contextual: It resides in the juxtaposition of slick commercial ceramic techniques and the relative anonymity of the artists' corporate identity with the psychic violence of the subject matter. The tacky figurines represent just one of the stylistic vocabularies swept up in the rush to chaos. Along the way, the Saarinen table and the Warhol Brillo boxes are relegated to the trash heap. The car batteries form a Rubik's Cube version of Mondrian, but who's there to enjoy the irony? Only a bird sitting on hand grenades.

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