

ArtZone

Aug 14, 2019

Invisible labour

In Carlos Sandoval de León's exhibition at Cindy Rucker Gallery on the Lower East Side in New York, a conscious system of change is operating in situ. Sophie McKinnon reports.

**Carlos Sandoval de León
Cindy Rucker Gallery, New York
March 23 – April 28, 2019**

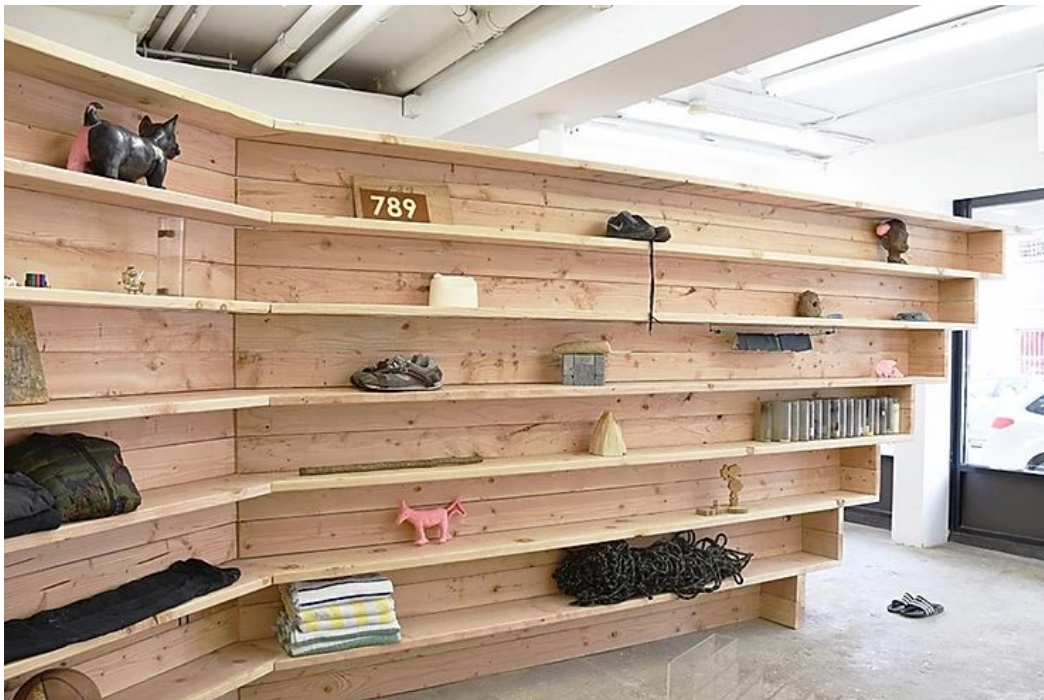


Carlos Sandoval de León, Cindy Rucker Gallery, installation view

The gallery is small, and a large wooden plank structure angles through the space, dividing it in two to the point of cramped-ness and making it impossible to see the entirety in one view. A collection of objects line the shelves on one side of the wood structure at different heights. The feel is workshop or back room, with many items lying on their sides, leaning, or simply placed

rather than displayed. A pair of battered slide sandals sit side by side on the ground at the entry, their insoles missing, giving the impression of a fresh excavation, as they seem to protrude from the cement. Across an inner wall above head height, a wide poster shows an image of a man at the wheel from behind, his beat-up van interior cluttered with bags and papers. On another wall some iron braces hold out a trio of items. These seem more purposeful. An upturned baseball cap is filled with candy-colored, unevenly formed pebbles. A wreath is made of Sun Maid raisin boxes, unfolded and concertina'd together with stitches of red thread. At a certain angle it is obvious that the iconic, benign face of the Sun Maid has been clipped out from each box, as have her arms and hands.

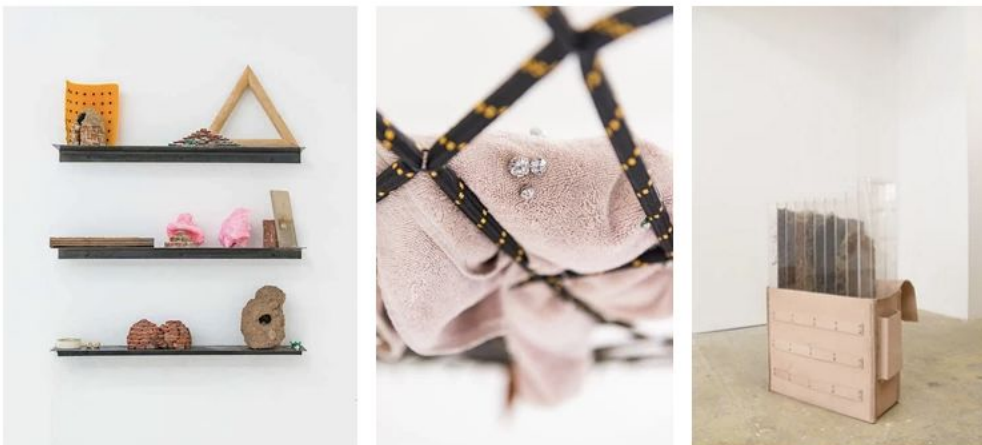
Some items are immediately recognisable: Heavily used devotional candles in glass jars, turned so that only their dime store barcodes are visible. A pair of sneakers. A neatly folded stack of striped towels. Some are familiar enough but are on their way somewhere else – a basketball with a segment peeled back like skin. Laptops with their screens open like jaws, a dense wedge of pink wax filling the negative space above the keyboard. Others still seem entirely new: porous rocks with holes through their centres, broken busts partially mended with more of the waxy pink substance – the same substance which caps mounds of coiled beads like parapets.



Carlos Sandoval de León, Cindy Rucker Gallery, installation view

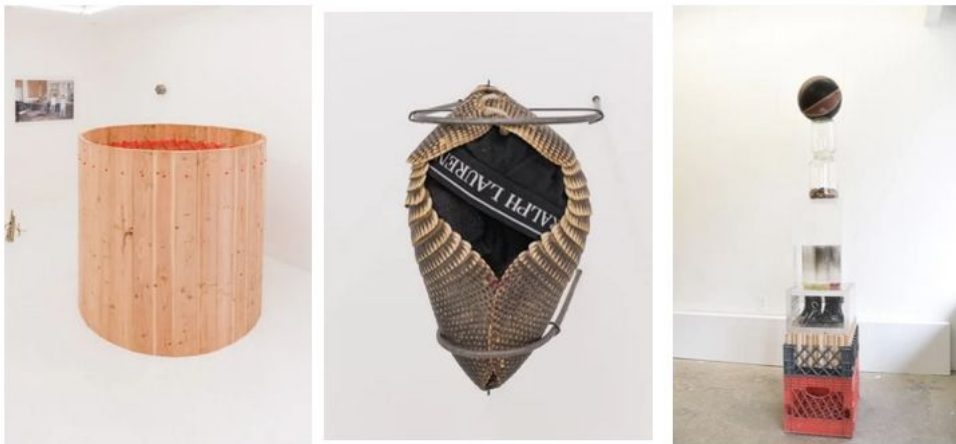
While the mind wanders toward the readymade, these objects feel not so much found as chosen. This particular grouping shares some aesthetic characteristics, with a largely earth-tone palette and rough surfaces, but they don't bear witness to any one person. Even the more domestic objects are impersonal, some seeming to be in a state of transition or metamorphosis. 'Modern' objects with polished edges are filled over with a handmade or hand-applied substance, towels bear gemstone earrings like nails. Even the plank shelves give way to something else – with portal shapes carved through the timber, and cutaways from one end of each shelf forming an inverted, stepped pyramid. The clues to the origin of these objects, their manufacture and purpose, is gently erased, smoothed over or stripped back with a more rudimentary process. In doing this, de León forges a new grouping, held together with string, wire and glue, charged with the aesthetic of the handmade and the humble.

There is a collective dimension to the work's execution. Brooklyn artist de León has been working in this series for a number of years, and it evolves with each iteration. He engages a close cohort of artisans and friends to realize certain parts of it, in an almost ritualistic embodiment of community. He describes his relationship to sculpture as an exercise in inquiry, in intentionality, 'the residue of materials' and ultimately the construction of objects, culture, and economies. Drawing on his own background as a Mexican-born and raised artist, he uses objects that are familiar but also disenfranchised in some way – overused, overworked, under-appreciated. The pink substance, for example, is *Zote*, a Mexican laundry soap for delicate garments made from tallow (animal fat) and citronella, and sometimes used as a base for homemade detergent. It has a thick texture and milky pink color, and here it becomes a kind of unifying mortar. Sandoval de León reworks these objects but also divests them of information about how they were made or why. This speaks to our relationship with the labour economy, and also more broadly to a shrinking relationship with raw materials. Do we really know what things are made from? What about their source?



These objects are narrative artifacts which forge uneasy material alliances. The coloured pebbles in the baseball cap give off the unmistakable smell of pre-chewed gum, sickly sweet and slightly oily. A spittoon of repetitive action filled to the brim. The raisin boxes minus head and hands are sewn together precariously, and the brand is literally defaced. Sun Maid, a privately-owned dried fruit co-op headquartered in California, has used the white-skinned ‘sun maiden’ (based on the likeness of American model Lorraine Collett Peterson, hired in 1915) for over a century, despite historically employing hundreds and eventually thousands of largely immigrant workers to perform the vital packing duties between producer and consumer. In September 2018, Mexican Independence Day was celebrated by crowds of labourers at the Sun Maid facility, amid strikes against wage cuts. In an exhibition that quietly challenges the traces of labour, it is interesting to think about the optics of brands that elect to promote an idealized image of production far from the reality.

Parts of the installation are easy to access while others are less obvious, hidden even. A tub-shaped container standing about a metre and a half tall obstructs the view. If you peer into it, a delicate grid of red-bobbled ribbons can be seen suspended inside. A clear plastic frame on the floor with ubiquitous ‘accepted here’ credit card stickers on the underside (we later learn this is bullet proof bodega – deli – glass) is so close to the back of one wall and the front of another you must perform a long step to clear it. A branded pair of Ralph Lauren boxer briefs folded into an armadillo shell are installed behind a pillar, virtually out of sight.



De Leon’s exhibition is not an overt critique of the manufacturing industry nor of the situation of immigrant labour, but it does raise important questions about production, process, the (in)visibility of labor, and the complicity of looking at things while failing to ask ‘who made this’, and ‘for whom?’ Subtle and persistent, it is meticulous but not careful, soft-spoken rather than heavy-handed, and perfectly balanced in a liminal space between revelation and concealment. Upon closer inspection, the missing ‘insoles’ of the sandals on the concrete floor show the

distinct outline of a foot inside them, and the impression shifts from that of something emerging to something disappearing. Someone bearing great weight has sunk into the floor in that very spot, the body already vanished while the sheath remains.

Outside on the street, some milk crates filled with rounded dowelling are arranged in a friendly semi-circle. 'For anyone who wants to take a seat,' explains the gallery assistant. Asked if people were making use of the invitation, she responded, 'I don't know, I can't see through the structure of the show to know what's happening out there.'

First published Art Zone #79

Extra images: Carlos Sandoval, Installation views, Cindy Rucker Gallery