

On Media

By Lesdi Goussen

While an artist's vision is inherently informed by the medium in which the artist works, the consideration that the medium is the backbone both conceptually and physically of an artwork is often overlooked by the viewer. When confronted with a work of art, one is often preoccupied with interpreting the figurative representation of a composition, rather than stepping back to consider how the medium of the work informs its meaning. However, by considering the medium, the internal, emotional, and upmost personal underpinnings of an artist's practice are revealed.

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The range and diversity of media that informs the practice of contemporary artists is eloquently captured through the exhibitions of two distinctly different galleries in San Francisco—Alter Space and Fraenkel Gallery. While both galleries exhibited artists whose works demonstrate a set of different practices, each work reveals the intimate relationship between the artist and the medium.

At Alter Space, the exhibition *Awkward Threesome* showcased the work of three San Francisco artists practicing in alternative, non-traditional media. Among the works exhibited were Kim Ye's latex pieces modeled after personal and everyday objects, such as a standard bathroom sink. Ye is a contemporary artist whose work takes the form of installation, sculpture, performance, and video art. Her latex pieces blur the boundary between sculpture and object and bring into question the discrepancies between the form and function of her art.



Kim Ye, *You Deserve Nice Things (er-mez)*, 2004.

Ye's works challenge the viewer to consider how the medium and the object represented are at tension, contradicting each other through their seemingly unrelated nature. Her latex pieces in particular are characterized by their expressive use of material, which does not conform to the object as it exists in the real world. In her work *You Deserve Nice Things (er-mez)*, Ye recreates a blown up Hermes

label out of latex, vinyl, fabric, pony beads, and staples. The redefined Hermes label takes on an identity of its own, providing a window into the artist's personal and professional life. The work is representative of the many gifts showered on the artist by her subservient patrons from her profession as dominatrix. The sensations and visceral reactions the latex evokes in the viewer mimic the roles Ye plays as a dominatrix, placing

the viewer in dialogue with Ye's personal life that is imbued with desire and temptation. While S&M culture is often kept in the dark, Ye's works transport her personal anecdotes to the forefront of public discussion.

In conjunction to the works in the exhibition, the gallery also showcased live performances during the opening reception of the show. Artist Kim Ye and Christine Wang performed a piece, *Art Scene*, that explored the complicated, tortured relationship between artist and gallery. The performance took place inside a jail cell in the basement of Alter Space. The cell is a historical marker for the space, serving as a reminder that the gallery was once a leather and bondage shop. While the cell holds historical meaning for the gallery, it also plays a crucial role in the performance by becoming the medium itself. The jail cell activated the space and served as the physical manifestation of the artist's captive state from working with a gallery. Approaching the performance through the lens of the cell allows the viewer to contextualize the piece and understand the convoluted and complicated gallery-artist relationship. The history of the space in relation to the cell also serves to promote a physical representation of the relationship played out, suggesting the parallels between the gallery-artist and the S&M variants that evoke feelings of power, pain, and pleasure.

Just as the medium of a work can reveal the personal underpinnings of a piece, it can also communicate details of the artistic process. This was demonstrated in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, an exhibition at Fraenkel Gallery based on the novel by Carson McCullers. The exhibition presented works by eighteen artists, built around the themes of vulnerability and yearning. The works selected for the show spoke to the lonely hunt an artist undergoes in search for inspiration. While the show itself ranged in media, individual works serve as exemplary pieces that quote on the role media plays in uncovering and even transcending the artist's process in realizing their vision.



Judith Scott, *Untitled (Circular "harp")*, 1993.

Judith Scott is an artist from the Center for Creative Growth whose practice took on a range of media by creating works out of found objects. Scott's piece *Untitled (Circular "harp")* is a multi-media soft sculpture made primarily from yarn. At first glance the work appears to be abstract, but upon a closer look, the familiar shape of a harp emerges from the gossamer of yarn. While the viewer feels compelled to decipher the piece, the very essence of the work lies in the complex web of yarn—the main material used in this artwork.

By divorcing from the figurative representation of the work, the yarn reveals a roadmap to Scott's process. Each individual strand of yarn traces a step through the tireless and sporadic journey of Scott's creation. In this sense, Scott's work draws reference to the Abstract Expressionists whose drips and splatters at first glance seemed to convey spontaneity but instead revealed the deliberate, premeditated movements of the artist's hand.

Alongside Scott, works by the artist Fumi Ishino were also included in the exhibition. While Ishino works primarily with the medium of photography, his process is informed by exploring various media, such as sculpture and readymade objects. By utilizing media outside of photography, Ishino is able to achieve tailored effects and distortions in his photographs.



Fumi Ishino, *Untitled (Strawberry Cap)*, 2014.

In *Untitled (Strawberry Cap)*, every aspect of the photograph reveals a personal attribute about the artist. The small, abstract white sculpture featured in the work was sculpted by Ishino himself, who sought to achieve stark contrasts and deep shadows when photographing the figurine against a white background. In addition to the sculpture, Ishino also incorporates a sliver of wallpaper featured along the left edge of the composition bleeding out of the frame onto the exhibition wall. The strategic continuation of the medium outside the formal parameters of the artwork demonstrate the artist's freedom of expression and creates the types of distortions and optical illusions that are characteristic of Ishino's work. While the

wallpaper expresses the power of media, it also symbolizes a personal connection to the artist's family wallpaper business.

The exhibitions at Alter Space and Fraenkel Gallery are a testament to the range of media that can inform artists' practices. While both galleries differ tremendously and cater to different audiences, the works on view in both exhibitions demonstrate how a viewer's engagement with different media impacts his or her experience. The range in content in both exhibitions speaks to the different sources of inspiration in each artist's practice, intimately communicated through medium in some form or another. While both the content and medium of a work exist separately, an artist's vision depends on the symbiotic relationship between the two. It is through media that the viewer is invited to enter into a dialogue that unveils the personality of the artist.