

ARTS SPACE

Keeping up

appearances

UTSA Satellite Space examines decorative objects

BY JOHN EWING

A chair is still a chair, even when there's no one sitting there," croons Dionne Warwick in one of her popular odes to the lovelorn. Broken hearts aside, the song's lyric goes nowhere if the listener rejects its basic premise. "A chair is still a chair," only if its function is obvious. That's the job of decoration — to identify functionally recognizable objects for convenient and pleasant use. The myriad styles given to decorative objects may express the taste or status of the owner, but excessive froufrou interfering with an object's functionality is usually considered "bad design." Unless the object is art.

"Objects," an exhibition of 45 local artists at UTSA Satellite Space, strives to reveal the "blurring line between fine and decorative arts." What the exhibit confirms, instead, is fine art's continuing capacity to make a special case for itself, even in the functionally demanding and lucrative context of decoration. Indeed, the function of art is to emphatically resist efforts to assign it a particular function, to be the irresistible center of attention in a conversation it intends to monopolize. The works

in this exhibition fall at different points along the fine-art/decoration continuum, but the most interesting do not hesitate to challenge the decorative object's traditional parameters of functionality as well as the overlapping stylistic histories of both decorative and fine arts.

One group takes up the challenge with gleeful adaptation of simple materials. Resurrecting the strategies of Italy's *arte povera* movement, Rhonda Kuhlman makes a "poor man's" lamp and pedestal from aluminum cans, a record album, and the delicate tissue of a sewing pattern. Kuhlman's design wrests new life from old castoffs without altering their former identities. By con-

Blue Christmas Tree
by Chuck Ramirez



trast, Franco Mondini Ruiz transforms store-bought matchboxes into instant heirlooms with black paint and plastic cameos. Elsewhere, Chuck Ramirez' otherworldly Christmas tree hangs from the gallery ceiling like a trussed, holiday fowl still wrapped tightly in its shipping net. Swathed in a web of blue lights, the object floats in space, a strangely beautiful beacon that uproots the most sacrosanct of decorations from centuries of tradition.

Other artists shift recognizable objects away from their functional and decorative contexts. Chris Sauter's *Oven Recliner* combines a hand-made oven with an "EZ Chair." Upholstered in plaid fabric that would make either object hideous by itself, together the pair is a

matched set that makes good decorative sense despite its uselessness. Thomas Glassford's *Black Chandelier* takes an object that is excessively decorative by nature and further complicates it beyond its function. Adding chains and bulbous, finial-like elements, Glassford expands the chandelier into an organic and somewhat menacing free-form sculpture. Additional artists make the contextual shift through repetition. Meg Langhorne's *Sweet* (a stacked column of bear-shaped honey containers cast in concrete) and Karen Mahaffy's row of tailored pot holders move ordinary, kitchen objects into fresh perspective with minimalist framework.

Henry Stein and Ethel Shipton turn decorative and fine-art distinctions inside out. In Stein's work entitled *Intersections*, he borrows a panel of decorative ironwork from a gate or garden fence and hangs it in the gallery setting in the manner of a large painting. Tiny squares apparently cut from actual oil paintings are placed at regular intervals across the ironwork to accentuate its crisscross pattern. So-called fine art is thus reduced to mere decoration for a lowly decorative object that has been selectively elevated to the status of fine

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Objects d'art

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art. Similarly, the fleur-de-lis pattern stenciled across Ship-ton's *Qué Pretty* is splotted and smeared; the painting series is an homage to a decorative trope so far past the point of Baroque cliché that it has come out the other end as neo-conceptual perversity.

With more than 75 individual pieces in the exhibition, "Objects" suffers from the very "blurring" it seeks to describe. Some of the works are lost in this busy atmosphere. Michele Monseau's soft sculpture is confined to a corner, quelling the creeping pervasiveness suggested by the amorphous forms. Jayne Lawrence's wonderfully absurd *Bread Table* is expediently used as a support for Ron Boling's raku *Ritual Vessel*. Although that makes functional sense, the resulting visual hierarchy prevents a separate, thoughtful encounter with either work. Elsewhere, a haphazardly draped

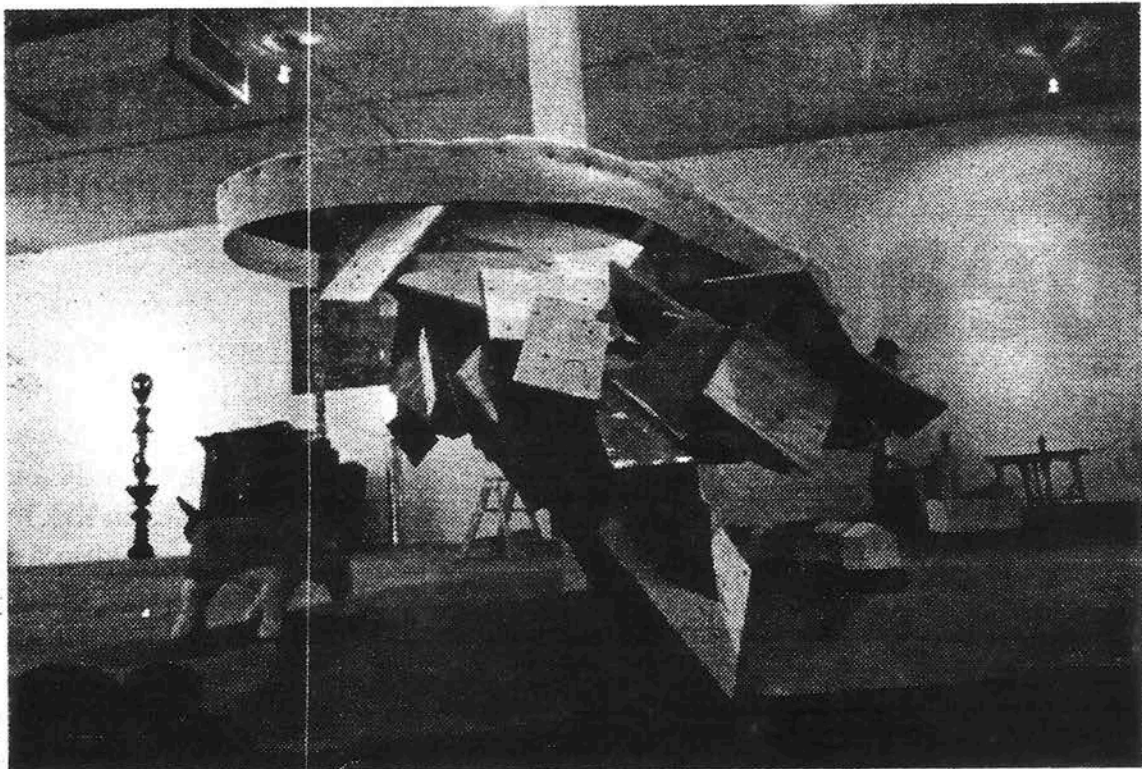


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display table is placed near a site-specific sculpture by Randy Wallace, both competing for attention in conflicting ways.

In the exhibition's wildly varied mix, it is difficult to determine what should leave and what should stay. Perhaps that's the lesson distilled from the fine-art/decoration debate. Art, unlike decoration, has a singular and self-serving objective. Sitting on the sidelines just doesn't cut it. ■

For more information on "Objects" at the UTSA Satellite Space, consult Exhibits Ongoing listings, page 33.