



Conceptual Art in Bodega's "Wax Apple"

In Bodega's "Wax Apple" exhibit, an orange makes an appearance. And it's plastic, not wax.

While there are other oranges in this show (a glass vase containing 2 liters of orange soda; a painting and screenprint with a bright orange background), the dominant ambiance of the show—whose theme is conceptual art—is gray, white and black. Even when there is some color, it's monochrome and muted. As one viewer said after leaving the gallery: "That was grim."

Indeed, I had trouble connecting with the retro-looking and formalist paintings, prints, monolithic abstract sculptures and photos. The press release talks about a "renewed enthusiasm" for objects and materials, and, to its credit, "Wax Apple" does convey the importance of art making. Some of the pieces are likable.

Christopher Samuels' "Untitled"—that vase with the orange soda—is eye candy in its spot on the vast gallery floor. It triggers thoughts of hot dogs...and Wayne Thibaud's cake paintings. But—and this may be reading too much into what is perhaps a toss-off work of art—I can't help but think of the rivers and lakes in Edward Burtynsky's documentary photos, which feature polluted waters that have almost the same tinge of unreal orange. No matter what the artist intends, a viewer can bring a lot to this little piece, and the piece is open enough to give right back.

Seven more works in the show (out of 21—there are 16 artists in the exhibit) are also untitled, and many of them are not nearly as engaging. The word "untitled" was prevalent in an earlier generation of conceptual artists and those whose works were formalist in nature. Today, mostly, artists have moved on from "untitled," so to see so many here is a surprise. Another surprise is the absence of video. They both make the show seem old fashioned.

"Portal/Photo Rug" by Kate Steciw is an update on Carl Andre's minimalist floor pieces. This polyester floor cloth with a photographic image of what looks like the eye of a hurricane seen from a satellite is true to Andre's aesthetic. It looks precious and you don't know whether to walk on it or not (when I was there nobody walked on it). I guess that shows you how far we've come—not very far. I've walked on an Andre rug (you're allowed), and the sense of iconoclasm—of desecrating a piece of art—is almost thrilling. I assume walking on "Portal/Photo Rug" would give you the same thrill.

The chill in this show comes from the grayscale works. Ben Schumacher's "Tractor PTO guard," an inkjet print on spandex wrapped around a steel armature, and his wall piece "BLOCK.PARTITION"; Lucas Blalock's "Untitled" gelatin silver print; Michael Giudetti's "Superimposed," a watercolor on canvas; Collin Hatton's "Busted," acrylic and graphite on canvas; Andrea Longacre-White's inkjet print "Postcard to Heidelberg 4," Natalie Rognsoy's "Untitled" watercolor; and Jessica Labatte's inkjet print "Linear Flexing." To the uninitiated viewer, these works are formalist enigmas and embodiments of joyless viewing. They may have been fun to make but they don't engage outside their small conversation circle. Talking with a small audience is fine as far as it goes, but if you're concerned, as I am, about the chasm between viewers and art that was created by just this kind of art, you will find this show largely disappointing. It's not enough to make objects—you have to make objects that connect with the public.

Through July 17. Bodega, 253 N. Third St. bodegaphiladelphia.org