

REGEN PROJECTS

Pulimood, Steve. "Popular Mechanics: Walead Beshty." Art in America (April 15, 2009)

Art in America

Popular Mechanics: Walead Beshty

by Steve Pulimood 04/15/09

London-born, LA-based artist Walead Beshty's recent exhibition of photographs, entitled "Popular Mechanics," is a meditation on the intermediaries of art making. Beshty explores the dialectic between those optical and material aspects of art that are ordinarily left concealed, and his incisive approach to the problems left behind by the legacy of minimalism -- such as the work of art as an object, first and foremost -- has earned him renown. Both people and processes register their role in the unique creative evolution of Beshty's art as it continues to pit technical vibrancy against contextual grayness, experimental methods opposite straightforward technique.

For the 2008 Whitney Biennial the artist displayed glass cubes the size of a standard shipping box, specifically a proprietary volume owned by Fedex. Every time a cube is shown, it is shipped in its respective box; inevitably the shatterproof glass develops more cracks with each trip. They are minimalist cubes, reminiscent of Larry Bell's, that reveal in naked terms where precisely the stress lies. Also at the Whitney, Beshty displayed photographs of the Iraqi Diplomatic Mission in former East Berlin, the unclaimed outpost of a defunct government standing on the grounds of a failed state. The film used in documenting the space was damaged in an airport security X ray machine, but the developed prints are lushly hued images of political and artistic deconstruction.

Shamim Momin, the curator of the 2008 Whitney Biennial remarked that Beshty is interested in "treating the image abstractly, rather than the content being abstract."¹ His photographs and broken glass boxes are critical testaments to the fact that an artwork is not only an image, but also an object itself. For the photographs featured in the "Popular Mechanics" he worked with magnets and different methods of rolling to produce images that are at once evocative of the wrappers of hard-boiled candies, and frenzied collages of the colored gels used in theater lighting. Like the glass cubes, the resultant photographs are documents of the physical manipulation of the paper, images of aggregate interventions. The impressive range of compositions among Beshty's photographs has injected vital energy into the specific genre of camera-less photography.

From Alvin Langdon Coburn's vortographs in the early 20th century to Wolfgang Tillmans's work today, the simple register of color or shape preoccupies many contemporary photographers. Like Tillmans, Beshty's work is protean, easily moving between complex, camera-less abstraction and skillfully cropped documentary portraits. For "Popular Mechanics" Beshty also interspersed groups of photographs of the people who are relevant to his work, ranging from his darkroom assistant or a dealer to the artist Karl Haendel. In one respect, the show is an attempt at making art that reveals its parts, each component in some direct or tangential way apart of its making. Beshty's chief concern is to extend the conceptual ends of his practice-to reveal the persons involved with and the processes of his art making--and juxtapose them in an exhibition like "Popular Mechanics." The challenge born by the viewer is whether they are images of equal merit.

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Ultimately, the contrast between Beshty's photographic styles is difficult to treat with equivocal admiration. Perhaps this is because we have become desensitized to the various uses of photography. Compare a Man Ray portrait and a Man Ray photogram: The psychological distance between them is great, yet Man Ray was such a progenitor of varied styles that the vast differences between his work were never a sustained concern of either the artist or his public. Beshty is fully aware of the problems of presenting two completely different styles of photography; as if to further complicate the liminal space between the stark documentary portraits and the colorful photograms, he cleverly opted to hang one large abstraction cantilevered off the edge of the gallery wall. This method of mapping out intermediaries and breaking up conventional presentation extends to the official press release for the show, which is a collection of quotes from friends about his work. Can we digest the various uses of the photograph—the colorful, large-scale abstractions and the tempered documentary style subjects-as works of art? Beshty shows all but does not tell.

¹. Bryant, Eric. "The Indecisive Image" Art news. March 2008. p. 112.

["Popular Mechanics" closed on March 3rd, 2009 at WALLSPACE gallery. Beshty participated in a recent discussion organized and moderated by curator Aram Moshayedi for Art in America at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, along with artists Elad Lassry, Carter Mull, and Erika Vogt. Installation view courtesy WALLSPACE gallery.]