



POSHLUST

RECENT SCULPTURE BY LORI MILES

There is a story. It begins with a young boy. His attempts to court a certain young girl are continually thwarted. He knows that she spends her evenings knitting on a balcony overlooking her estate's lake. The boy devises an infallible plan to win her heart. As evening approaches, he removes his clothing and dives into the lake beneath the girl's balcony. He arranges for a meeting in the lake between himself and two gorgeous swans. He embraces the swans and strikes pretty poses with them in the moonlight. He sees something mythic and majestic about his aquatic posturing with the birds. His knitting maiden sees him swimming each evening with the swans and her heart swoons. They soon marry.



This story was penned by the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Vladimir Nabakov, another Russian writer, responded to the scenario put forth in this story by calling it "poshlust." "...Poshlust is not only the obviously trashy

but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive," claimed Nabakov. Poshlust is kitsch that thinks it is not, where straightforward kitsch is almost transparently trashy and therefore wholesome in comparison. He further stated that poshlust "is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is not obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion."¹

The young boy in our story thought the winning combination of props, setting and lighting, with a touch of nudity (to simulate honesty) expressed

his deepest desires and pulsing love. But it was all a performance – a strange sham – to give the appearance of class, candor and nobility.

There is another story. A woman finds her home dull. She decides to purchase an ottoman to chase away the domestic doldrums. She opens a Pottery Barn catalog where she finds a picture of the "Sullivan Leather Ottoman" sitting robustly on a Persian rug and surrounded by tasteful, yet subdued décor. The hardwood legs have a walnut stain, and the cushion is aniline-dyed top-grain leather. It looks like it could have belonged to her grandmother and therefore appears meaningful. It was manufactured three months ago. She buys the ottoman and has it delivered to her front room. When friends come over, they marvel at her purchase and ask from which quaint antique shop the ottoman was purchased. The woman just smiles.

Pottery Barn targets upper-middle class consumers with faux-aged objects that are reminiscent of yesteryear. However, Pottery Barn tchotchkes and furniture have only a veneer of history without the actual aging process. These products were not handmade decades ago, handed down from owner to owner, purchased at flea markets, nor are they layered with histories. The Sullivan Leather Ottoman is an item dressed up and named to seem like an important historical heirloom,



but it is really just a blandly mass-manufactured ottoman. The idea that this object is meaningful, and that its significance will rub off on its owner, is also poshlust.



Lori Miles toys with the notion of poshlust by basing her sculptures on images found on the Web site istockphoto.com, which buys and sells royalty-free, unlicensed photos intended for commercial use. The stock photography found on the site is intended to be open to interpretation. Oftentimes designers add copy to the image to define its meaning. The objects photographed are common, are shot in extreme close-ups, at unusual angles, and are saturated with color, imposing an aura of attractiveness and importance. Candy, cardboard boxes, and pencil shavings are part of stock photography's visual vocabulary, which is dressed up in the finest stylings of poshlust.

"I looked at every one of their 40,000-plus images," says Miles. After scouring the istockphoto.com archives, she singled out the most benign and pedestrian objects, such as nails, vases and crumpled paper. Working from selected images of these objects she created sculptures, installations, and drawings; other stock images were printed for display as "readymade" photographs. Her sculptures, installations and drawings "reclaim" the subjects of the stock photography by removing them from their slickly produced 2-D world and making them real again.

By recreating the subjects of the stock photography, Miles's new sculptural objects lose some of the importance initially assigned by the camera, lighting

and Web site. Yet by inserting the "reclaimed" object into an art gallery – a pristine, white cube that bestows the importance of art upon the items under its controlled lighting – a sense of poshlust is reintroduced to the work. A ball of rubber bands, in and of itself, is not a collectible item that ennobles the owner, but once a rubber band ball is presented as art, it becomes an object that is collected, pondered, written about and deciphered. Miles takes lowbrow items that have been instilled with high-class style and creates artworks that leave us wondering if we are looking at winking kitsch, or oblivious poshlust.

There is one last story. A young man enters an art gallery. He surveys the field of art ahead of him before carefully considering each piece individually. Assuming a posture of contemplation, he massages his chin with his hand to show that he is seriously pondering the work in front of him. He spends the afternoon under the gallery lights, posing in front of each artwork. He sees his in-depth focus on the work as highly intellectual and refined. He catches the eye of the gallery guard who has been quietly sitting in the corner attending to her knitting. He questions her about purchasing the artwork made up of a small tower of matchsticks. She swoons at his appreciation of the finer things in life. They soon marry.

Christopher Lynn
Assistant Curator

¹Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1944), p. 68.

All images: istockphoto.com



Exhibition Checklist

Abstract 3- D Illustration

foam installation

Readymade #5

baby yak hair and string

Lemon

digital print

I'm No Eva Hesse

balloons and string

Red Balloon

digital print

Textured, Scratchy Edge

graphite on Paper

Interior

mixed media installation

Wrinkled Paper

paper

Tangled Tape Measure

tape measure

Candy Flower II

candy corn and jellybeans

Chain of Gum Wrappers

gum wrappers

Balloon Bunny with Clipping Path

latex balloon

Needles

needles and pincushion

Abstract Clay Sculpture

clay

Match Stick Tower

matchsticks

Circle of Life

colored pencils

Box in Box

cardboard boxes

Ball of Bands

rubberbands

Pencil Shaving Flower

pencil shaving

Poshlust: Recent Sculpture by Lori Miles

Aug. 24 – Sept. 25, 2005

Richard E. Peeler Art Center, DePauw University



Gallery hours: Mon.-Fri., 9 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sun., 1-5 p.m.

Location: 10 West Hanna Street, P.O. Box 37, Greencastle, IN 46135-0037

For more information: (765) 658-4336, www.depauw.edu/galleries/