

THESE ARTISTS GIVE NEW MEANING TO TOOLS OF THE TRADE

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"Among the low-priced, factory-produced goods, none is so appealing to the sense as the ordinary hand tool. Hence the hardware store is a kind of offbeat museum show for the man who responds to clear 'undesigned' forms."

-Walker Evans

Walker Evans, one of the most influential American photographers of the 20th century, literally and figuratively hit the nail on the head with the above quote. For those of the handy type, a certain thrill accompanies the viewing of a well-crafted tool. It's a fascination that borders on fetish.

Evans offers up a centerfold for that fetish in "Wrench," his 1955 black-and-white photograph that is just one of 72 pieces of art on display in "Tools as Art: The Hechinger Collection," a traveling exhibit now at the City Museum. The Hechinger Co., a hardware and building materials chain that has gone out of business, culled the show from its collection of nearly 400 tool-related artworks.

"Tools as Art" may not fall into the category of "important" shows, but some important artists appear in addition to Walker: Jacob Lawrence, Jim Dine, Red Grooms, Claes Oldenburg, Fernand Leger. These names, as well as many less well-known, are united by their utilitarian subject matter; subject matter that despite its lack of glamour manages to entertain and occasionally provoke thought. Not a bad trick for a room filled with saw blades, claw hammers and needle-nose pliers.

As might be expected from a group of visual artists, the paintbrush emerges as the most common tool found in "Tools as Art." But here it's not the artist's brush, but the meaty version used by home owners to slather on the Benjamin Moore and Sherwin-Williams. An African-American folk artist named Mr. Imagination turns discarded ones into bizarre portraits, while several artists make surreal statements by subverting the usual paint and paintbrush relationship (i.e. a carved wooden brush dipped in a carved wooden paint pail; a can of paisley-patterned paint; a canvas covered with brushes that have created a colorful stroke before freezing in place).

The lean toward the surreal happens often in this show. The most striking example comes from Andrey Chezhin, whose untitled 1994 photographic portrait of a man's face would be ordinary if not for the fact that the face has disappeared. The blank space is broken up by the image of a huge nail driven into its center. The image recalls Magritte, but the aftereffect proves to be much more disturbing.

Surrealism's more playful aspects sprout up in Lee Schuette's "Rake Back Chair #2" (1981). Like the name implies, the artist created a chair that has a garden rake for its back. For the seat, Schuette prepared a section of green plastic turf. Designwise, the chair really works. As for comfort - well, the museum's signs warn us to stay off the artwork.

If the theme of this show is the tool itself, then the sub-theme would have to be tools-as-the-unexpected. Saw blades normally used to cut wood are now made out of rice paper or wood itself, or they might be used as an artist's canvas. (Folk-art legend Howard Finster appears in this latter category.) Ben Jakober turns a modern-day hammer into an archeological fossil, while Oldenburg transforms the seemingly drab "Three Way Plug" (1965) into a Pop art star. The work on paper in this show is a relative to Oldenburg's oversized, sculptural version that can be seen on the grounds of the St. Louis Art Museum.

Not all of "Tools as Art" is completely satisfying. Some of the realistic still-lives seem a bit dull next to their surreal and expressionist counterparts, and the fact that most of the art dates from the 1970s onward makes one wish for a bit more wide-ranging historical perspective. Those criticisms aside, the show is well worth a visit, especially for those that appreciate tools for the fabulous devices - visually and functionally - that they are.

For those uninterested in the fine line of a Craftsman skill saw, the visual art here should still prove a draw. For those with a tool fetish, this is a peep show in a high-class joint.

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Tools as Art

Where: City Museum, 701 North 15th Street

When: Through Aug. 31

Info: 314-231-2489

- Caption: PHOTOPhoto - "Paint Can with Brush" (1991) by Phyllis Yes features a paisley-patterned paint can.
- Memo: ARTS

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