



THE DENVER POST

“Scrounge”: Recycling junk into art at Denver’s Republic Plaza

By Ray Mark Rinaldi, April, 2014

More than paint, clay or thread, and way more than any structured material like bronze or stone, the found object is the artistic medium of the millennium.

We live in a refashionable age, where making things from scratch has been replaced by making things from scrap. Artists take our trash and use nails, wire and glue to give it new meaning.

While you’ve been tossing your old vacuum cleaners in the Dumpster, Jimmy Descant has been transforming them into fantastical spaceships. Bernice Strawn has been collecting your rusty hooks and water-logged boards for her religious totems. Owen Gordon sewed your faded blue jeans into fabric collages.

It’s clever stuff, for sure, and it fuels “Scrounge,” the new exhibit in the lobby of Republic Plaza, Denver’s tallest building. The show is massive, full of large and colorful works and comes with two sideshow exhibits strong enough to compete for attention. The whole thing is a kid-friendly, adult-satisfying junk extravaganza, and it’s free.

The show is a hall of fame for Denver’s legendary recyclers. Mario Rivoli returns from a long absence to show off his wall reliefs made from rubber ducks and Kewpie dolls. Phil Bender brings back his muffin pans converted into sculpture and Claudia Roulier loads up her old trinkets, seashells and empty medicine bottles into mysterious shadow boxes.

There are fresh names in the mix, too, like Joseph Coniff, who elevates an old school chair and a classic bubble-gum machine 8 feet off the ground, and out of reach from the comfort they might offer. Smart pieces, both of them.

New artists, old artists — it comes together with a lot of energy; almost too much, actually. “Scrounge” has an overload of gimmicks and one-liners. If it were in a lesser building, it would be excessive.

Fortunately, curators Deborah Jang and Andra Archer know their space. Is it possible to go over the top when over the top of you are 55 stories of lawyers, accountants and bankers doing their thing all day? Probably not.

Plus, there’s something fitfully of-the-moment with the offerings. The work is powered by the spirit of the neo-green movement that’s so trendy right now. It’s reused, recycled, reduced into relevancy via the 119 dead light bulbs Craig Robb strings together for a hanging lamp or the yards of outdated computer tape he turns into a hairy two-dimensional constructions hanging on the wall.

The overall exhibit has a frivolous, vogueish edge and a corporate shine, as well. Brookfield Properties, which owns the building, was pushing an Earth Day tie-in to the show. That’s slightly insulting when you consider the real environmental issues the Earth faces today, none of which will be solved by transforming a few old books or outgrown toy dinosaurs into easy-to-digest art.

It’s doubly dubious when you consider all the relevant art being made about climate change these days (go see Kim Abeles’ work, currently in the Art-Science Gallery of Boulder’s National Center for Atmospheric Research if you are serious about this idea).

Still, “Scrounge” has its deep moments. Strawn’s assemblages of oxidized bits and more take on a rich, spiritual air that gives the objects we use and refuse a soulful eternalness. Bender’s cookie and fruitcake tins, arranged in perfect grids, evoke the purposeful patterns of old-world quilts. You couldn’t imagine a more powerful, or simple, reincarnation of waste.

Floyd Tunson, as he always seems to do, finds deep meaning in combinations of nothingness. His “A Daydream from Jail,” made from, among other things, an old platform shoe, a tennis ball and Mickey Mouse ears, offers a thoughtful rumination on social order.

There’s a richness, too, in the installation called “The History of Ornament” by Rebecca Vaughan and Theresa Anderson, who transform a small underground office into a trippy room of handmade-fabric furniture and lit-up clouds. They recycle memories, as well as objects, in this curious pop-up space.

There’s a lot of material, and materials, in these shows, and it’s a good look at where art stands right now. This is what artists make at a certain time and place in a city’s history, when it’s old enough to have so much excess lying around, yet inspired enough to explore it intellectually.

These objects are no longer hard to find, for worse, if you’re a landfill, for better, if you are enough of a sport to contemplate what it all means.

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“SCROUNGE” Arts Brookfield presents three exhibits in the lobby of Denver’s tallest building, Republic Plaza, featuring the work of 21 Colorado artists. 370 17th St. 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday. Through June 5. Free.