

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Peter Fischli and David Weiss

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

I was totally punked by Peter Fischli and David Weiss's iconic 1994 outing at New York's Sonnabend Gallery. Installed to mimic a construction site strewn with debris—that is, the actual art was made from polyurethane and painted to look like bona fide trash—the show seemed like nothing more than an abandoned space. Curiosity was necessary to overcome the deficiencies of a first impression: *Was the exhibition postponed? Did I confuse the date of the opening? Am I somewhere I'm not supposed to be?*

Misperception, of course, is the aim of all trompe l'oeil art. Fooling the eye to precipitate a great discovery when the ruse is exposed is a strategy that stretches back to the ancient Greeks, who placed a premium on verisimilitude. According to Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (Natural History, 77 CE), an artist by the name of Zeuxis painted a picture of grapes so realistically that birds

flocked to it, trying to eat the fruit. But Parrhasius, who rendered a curtain so skillfully that Zeuxis reached out to pull it back, took home the prize for his grand deception. Fischli and Weiss employed a similarly winning technique to trick audiences at Sonnabend. In their elaborate game of hide-and-seek, viewers became temporarily blind to what was right in front of them.

“Polyurethane Objects” at Matthew Marks Gallery, which featured works made between 1993 and 2014, wasn't as startling, but that was largely due to Fischli's decision (Weiss died in 2012 at the age of sixty-five) to opt for a more formalized grouping of the series across fifteen installations. In contrast to the Sonnabend show, the presentation here was suffused by an elegiac stillness. Each sculptural cluster was arranged to appear as though it was a still-life glimpse into the artists' studio—the remnants of a creative collaboration, stopped in time.

We might have been aware that every piece in the exhibition was handcrafted, but it was still hard to believe. What the mind thinks it knows, the eye doesn't necessarily see. All the polyurethane objects referenced their own means of production in the rawness of their appearance—but was everything on display a “Polyurethane Object?” Were the somewhat beat-up pedestals actually art, or were we meant just to focus on the hundreds of things displayed on and around them? None of the bits and pieces of garbage, lunch leftovers, and disposable lighters seemed particularly worthy of attention, although it was apparent that insignificant items such as cigarette butts or empty peanut shells had been fabricated to take us to our retinal limits.

Aside from philosophical inquiry, the works required us to vigilantly search for any evidence of the hand. Such traces could be found in the artists' replicas of consumer goods. The tiny, uneven text painted on facsimile bottles of Tylenol Extra was a dead giveaway, even though many of the other faux products—including a box of Newports, a Sharpie, and a bottle of Liquid-Plumr (with the price sticker)—passed the eyeball test. They shared space with a host of generic items—a roll of masking tape, a ballpoint pen, a pair of old loafers, scissors, a wrench—most of them covered in paint and fingerprints.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Untitled*, 2005, hand-carved polyurethane, paint, seven parts, overall 38 x 23½ x 16". From the series "Polyurethane Objects," 1993–2014.



One category of “Polyurethane Objects” defied easy categorization. It consisted of colorful mixing bowls, buckets, and cups that mimicked the mass-produced plastic ones. They were prominently showcased in ten of the installations. Each was characterized by the residue of materials they purported to have once contained and were patterned with painterly traces of flows, spills, washes, swirls, drips, and splatters. Color contributed to the reverie: Shocking-violet pools appeared at the bottom of a gray tub; elsewhere, shots of turquoise and lime green mingled with layers of taupe and creamy white. Were the pours actual or simulated? These ingeniously banal-looking sculptures forced us to countenance the ineffable—and on a granular level, they were an homage to that very idea.

–*Jan Avgikos*