

# WESTERN ★ PROJECT

## Artweek

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### 'SCULPTURE: Part Two' at Western Project

If a single leitmotif can be identified to encompass the far-flung range of styles and media comprising the second half of Western Project's small but salient contemporary sculpture survey, it would have to be Playtime. But not just any old recess or crafts hour. No, the five artists in this assembly take their jocundity to heart. One of the factors lending this exhibition its considerable energy, likely results from the fact that two of the five – **Wayne White** and **Michael Reafsnyder** – are primarily painters in their customary art practice. And of the other three, all have a taste for nontraditional materials, culled to varying degrees from outside the fine art lexicon. Taken as a whole, the exhibition demonstrated a freshness, a subversive and innovative attention to craft and an undeniably upbeat sense of humor not usually associated with conceptual sculpture.

**White**, one of the painters, showed a series of alphanumeric totems, in which words were spelled out in Don Suggs-style vertical stacks of three dimensional single letters. The main work was *Porkgrease*, a word-object drenched in both the color and texture of weathered adobe, or perhaps, burned swine fat. The privileging of text references his penchant for painting words over found images, but this formulation of the ironic tug between word and image is not as successful without a more developed imagic component to play off the text. Other more symbol – and metaphor – rich fancies like *I'm Dreamin'* and especially *Word Burn Country Boy* become more distinctly sculptural and in moving away from the word-based, flatter work and embracing the narrative and associative potential of content, then, like his wonderful paintings, they embrace all the dimensions, including that of imagination. One imagines that if Philip Guston had made children's toys, this is what they might look like: random objects – fishing poles, arms, light bulbs, signs, corncob pipes – dangle from a spiky-stemmed tree and wood base which are themselves deeply scored and burned with an inscrutable alphabet of Paleolithic glyphs.

**Reafsnyder**, the other painter, also references his painting style in his sculptural entries – lumpy ceramic affairs of fatty, shimmering flesh. *Glossy Goo* looks like someone beat a Ken Price to death; a voluptuous female figure is in there somewhere, but the glossy, creviced surface folds around itself like a wet wool cloak. *My Glorious Mermaid* evokes a fountain, with ice-hard pools of pigmented glaze like black water inside a shell/bowl of its base and its mottled distressed overall quality of insane, absurd violence done to the clay shivering its own dark ripples like a frozen spring. **David Kiddie**, a renowned ceramic artist in his own right, also collaborated with **Reafsnyder** in an earlier project in which **Reafsnyder** painted on **Kiddie's** heavy, ornate platters. *Baroque-a-Doke* and *Rococo A Go-Go* were made in this way and their knifed skins and broken brocade borders slathered with unpredictable weights of glazing pigment encompass the abstract expressionism and exuberant impasto of **Reafsnyder's** acrylics.

**Michael Dee's** suite of three large scale sculptures – Star (Large Red), (Large Clear) and (Large Blue) – bear some relation to the vivacity and non-traditional approach of what **Kiddie** and **Reafsnyder** did, as **Dee's** process of melting down plastic drinking cups into malleable skins and recombining them into frozen starbursts results in a similar shimmer and mottled texture. However, despite the great fun he clearly has making these monumental trifles **Dee's** conceptual foundations are in formal discourse about surface, mass, beauty and illusion, and represent a serious attempt to conceal his objects in the invisibility cloak of their own disintegrating surfaces.

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**Heimir Bjorgulfsson's** *lone star* arranges a concert of stuffed parakeets atop a spinal column that rests like a tripod on a photo-covered box, with the parakeets converging at its head like a flower's petals, or like one of **Dee's** stars, with the topmost bird angled up at the viewer like a rocket launcher or stuck lawn dart, its tail caught mid-wiggle. The photos on the box give a series of spiky palm fronds and blue skies the same treatment, with vertical segmentation and the reshuffling of their components making for unlikely but lively formal patterns – encapsulating the exhibition's overall fusion of serious craft and even more serious recreation.

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## **RAMBUNCTIOUS GROUP ENERGY**

-David Pagel

"Sculpture Part II" is about as boring a title as one could come up with for a group exhibition. Yet it suits the rambunctious energy of the four-artist show at Western Project, which leaves viewers free to make up their own minds about the freewheeling mixed-media pieces jam-packed into the modestly sized gallery.

Just inside the front door, three works by **Michael Reafsnyder** set the tone. "Glossy Goo" is a glistening aqua blob that combines the wonderfully puffy look of cumulus clouds on bright sunny days with the scrappy tangibility of industrial spills swept up and on their way to the trash bin. Almost 2 feet tall, the shape-shifting figurine stands on a pedestal between "Squirt Lion" and "Baroque-a-Doke," a pair of handmade ceramic plates that feature smiley faces and spurts of glaze in a palette too wacky to believe yet too exuberant to take lightly.

The three Reafsnyders in the main gallery — "Rocco a Go-Go," "Fab Nebula" and "My Glorious Mermaid" — are even bolder and better. They pair perfectly with **Wayne White's** five little whittled sculptures and one 8-foot tall stack of clay letters spelling out its title, "Porkgrease."

Like Reafsnyder's fun-loving works, White's seemingly naive pieces are wickedly sophisticated. They bring such folksy arts and crafts as whittling and wood burning into the urbane language games of Pop and Conceptual art. They also make strange bedfellows of Ed Ruscha and H.C. Westermann, artists whose works are not usually thought of as belonging together.

**Michael Dee's** trio of 3-D asterisks, each approximately 5 feet tall and built of partially melted plastic cups, makes a great first impression. But it lacks the deep love of funky absurdity that gives the other works their kick.

Two pieces by **Heimir Björgúlfsson** made of taxidermy birds, bone replicas, mirrored tiles, photographs and a beer bottle, strike a fine balance between melancholy and silliness. Like most of the works, they prefer going over the top with generosity to playing it safe or falling short with stinginess.