

Tongue Planted Firmly in Cheek

The first of six artists still under 30 and full of it

by Patricia Rosoff - December 25, 2003

Contemporary art is a young person's arena, fermented with piss and vinegar and determined to upend the old order and make room for new ideas. The goal is not generally aesthetic, in the gentrified sense of things; rather, its agenda is more a matter of edge and angle than satisfying "standards." Leave guarding the gates to those of middle age; the kids have no aspirations in that direction.

What's so interesting, then, about Real Art Ways' new series of six one-person exhibits is how wryly Hartford's most ambitious venue for contemporary art has set out to celebrate the looming onset of 30 years of operation. Even as the old "alternative space" (carved from a former typewriter factory) makes itself comfortable in its posh remodel, RAW gives a wink and a nod to its rough-and-ready beginnings by sponsoring a competition entitled "Don't Trust Anyone Over Thirty." (It was a competition open to any artist under the age limit and living in New England or in New York state.)

The lure? A one-person show for each of the six most intriguing entrants.

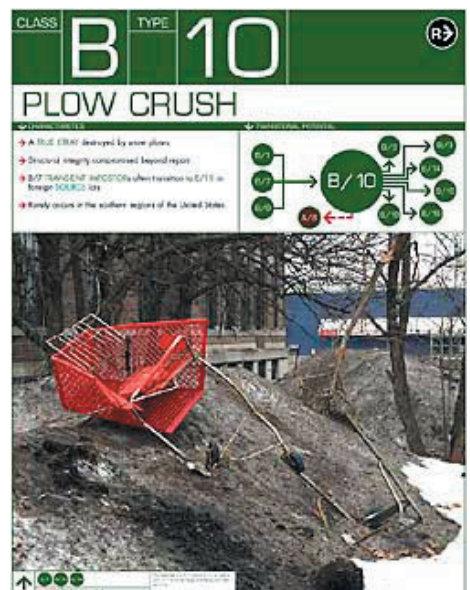
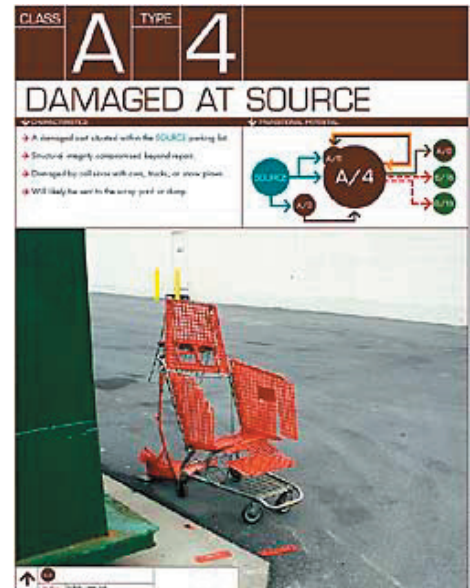
Intriguing is precisely the word. The central figures in the first exhibit of this series could not be more ubiquitous -- shopping carts. Like the battered stars of some dysfunctional street opera, a number of these chunky vehicles are set out on low plinths in the middle of the gallery, surrounded on four walls by photographs documenting them in their natural habitat (the streets and alleyways of greater Hartford).

The "images" that surround these "artifacts" don't exactly look like art; in fact, they resemble the displays for some elaborate entry in a science fair. The artist, Julian Montague, makes his living as a graphic artist, specifically, designing instructional kits that he sells to middle school science departments. This exhibit is a wry inversion of this art, creating a classification of charts and flow-charts, mimicking the taxonomy of science to categorize shopping carts as if they were some rare species of plant or animal.

Therein lies the whimsy -- and the brilliance -- of the whole assemblage.

As you begin to read, you become engrossed in the oddity of the whole scheme -- the supreme logic of systems of classification (carts in their

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natural habitat; carts that have been absconded with) on the one hand, and the supreme nonsense of them on the other (“habitat” for shopping carts? You’ve got to be kidding!).

We’re talking about an artist with a full-blown respect for the most human of abstract acts -- naming. At the same time what we’re looking at opens a cunning window on a virtually invisible corner of America’s consumer culture. Montague’s scrupulous documentation of the shopping cart in situ (as he finds them) offers nothing we haven’t experienced first-hand: the shopping cart as a homeless person’s equivalent of the prairie schooner; the shopping cart as utility vehicle for the car-less pedestrian; the shopping cart as flood victim/snow ploy casualty/urban baby carriage.

Montague’s classification system takes it all in as an organic expression of human endeavor -- critiquing not only his subject, but also his methodology. It considers the use, treatment, and modification of shopping carts as a reflection of the human condition in a consumer age.

Just the initial breakout of categories is food for a chuckle. The broad designations that Montague considers are 1) the various situations in which shopping carts are found, 2) the conditions and human motivations that placed them there, and 3) the potential of a cart to make the transition from any one designation to the other.

His photographic documentation vivifies a world completely familiar and utterly mundane -- a cart abandoned at a bus stop blocks away from the store, with an empty soda can (and an opened back of chips) occupying the child’s seat. Like an archeologist’s find, one photo delights us with the ingenuity of some unnamed tinkerer, who repositions the cart’s wheels (for what purpose we can only surmise).

Each image lands on two feet: utterly familiar, completely reinvisioned by means of Montague’s classification system. He asks you to consider, for example, stray carts. He provides classes and sub-classes of stray carts. He notes the difference between Class A (“false”) strays, i.e., carts which appear to have been removed from their original location, but which will likely be returned and Class B (“true”) strays, i.e., carts which will never find their way home again.

He documents each class and sub-class with photographs of actual carts, captured on film just as he found them on his field expeditions, as scrupulous and scientific as any naturalist in search of fauna. He provides parenthetical parallels in Scandanavian examples, positing occasional careful notations and a summation: “Hartford [demonstrates] a high level of cart activity and type diversity ...”

It is this double barrel that gets to you. The humor is irresistible.

An Illustrated System of Identification
by Julian Montague
through January 4
Real Art Ways
56 Arbor Street, Hartford
(860) 232-1006

