

A Plastic Flower Blooms in Brooklyn

The new series of works shows the American provocateur Stephen j Shanabrook's lyrical side

By Marianna Rosen March 04, 2023



Stephen J Shanabrook, "Milk Oil Soap," 2023. Melted plastic, 56cm x 51 cm. (Photo: Stephen J Shanabrook).

They say that one man's trash is another one's treasure. Indeed, "Trash Flowers," Stephen J Shanabrook's latest series of works, is, hands down, stunning. Shanabrook's pieces, currently on view at Frank Taal Galerie in Rotterdam, are collages of sorts, achieved by baking into sheets of dumpster-found Sintra plastic carcasses of silk flowers and other achingly familiar yet forsaken objects that the artist extracted from waste containers throughout the world.

An artist is ever a maker of visual fiction, and what Shanabrook created is an unlikely optimistic dystopia, whereby tacky artificial flowers and things like empty gasoline and milk cans, stripped of their pedestrian and a priori expendable existence, acquire, in an ensemble, an elevated meaning. Yet, his works are not solely about giving castoff objects a new lease on life but rather recapturing through and in them the primordial awe, a sense of wonder long lost in the dreariness of profane.

But however profane was the original purpose of the object, the artist doesn't see the object itself as such. For Shanabrook, each object is sacred by dint of its lived life and its used-up body — a thing that is found is already consecrated. Says Shanabrook, "the drive for me has always been the sacred found object, an object with its own history given to me to mold into another narrative. Eventually, we realize that our own body and self is also found object, given briefly, so we too can write our own story."



Stephen J Shanabrook, Daylight Oil, 2023. Melted Plastic, 54cm x 41 cm. (Photo: Stephen J Shanabrook).

Stephen J Shanabrook, an American artist and an alumnus of Amsterdam's Ateliers, has lived in The Netherlands and Russia in the past but is now based in New York City. His Brooklyn Navy Yard's studio is a science lab and a cabinet of curiosities, with a bit of Dr. Caligari's spirit thrown in. The technological paraphernalia of his process: a standard industrial convection oven for warming the plastic or hydraulic press for pressing the plastic between two metal or glass plates seems to be as important as its outcome. And indeed, it is — the hydraulic press, for example, is made by the artist, its lower plate came from an old printing press that was the artist dug out from a dumpster at a trade school that went from analog to digital.

Born in Ohio, Shanabrook is the son of an obstetrician and the town coroner. His birthright then is the purgatorial point of view that could be credited, in part, for the artist's drive for a sculptural "actualization of a life experience with the body and its shadow ever present within a precarious world." One of the things that actualization entailed for his earlier works was making chocolate molds from cadavers kept in American and Russian morgues; Shanabrook made molds from fatal wounds: stitched skin, gunshot wounds, and protruding eyeballs. A sculpture titled "On the Road to Heaven the Highway to Hell," is part of a permanent collection of the famously avant-garde MONA museum in Tasmania, depicts the remnants of a suicide bomber with his entrails in full display rendered in dark chocolate.



Stephen J Shanabrook, "Slapped in the face until your shit turns red," Centre d'Art Neuchâtel, 2009. (Courtesy: Stephen J Shanabrook).

Chocolate is just one of the many non-traditional materials that Stephen Shanabrook has used in his art. His work has been made out of animal carcasses, plastic dolls, sheets of collectible plastic soldiers, scores of which he found in a dumpster in Berlin, a cotton candy machine and cotton candy that he used in a performance art piece titled "Slapped in the Face Until Your Shit Turns Red," and prescription pill bottles that the artist melted and formed into Easter Bunnies - a jab at the deceptive innocence and ubiquity of prescription drugs that precipitated the countrywide addiction crisis.



Stephen J Shanabrook, Pharmaceutical Easter Bunnies. Melted prescription pill bottles. (Photo: Stephen J Shanabrook).

Using his recipe for warming different kinds of plastic, which he has developed over the last twenty years, Shanabrook employs plastic as paint: his process is deliberate and controlled. After the melting and pressing, the merging of separate, often opposing layers. The antagonistic forces — death rendered in chocolate or cotton candy-like sweetness forcibly inflicted via received wisdom — are also present in his new series. Discarded plastic, the bane of nature's existence, becomes a building block of a new harmony. But for all their intellectual gravitas, the "Trash Flowers" betray the artist's lyrical sense of nature — their visual rhetoric is delicate and disarmingly optimistic.



Stephen J Shanabrook, "Bug Zapper," 2023. Melted plastic, 54cm x 46 cm. (Photo: Stephen J Shanabrook).

Although the artist credits Arte Povera as one of his many inspirations, there is a strain of Surrealist promise of content in Shanabrook's art: Surrealist metamorphosis, the sliding of identity, the spilling of the inner into the outer, the merging of separate, often opposing layers. The antagonistic forces — death rendered in chocolate or cotton candy-like sweetness forcibly inflicted via received wisdom — are also present in his new series. Discarded plastic, the bane of nature's existence, becomes a building block of a new harmony. But for all their intellectual gravitas, the "Trash Flowers" betray the artist's lyrical sense of nature — their visual rhetoric is delicate and disarmingly optimistic.

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