

## Turning objects into untraditional art

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Not all art is traditional sculpture, painting, prints or photography; some, like Tracy Spencer-Stonestreet's installation, is an assemblage of objects, found or created, to tell a story or make a statement.

Spencer-Stonestreet's venue lends itself to this kind of work. Room 100 Gallery is an open space in Golden Belt's building of artist studios and has hosted dozens of artists who also do installations. For this show, the gallery walls are lined with small objects, each on their own shelf. In the middle of the room are two four-poster beds, one in dark wood and one in painted white wood. The bed posts are in perfect condition, but the beds have been reworked so they are miniature in size and a block of concrete sits where a mattress would be.

The objects around the room are small ceramic figurines, the kind many of us grew up with; these, however, have small blocks of cement covering the heads. The artist reminds us that knickknacks were collected in many southern households to imitate heirlooms of the aristocracy and represented family aspirations to move into the middle class. The artist refers to them as "chotchkies." (A "tchotchke" is a Yiddish word, widely used in English, which translates to a toy, ornament or knickknack of low quality.)

In a telephone conversation the artist said she has been studying the history of objects and realized furniture is a symbol of the domestic sphere and can act as stand-ins for humans. Furniture has personality; an example would be a well-used overstuffed chair with its imprint of a human body. Spencer-Stonestreet is a graphic designer with a brand new MFA in sculpture from UNC Chapel Hill. She is also just married and said their future is still to be decided.

Some viewers might take the display of these domestic objects as criticism of her

family. Spencer-Stonestreet, however, underscored their use as demonstrations of the love within her family and the fact that one can never get completely away from roots. Although she grew up in a lower middle-class house, she said her story is not just autobiographical, but is about the broader topics of background, social issues and upward mobility.

Via e-mail I asked what did the use of the concrete blocks in the beds and as covers over the heads of the small ceramic figures mean. She refers to the figures as "block heads" and writes, "The concrete in a way serves to bring the little found sculptures back to their original sculptural blocks." She also wrote that concrete is a basic sculptural material; it is dense, heavy and extremely common.

In her installation Spencer-Stonestreet sets up a dialogue between the objects, upward mobility, ubiquitous concrete, and the viewer. There are no conclusions, but the debate is worthy of exploration. What better use of art?

As I puzzle over the artist's ideas I begin with upward mobility, something we Americans believe is possible. The idea is certainly as old as the Greeks who invented a society of men who would choose their leaders; they had no aristocracy, but owning land was the standard of the upper class. In Rome, becoming part of the aristocracy was available to any man who excelled as a military leader. From ancient times to today, most countries were class conscious. There were the aristocracy and the peasants until the rise of the middle class around the 17th century. Unlike England with its blood-line aristocracy and a lock on moving up to those circles, we Americans could aspire to and make it to the top rungs of society in several ways. Men could move into a higher class by intelligence, especially in the world of commerce and finance. Women usually had to marry into it. Today, in theory, America's middle class is open to all men and women through education.

The poorest families who educate their kids see their children move into a better class; examples of that appear daily in news stories. We do not have a real aristocracy in our country; we have the super-rich, like Warren Buffet and Oprah Winfrey, who attained the top rungs of American society through economic prowess. Are they the exceptions to the rule or can anyone get there who finds the right combination of intelligence, drive and luck?

And, as for concrete, the connotations are not complimentary. A "blockhead" means stupid and, because there is so little flexibility with concrete, once in place it is almost impossible to remove. We attach "set in stone" to ideas which cannot be changed.

It is obvious the artist is working through many ideas about family in this exhibition. For me, she asks some difficult questions. Are we really an open society or are we locked into the stones of our birth?

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