



Homage to Domestic Familiarity at Anya Tish Gallery
by Garland Fielder
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Domestic bliss comes in many forms. For some, it means the ordered array of the banal elements that define our immediate surroundings. For others, it encompasses the timeless household chores that provide reprieve from the outside chaos. Still others define it as an emotional sanctuary. For everyone, however, it resonates in the collective unconscious with promises of safety.



Dustin Van Orne
Portable Sensation of Home
2006

Installation

15 1/4 x 20 x 17 1/2 inches

Homage to Domestic Familiarity on view at Anya Tish Gallery presents nine distinct artists' musings on the subject. The internationally diverse show has some outstanding pieces that resonate with clever insights, as well as some lesser achievements that trample over the same old ground.

The title of the show is taken from Dustin Van Orne's sculpture of sheetrock, wood and electric switches. A row of 10 light switches is mounted into a box painted in a blue and white color scheme, perhaps referencing a boy's bedroom. The repetition of the light switches suggests mindless acts repeated daily. Although they are functional, the switches do not illuminate anything. The piece suffers due to its wall-mounted box presentation that speaks of Donald Judd's boxes, but says little more. A much stronger piece by Van Orne is Portable Sensation of Home, an old-school plastic suitcase fitted with doorknobs. It too meditates on repetitive actions, in this case of coming and going, but the visual impact is less confused. The suitcase is handily sitting on the floor of the gallery, almost beckoning the viewer to take flight, while at the same time it recalls the same doors we walk through when returning home at the end of every sojourn away.

John Knott's striking construction is titled Pramulator. It is a retrofitted antique baby carriage that has been transformed into a space-age hot rod. The carriage itself is shaped like a bulbous rocket in polished aluminum, the cockpit replete with a tachometer and speedometer. It speaks of the typical male desire to soup up any domestic gadget, attempting to escape the blandness of domesticated maturity.

Brandon Thiessen
Necessary Precautions #2
2006
C-print
68 x 33 x 1 1/3 inches

Two photographs by Brandon Thiessen are perhaps the highlight of the show. In Necessary Precautions #2, Thiessen has set against the corner of the gallery a triangular frame that contains a photograph of a mop resting in that very corner. The self-referencing in-house photograph highlights the domestic chore of mopping, while letting the image of the mop and the act rest, as it were, in the corner. In Extinguisher II, the artist has mounted a photograph of a generic fire extinguisher behind break-in-case-of-emergency glass, creating a dynamic between the depicted and the material that defines a state of anticipation. These two pieces have a site-specific quality that extends past the mere notion of domesticity into a meta-narrative of domestic signifiers.

Elzbieta Jablonska, a Polish artist, works in a similar vein, although her photographs are not as concerned with formalism as Thiessen's are. In House Games, 2002 (Washing, Cooking, Laundry), she has photographed herself in the kitchen in a Superwoman costume with her young son perched on her knee. Diagrammatically superimposed on the work are the Polish words for "washing," "cooking," and "laundry." The child looks off to the side of the image, his puckered, forlorn expression giving an emptiness to this

domestic setting that Jablonska appears heroically at peace with, her posture and face conveying duty, certitude and calm. In her *Incidental Pleasures* series, the artist documented the contents of her kitchen drain for some 300 days. The background of each drain catch has been purposefully tinted to complement the colors of the various fruit peels and vegetable rinds. This attempt to abstract incidental beauty from domestic debris, while not extending as far as her *House Games* piece, is visually intriguing.

Betty Page meets Norman Rockwell in the large-scale watercolors by Lauren Bergman. Her images evoke a Sears catalog aesthetic while exploring the racier elements of domesticity, including latent passions and overt distortions. The pieces are well-conceived, but have a tendency to shout when they could suggest. Wyatt Nash's *All I Need* is an installation/sculpture made out of Styrofoam, paint and plastic. It depicts dorm room essentials such as a microwave, stereo speakers and a coffee table. The piece has a Claes Oldenburg feel, sort of soft and unassuming, but Nash does not seem to be in total control of the materials. He achieves a sort of slacker aesthetic, but not convincingly on purpose. The show's theme is broad and the attempt to assemble international voices on the subject matter is ambitious, if not always consistent. The best pieces of the show are the ones that allow the concept of domestic familiarity to serve as a starting point for a more interesting dialogue on what it means to be domesticated.