

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

“A modest occupation”

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Robert C. Tannen, *NOMAN RIVER*, 2012, digital print, 14 x 11”

If present-day lifestyle guru Gwyneth Paltrow and early Black Flag somehow teamed up to make art, the results might look like what’s on view in “A Modest Occupation”—covetable stuff that sticks it to the Man. Curator Abigail Satinsky documents a selection of goodies

that’ve gone out to homes across the US via fifteen different subscription-based art services. Inspired by the boxes of kale and fennel divided up among stakeholders of community-supported agriculture, these DIY art-distribution programs (which range from the Bay Area–based Alula Editions to the Drop in New Orleans) seem, at their best, like a promising, fecund alternative to the relentless gears of the gallery machine.

The artworks themselves range from a leather-encased flask made by Carol Jackson to a typically absurdist piece by Allora & Calzadilla: a blank notebook attached to a tennis shoe via its shoelace, which has been bound into the volume’s spine. There’s little on view that overtly confronts or disturbs; nothing approaches the stomach-wrenching effect of, say, a bloody Thomas Hirschhorn image, or the sucker-punch of an Adrian Piper artwork on race. Which isn’t to say that the show deals in mere pleasantries. Artist Eric Fleischauer’s photo *Universal Paramount*, 2010, taunts mainstream media, depicting the Hollywood sign replaced by white letters that spell out YOUTUBE, while Robert C. Tannen’s *NOMAN RIVER*, 2012, references environmental abuses in the Mississippi River Valley. And Steve Lambert’s cardboard tags, which read I WANT YOU TO HAVE THIS, are meant to designate household goods as up for grabs. His work may be part of a bigger movement to dispel the buy-and-hoard impulses whetted by late capitalism, but Lambert opts not for revolt or activism so much as for the gentler pastures of Craigslist’s “Free Stuff.” All together, the works here pose important questions about both the potential and the limits of a service that caters to twenty-odd subscribers waiting each month for a box of art. What pressures does such a distribution model place on its participating artists—and when are those burdens still preferable to the exacting demands of the gallery system?

— Dawn Chan

