

THE MATERIAL PRESENT: ON MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN'S *THE RELIGION*, 2014 HANNAH WALSH

This essay by Hannah Walsh first appeared in 'The Religion' a 2014 monograph documenting the eponymously titled exhibition shown at the Fosdick-Nelson Gallery, in Alfred, New York, November 1 – December 2, 2013.

It is no small feat that Michael Jones McKean's *The Religion* does not beg to be solved in the manner of an equation or a puzzle. It is after all a series of simple things in a complex arrangement. In the gallery you are confronted all at once with the sculpture - a very large open-fronted box subdivided into areas of white, fleshy pink, or very intense green, with each smaller section framing the objects it holds: a branch, a taco, profiled heads, gold chain... If we are struck first by the blunt fact of its presence, then an urgent curiosity about the relationship of its parts is not far behind. If the experience resembles math at all, it is math at the highest level, where problems must be discovered and wrestled creatively. Part of the pleasure of looking at this sculpture is in regrouping the figures, pushing around the parentheses and changing the order of operations. You try and hold one set of references, one kind of feeling in your head, and then let another box of objects, with its particularity and feeling, come to bear on the first.

The Religion doesn't ask to be solved in part because it lays itself so bare. Nothing touches. Almost all edges are visible at once. The language of archeological documentation seems to assure you that these are the facts of it. You can proceed as you might with a set of data before it has been packaged into a news story or a blog post – idly musing, filling in narrative details, free to wonder. Every object here has been called to a single plane, ready for inspection.

It may be a surprisingly long time before you wonder about the backs of the objects in *The Religion*. Usually a sculpture will draw its viewers to experience it in the round. *The Religion* tends to suspend viewers in a narrow plane in front of it. This sculpture borrows the documentary posture of an archeological photograph, where we trust that the most salient details have been presented to the camera and that if there is anything important on the back, that that too will have been photographed. You can in fact comfortably walk behind the sculpture, but there isn't much to do when you get there. One is tempted to call it "backstage", and yet there isn't any of the hushed business of a production in progress. It's all painted flat black: nothing to see here, folks. The structure of this work is emphatically frontal and clearly bounded. It functions as its own velvet rope, its own black tape on the gallery floor. This may be installation scale work but it is a decidedly discrete object.

The frontal, divided nature of the piece calls to mind display cases, museum exhibits, trophy cases, and store windows. The hidden internal lighting also makes each section into a tableau, lit and ready to be photographed. When looking at the piece you sometimes feel as if you're already viewing its JPEG. It is posed and lit and sectioned into detail shots. And of course, as much as it references these structures, each section, rather flat and emitting light, also appears as a screen – or at least a screen as built by stagehands.

Inside are real objects pretending to be mediated, as though the best way to get someone to look at actual objects is by having things appear as though they're on a screen. This is the same kind of slippage that happens when you absentmindedly touch a book to keep it from going to sleep. It's a funny mistake, but it is also a reminder that we spend most of our time behaving as if it *is* logical to touch an inanimate object so that it doesn't "go to sleep". This kind of magical thinking speaks to a profound shift in the relationships we have with objects. It is much harder to expect sentience from something you've put together yourself.

We no longer make most of the objects that inhabit our lives. In fact, most things do not feel *made* at all. Things simply appear when you buy them and disappear when you discard them. Even being one step removed from production is a rare and upscale luxury – the embarrassing "homemade" of the last generation has been finessed into the expensive "handmade" or "artisanal" of this one. Most production happens so far above or below human scale that we can no longer even intuit how things are put together. Television shows

like *How It's Made* exist just to explain these quotidian mysteries. You can be surprised and entertained for half an hour learning how a Lemonhead is made, even if you already know it is simply melted sugar and lemon flavor.

The majority of contemporary objects exist in an almost pathologically present tense – they have no imaginable past or future. Michael's work is affecting in part because it *is* imbued with a sense of time. The green screen box is filled with our material present: current model devices and perishable foodstuffs. But it is also washed in the surreptitiously nostalgic sentiment that we're living in the future – in a cloud of information/objects all green-screen green and infinitely mutable. On the opposite end of the sculpture in a slightly more acrid green, a branch drips primordial soup. A box of ashy spires connected by gold chain is somehow untethered from a physical scale or a timescale. Is it an excavated relic or a model for a post-apocalyptic monument? A grid of human bones reflects a contemporary handling of objects from the deep past. Its sister box of gridded heads retain their flesh. They are like uncanny sculptural guesses made from the DNA of a future cult instead of from the ice-preserved body of an unlucky caveman. Here the gap between the distant past and the distant future is collapsed, fit into the same gridded structure and finger-painted. The future has a tendency to sneak around and tap you on the shoulder – Hey, remember grunge? Hey, remember small-scale agriculture? Remember your dark apocalyptic future/past? What time is it anyway?

Besides these overt references to time in the work, there is also the embedded time of an object's making - ironically perhaps most apparent at its quickest and dirtiest. The heads have an intensely handled quality. The lumpiness of their skin makes it easy to imagine fingers pushing their contours into place. Their hair is mussed. The paint on their faces has been applied by hand, whether you imagine that to be the maker's or their own. Even things that don't bear the overt mark of the hand feel made. There is specificity to the forms: the particular delicate right angles in the wire that hold the bones just so, the wonkiness of the flattened vessels and balaclava, the stage craft joints. The grey potted tree is almost impossibly smooth. Its surface and the particular background-grey make it appear as an immaterial idea of a tree – an amplification of the way an office plant sometimes feels like a plant in air quotes. But for a maker, it is also hard to ignore the obvious amount of hand-sanding that goes into a surface like that. For a non-maker, it might bring to mind the unique smoothness that comes from the oily erosion of a handrail. In either case, it feels intensely touched. It is undeniably tangible even while retaining its aura of immateriality.

That paradoxical tension is echoed throughout. Much of the piece feels both incredibly specific and somehow also generalized. *This* tree. *This kind* of tree. *This* bone shard. *This* way of photographing bone shards. The walls, the wire, all the bones in that box are partially reburied by a uniform peachy nubble. One is compelled to consider each bone not just as part of a group, but as part of a system of looking. Here is the way we organize things we unearth. It is a set of parenthesis that says: solve this part together. This is a unit. You can get lost in its particularities, but when you zoom out, it hangs together as a single thing. This zoom-out allows for a telescoping set of detached observations – a dispassionate gaze at the dispassionate gaze of ethnography or archeology. It is from this distant vantage point that the work is at its coldest. When we try to view ourselves as aliens might, we feel the chill of deep space.

This is of course not the only temperature at play. The work can also feel incredibly warm and up close. Its most handled parts hold the warmth of the body. If those heads make us uncomfortable, it may only be because they've pulled us too close. *The Religion* is both critically distant *and* warmed through by touch, and it is exactly this kind of opposition that generates the real heat in the work. The past, present and future tense coexist in the same box, sometimes oscillating within a single object. Even the blank white center, what looks like a visual sigh, is quickly flooded by competing associations and neighboring influences. A frictive heat is generated when you surface from a box and try again to conceive of the piece holistically. Everything does not slot together nicely.

Yet this varied climate is populated by things like sunglasses, a bowl, an iPad, a branch - things that could fairly be described as room temperature – that magical non-temperature that disappears against your skin. These objects and structures that are normally camouflaged by familiarity here are placed into a net of complex and problematic relationships. The scope of time, material, connotation, and craft in the work serve as

points of contrast - mechanisms for seeing that can pull banal objects back into the realm of scrutiny. But the breadth and simultaneity of the work never calcifies those relationships -an object may flip between figure and ground, past and future, large and small many times in the course of looking at the piece. *The Religion* feels remarkably limber. It is active. It roams. It points out in all directions, only to reveal its locus in the here and now.