

Carter Mull
Artforum
Michael Ned Holte
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OPENINGS

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MICHAEL NED HOLTE



Carter Mull, *Delicacy (details)*, 2010, video, printed screen, projector, amplifier, batteries, dye-sublimation print, dimensions variable. Video still.

CARTER MULL'S *DELICACY*, 2010, is a compact, ungainly tabletop composition, an intriguing and idiosyncratic mixture of still-life photography, miniature audiovisual equipment, batteries, sound, and video. Its title suggests the faculty of taste, of course, both literally and metaphorically. Indeed, the apparatus-heavy arrangement calls to mind the mad-scientist routines of molecular gastronomy; the silvery tablecloth underneath the *mise en place* is

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itself an actual-size photographic image of a lemon, rock salt, Danish Creamery butter, and macarons on a concrete floor. A tiny projector, powered by a battery nearly equal in size, beams a video across the table, onto a small “screen,” supported by a ringed menu holder, backed with a historical (and slightly altered) illustration of a lobster.

The ten-minute video cuts back and forth between a 1984 episode of the outlandish cartoon series *The Catillac Cats*, and footage of a lobster roaming around the artist’s Los Angeles studio floor, which is littered with many of the ingredients depicted on the tablecloth. Appropriate to the scenario’s Surrealist pedigree, there’s something unsettling about the crustacean’s encounter with a plate of Day-Glo macarons. Meanwhile, in the cartoon, the gang of stray felines, led by urban dandy Riff-Raff, travel undersea to discover boundless treasure, which they must ultimately abandon so that it doesn’t bog down their Cadillac-cum-submarine. Like the lobster grabbing hold of the macarons, Riff-Raff and his crew find riches but quickly discover that possessing them is futile.

The video is accompanied—disjunctively—by a little Fender amplifier playing what initially sounds like a child clumsily reading Marxist indoctrination. The words turn out to be the lyrics to Gang of Four’s urgent post-punk rant “Natural’s Not in It” (1979): “The problem of leisure / What to do for pleasure / . . . The body is good business / Sell out, maintain the interest / . . . Dream of the perfect life . . .” The revelation is humorous but also moderately depressing: Will this anonymous kid spend the rest of his life in pursuit of treasure? Seeking out lobster dinners? Is there any escape from the contemporary mythology of the perfect life?

Delicacy raises many more questions than it can answer, but still it sets the proverbial table for Mull’s larger body of work, which implicates the personal economy of production and expenditure that is played out in the artist’s studio within the larger circulation of capital and meaning. If Gang of Four invoke the “problem of leisure,” then Mull suggests that the artist’s problem is that his or her work is never actually done, and that objects exhibited in public only point to, but never fully explicate, a practice of everyday life. This buffet of signifiers offers immediate sensory pleasure—Mull is not afraid of seducing the viewer—but it’s hardly easy to digest.

Mull’s work has been included in several recent surveys of contemporary photography, such as the 2009 edition of *New Photography* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the traveling show “Image Transfer: Pictures in a

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Remix Culture,” which closed last month at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. Such medium-specific exhibitions have somewhat paradoxically pointed up a motif central to Mull’s oeuvre: the ever-increasing difficulty of adequately defining what a “photograph” is (or isn’t) and the impossibility of quarantining “the photographic,” particularly in its digital states. Whether one sees a banal ubiquity or sublime multiplicity of images in the world—or both—the photographic is ever more synonymous with the world itself. Facebook, Flickr, and Google have made images of nearly everything and everyone immediately available—rendering even Douglas Huebler’s Sisyphean objective to “photographically document the existence of everyone alive” seem startlingly possible forty years later.

Although Mull’s work encompasses and intermingles installation, drawing, collage, sculpture, and books, there is a stubborn fixation on the specificity of images. To wit: The artist’s first solo show, at Rivington Arms in New York in 2005, featured a group of photographs of debris strewn about his studio floor, often shot from above, knowingly recalling the post-Minimal scatter pieces of Barry Le Va, Bruce Nauman, and Robert Morris while simultaneously denying the tactility of such forebears. Surprisingly elegant—for photos of debris—the images nevertheless elude easy apprehension, or at least verbal accounting. Though not abstractions in the strictest sense, these photographs push the medium’s alleged indexicality to the edge of legibility.

Mull’s second show, which took place the same year, at the Los Angeles apartment gallery Champion Fine Art, consisted solely of *State of Shifting Mirrors*, 2005, a disorienting room-size image of broken glass, splattered paint, construction illustrations taken from Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*, glitter, and other carefully selected odds and ends. The work doubled the low, domestic ceiling and was lit from below by fluorescent tubes mounted a few inches above the ground. A subsequent installation, *Ground*, 2006, inverted this approach by covering the floor of Marc Foxx gallery in Los Angeles with hundreds of images—jet-printed on holographic film and spray-painted—all of which had been selected from a batch of eighteen hundred discrete stills created from a minute-long, thirty-frames-per-second video. In placing these prints underfoot—which reportedly made some viewers wary of traversing the space—Mull pushed the images into the category of objects. At the same time, he transformed waste material in the studio into something valuable (art, in a word) that was subsequently resituated again, thereby subjecting the presumably precious art object to the literal defilement of viewers’ shoes. Such a maneuver points to the complicated intertwining of symbolic and material economies—a relationship

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central to Mull's concerns. It also isolates the still amid the endless stream of image production, with a metered, paracinematic approach to producing the hundreds of unique images before their temporal order is obliterated in their dispersal.



Carter Mull, *Gift*, 2010, color photograph on metallic paper, 41 1/2 x 67 1/2".

Mull's conflation of time and expenditure reached its most complex manifestation so far in "Metemetrica" at Marc Foxx last year, where—alongside *Delicacy*—a new floor-bound spillage of images on Mylar and metallic paper (*Diamond, Caviar*, 2010) grounded an arrangement of framed images on the walls. While these works were obviously realized using postproduction tools such as Photoshop, they prominently feature relics of the mechanical age—this time spreads from the *Los Angeles Times* accompanying diagrams of tools and industrial apparatuses from the *Encyclopedia*. Both products are, in keeping with Enlightenment ideals, intended to synthesize and distribute information that reflects the knowledge and values of culture as a whole.

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Of course, the print versions of both these formats are increasingly facing obsolescence. In fact, Mull situates the entire field of the photographic—or rather the image, of which the printed photograph and the printed newspaper are kinds of relics—within this larger technological shift. For several works in “Metemetrica,” the artist photographed spreads of front and back pages of the *Los Angeles Times* lying on his studio floor. The front page inevitably connotes significance, while the back always features an enormous advertisement: Both, together, account for any “reading” of the printed news. Mull calls the newspaper a “complex chronometer,” reflecting in part that the news is always actually “old” by the time the paper is printed.

One such work, *Gift*, 2010, is printed on metallic paper with the original image’s color and contrast conspicuously tweaked, lending it a unified but irradiated, even hallucinogenic quality that obfuscates much of the newspaper’s text. One can just make out the headlines, which indicate issues both current (gay marriage) and avowedly eternal (taxes), and large advertisements for Louis Vuitton and Coca-Cola. The paper itself provides a backdrop or context for Mull’s activities in the studio, while positioning the news simultaneously as image and object, foreground and background. In *Gift*, the paper is dotted with spiny sea urchins purchased at a fish market near the artist’s studio, and he often uses the *Los Angeles Times* as a provisional ground for crustaceans and other food products—perhaps as a visual pun on *fish wrap*, that derogatory term for newsprint. A smaller photograph of a spoon on a soiled napkin (taken by Mull, in a restaurant) is also physically collaged on top of another image on the front page. The artist repeatedly performs this tactic of replacing an image from the news with an image from his daily experience, describing it as an “I/we” gesture, in which the individual is part of society while also outside it.

As in *Gift*, the motif of Coca-Cola frequently appears in Mull’s photographs, as either a product or a logo. *Sugar*, 2010, integrates several Coca-Cola bottle caps into a diagram of sugar production (again taken from the *Encyclopedia*), drawing connections between the present and the industrial past. As the late artist Ian Burn observed, “If a recognizable image was used (as by the Pop artists), then its ‘meaning’ could not be read literally. For example, the image of Coca-Cola bottles was used, not because of what it depicted, but for what it represented or symbolized.” In Mull’s case, he appears interested in the brand not only as both object and sign but also for its third-degree meaning as an archetype of Pop itself.

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Such links serve to imbricate the specific and the general, as Burns's comment suggests, and to position the artist within the broader cultural framework implied by his notion of "I/we." While relying on contemporary tools, Mull's project may actually be best understood within the lineage of the still life, that most anachronistic of genres, whose methods he uses to track and arrest the image momentarily in the process of its consumption. The *nature morte* has always been predicated on a paradox of time, a commingling of living and dying, eternal and ephemeral—on the thin threshold between ripe and rotting. The genre not only uses seduction ("lifelike" effects, the promise of abundance, and so on) but relies on it in order to set into motion its paradoxical play. If the classical still life *stills* ordinary objects to elevate a particular, mundane item into a universal picture, Mull's work typically attempts the opposite, by remaking images extracted from culture (the newspaper, the *Encyclopedia*) and returning them to the world of objects. He lavishes attention on these complex chronometers, in all the specificity they have in the face of the proliferating images that surround them—knowing, finally, that this operation marks only a transitory moment.

Michael Ned Holte is a frequent contributor to Artforum.