

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS MAY 2013



Left, Thomas Barrow: *Self-Portrait*, 2007, mixed mediums, 13¾ by 12 by 2¾ inches; at Derek Eller.

THOMAS BARROW

Derek Eller

Anyone looking for a counterpoint to the seamless photography currently dominating the digital field need look no further than the work of Thomas Barrow. Emphasizing the materiality of the photograph, Barrow focuses on its uniqueness rather than its reproducibility. This mini-retrospective of two dozen artworks from the mid-1970s to 2010 consisted of sculptural pieces, black-and-white images, Polaroid collages, and torn and reassembled prints. All pointed to Barrow's longtime commitment to an experimental process.

Barrow, who attended the Institute of Design in Chicago and studied with Aaron Siskind, was one of a number of artists in the 1970s, including Robert Heinecken, Robert Rauschenberg and Jerry Uelsmann, who incorporated their photographs into mixed-medium works that resisted the notion of a window onto the world. Barrow's "Cancellations" series, from the mid-'70s, addresses the issue directly: he shot images of bland buildings or landscapes, in the vein of New Topographics artists like Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams, then used an ice pick to scratch an X across the negatives before printing. The mark is an assertion of the artist's hand, a negation of the idea of an unmanipulated view of reality and a challenge to the emerging photography market's emphasis on the pristine print.

In the early '80s, Barrow took his process one step further, tearing up the photographs and reconstructing them in different configurations using gloppy colorful silicone caulk and spray paint. *Tempe Reconstruction* (1982) suggests a pane of glass that's been cracked and then inexpertly restored.

In his later collages and constructions, Barrow seems to have disengaged altogether from debates in the photographic field, creating elaborate, whimsically absurd work with a more personal resonance. Among the elements making up the Joseph Cornell-like construction *Hare Reliquary* (ca. 1996-97) are Polaroids of masks and a monkey face, pink marshmallow bunnies and various rabbit figurines.

There were two assemblage works titled *Self-Portrait* in the show. Using a segment of pipe as a base, the more recent piece, from 2007, includes a tennis ball-turned-nest and four photographs of the artist, one of which is actually of a sculpture he made of himself. A tightly packed, rectangular box from 2001 presents a small black-and-white photograph of Barrow along with a plastic skull, a Flash action figure and a tangle of unspooled cassette tape among its treasures. Like *Hare Reliquary*, this work makes playful use of the detritus of consumer culture.

In fact, one 2010 work is called, simply, *Detritus*. It consists of four plastic bags filled with stuff: fake teeth, torn pictures, one of the artist's old bank cards and plastic doodads of all sorts, including a finger. Barrow scoops up into his creative ferment whatever seems personally and culturally relevant. In continuously broadening his focus and his medium, Barrow has made his work loopier over time, but also richer.

—Jean Dykstra