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A Collection in Need of Definition

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The first thing I saw, wheeling past the Time Warner mall to take in a full view of the new Museum of Arts and Design, was a huge graphic climbing the corner of the building: the store. I had to search the façade before I found the museum's logo, discreetly carved out of the edge of a metal canopy over the entrance. The eye-catching store is the heartbeat of the lobby; little else of any stature, art- or design-wise, greets the visitor. This is a shame, as it does nothing to underscore the organization's claim to being "the leading cultural institution dedicated to exploring the creative processes of contemporary artists and designers."

Climbing the stairs to the first floor, I arrived at what seemed to be a jewelry boutique and decided that I must be coming at things from the wrong direction—the retail direction. So I took the elevator to the sixth floor, where an open studio was in session. Behind a wall of glass cabinetry a young woman was modeling small figures. She shaved her sharp, steel chisel—like a dentist's tool—across the clay, peeling away tiny curls. After a few moments the throb of retail dropped away, and I was calm, ready to connect with the artifacts, and perhaps even the spirit, of art and design.

MAD used to be the American Craft Museum; it has outgrown those pesky "traditional hierarchies" and molted into a blurred coloration of craft, deco-

orative arts, design and fine art. This leaves it to the visitor to sort out what's art and what's... anything else, including silly. The new building provides twice the exhibition space, with two floors for changing exhibits. Now on is "Second Lives," a collection of works constructed of ordinary things—coins, shoes, bottle tops. I was entranced by the beauty of what looked like a shimmering coral branch by Tara Donovan, made of thousands of buttons stacked slightly askew, so that the edges shiv-

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ered and blurred. I was so caught up in watching the play of light as it penetrated the piece that I forgot to wonder about art or design; the same thing happened in front of an enchanting piece by Paul Villinski called "My Back Pages." Butterflies had been meticulously cut from vinyl records with a scroll saw, their colorful labels forming the body of the insect; they soared out of a vintage record player sitting on the floor, and fanned across the wall. It is breathtaking, at once whimsical and, oddly, bitter-sweet. "The soundtrack of my life," as the artist described it, included records by Van Morrison, Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis, Fleetwood Mac. He listened to each one last time before engineering its reincarnation; the piece has the resonance of a fairy tale.

More space, paradoxically, requires tougher editing; this is a wilderness of stuff. Some pieces manage the nifty trick of clothing pretension in folk art (undoubtedly done by the kind of folk who always wear black). What is there to say about a tripod made of 9,273 plastic spoons held together by 3,091 rubber bands—besides "gee whiz"? Could we harness the biofuel that propelled such compulsion? As for the craft front, high standards for sewing, gluing, tying and all manner of assembling were maintained.

The elevator was whooshing loudly, so I took the stairs to visit the two floors of the permanent collection. The stairwells seem to have been an afterthought; they are narrow and

badly lit, the ceilings are oppressively low and the gray concrete is already splotched and stained. Large trash bins with black plastic liners greet you at the door to each floor. The tunnels are relieved only by jaunty displays at some of the landings.

The display spaces are open and light; the cabinets and tables are elegant and sturdy. But the permanent collection is, simply, overwhelming and presented without any real thematic coherence. There is an attempt, though so feeble that I almost missed the cards announcing Organic; Nature; Geometry; Texture; Color; Wit and Humor; History; and so on. (By far the most prominent labels were for exhibits that seemed to be called Do Not Touch.)

Get past the sheer quantity of things at MAD, and pick out your treasure—a glass boat by Tapio Wirkkala; a shimmering textile by Jack Lenor Larsen, perfectly installed in a window slit; a stoneware cross by sculptor Peter Voulkos. So much talk about the "blurred lines" between everything—art, design, craft, you name it—renders everything meaningless. All things are designed; what makes Design? Anything can be art—though most things aren't. The shrouding of commerce in the vestments of art has created a lucrative market for furniture and decorative objects; it enhances the investment quality of a cup or a chair, inspiring confidence among insecure, newly rich, collectors. You'll have good reason to weep if you break a plate by Cindy Sherman (on display but not for sale at MAD), but you can always buy another. It is one thing to craft a piece of pottery, however graceful, another to create art as a sculptor working in clay. The distinction is in the work itself and in most cases it is obvious.

The boutique on the second floor turns out to be the Tiffany & Co. Foundation Jewelry Gallery, and it is dazzling. This is the only exhibition space in the U.S. dedicated solely to the display and study of modern jewelry. The space is superbly designed; the cases are elegant, with glass-topped drawers that slide quietly open. Again, the collection is large and curatorial themes are muddled; it would be better to focus on one idea and explore it in depth. The only problem here (easily fixed) is the puddle of shadow in the middle of the floor. Jewelry should sparkle, as Tiffany knows



Paul Villinski's 'My Back Pages' features butterflies that he had cut from vinyl records by such artists as Van Morrison, Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis and Fleetwood Mac.

better than anyone. Of course jewelry is designed, but is it art? I don't think so, and nothing I saw convinced me otherwise, though artists have made wonderful pieces—think of Calder's bracelets and brooches. It is a craft with a long, noble tradition, during the course of which standards of excellence in production and creativity have been refined. This collection celebrates that.

The jewelry display inspired retail itch, naturally, so I returned to "The Store" on the ground floor. This is easily the most high-end museum gift shop in the country. The place was packed. Indeed, the whole museum was humming with visitors, none of whom seemed remotely bothered with questions of art, simply enjoying what was "cool" and

"weird," the adjectives I heard most frequently. At heart, this exuberant museum is lots of fun, and perhaps that is more engaging than dignity. You can amuse yourself with the metaphysics of art and design; you can wonder at the transmutation of pins into pyramids; or you can buy a brooch for your next evening out. Take your pick.

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