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ARTIST+

The Magical From the Mundane

The Museum of Arts and Design explores the space between arts and arts-and-crafts, Lance Esplund writes.

Metamorphosis is as central to art as it is to myth. When an artist transforms his materials, he becomes a shaman. When an artist's materials are not transformed, he remains a charlatan — and we are left with a mere field of paint, not the "Sistine Ceiling"; a chunk of marble, not the "Pietà." With the advent of collage in the 1890s, however, metamorphosis took on new meaning. Invented by the Beggarstuffs (the British poster designers and brothers-in-law James Pryde and William Nicholson), collage introduced appropriated objects and cut-and-pasted materials into art's arena. But it was the Cubists — Picasso, Braque, Schwitters, Gris — who, as Modern shamans, first transformed detritus and ephemera into art.

To create something magical and lasting out of the merely pedestrian, out of fragments of the everyday and the throwaway, is a challenge peculiar to artists of the modern and industrial age. And that challenge is the focus of the art included in "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary," the chief, inaugural exhibit at the new Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), which reopens to the public on Saturday in its new, 12-story, 54,000-square-foot, renovated home at Columbus Circle.

The other two inaugural exhibits, "Permanently MAD": Revealing the Collection" and "Elegant Armor: The Art of Jewelry," showcase works from MAD's permanent collection of more than 2,000 objects. The two shows fill out the rest of



**SECOND LIVES:
Remixing the Ordinary**

**ELEGANT ARMOR:
The Art of Jewelry**

**PERMANENTLY MAD:
Revealing the Collection**

Museum of Arts and Design

the museum's four floors, or 14,000 square feet, of exhibition space. All three exhibits, free to the public this weekend open Saturday.

"Permanently MAD" is an ongoing and changing installation of arts and crafts, as well as works that straddle that uncomfortable gray area between art and arts and crafts, all from the 1950s through the present. It is a hit-and-(mostly)-miss grouping of 250 objects, including vessels, sculptures, and textiles in materials such as wood, metal, paper, yarn, clay, plastic, and glass. There are some beautiful works in "Permanently MAD" by Anni Albers, Hans Christensen, Mark Gardner, Eva Hild, Janne Kytanen, Bernard

Leach, Karim Rashid, Bob Stocksdale, and Gertrud Vasegaard, among others.

But mostly we find objects that, although extremely well-crafted, fall somewhere — amid a hodgepodge of styles including Modernism, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, biomorphism, and that deadly misnomer Contemporary Modern — between incoherent functional object and incoherent sculpture. A number of these works, especially after 1970, are politically charged or self-consciously ironic: At times I could only surmise that — although many were created by big names

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Harumi Nakashima, 'Struggling Form' (from the Ecstatic Series) (1997). Far left, Wille Cole, 'Loveseat' (2007).



Too often, when confronted with the show's artworks, the question "What is it made of?" quickly devolves into "Why was it made?"



Paul Villinski, 'My Back Pages' (2008)

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in the Contemporary art world — the objects made it into MAD because they were turned on a lathe, woven on a loom, or fired in a kiln.

"Elegant Armor," by far the most satisfying of the three exhibitions, is a small, in-depth, and frequently gorgeous display, in curving vitrines, featuring more than 130 works from MAD's permanent collection of nearly 500 pieces of jewelry (all from 1948 to the present). The remaining 300-plus necklaces, rings, bracelets, brooches, and body art, easily accessible to viewers, are housed below the vitrines in the gallery's study drawers.

The Cubist's desire to transform yesterday's newspaper into art, to make something magical out of something mundane, is probably deeply connected to the age-old artistic impulse to make not just a functional pot, but a beautifully formed, beautifully weighted, and beautifully decorated pot, in which to carry water from the well. But it seems that increasingly the litmus test of a Contemporary artist's abilities rest in his or her penchant for assemblage; and that the litmus test for a contemporary potter, or a glass-blower, or a weaver, rests in his or her ability to move as far away from form and functionality, and as far into postmodern irony and pop sensibility, as possible.

"Second Lives" is not particularly adventuresome artistically or curatorially. A number of the artworks, as well as the artists, have been shown before and are more interesting for their uncanny materials than they are for the outcomes — the metamorphoses — of those materials. Too often, when

confronted with the show's artworks — a love seat made out of spiked high-heel shoes; a biomorphic couch made out of quarters; a gown made out of white rubber gloves; a metal jacket made out of 3,000 dog tags; stalagmites made

Once you figure out the thing behind the thing, the artworks lose their aesthetic air like punctured balloons.

out of plastic buttons; a chandelier made out of eyeglasses; Buddhas carved out of phone books; an 8-and-a-half-foot-high pyramid made out of rubber bands and plastic spoons — the question "What is it made of?" quickly devolves into "Why was it made?"

Many of the artworks in "Second Lives" have the labor-intensive allure of giant jigsaw puzzles, rows of dominos, and houses of cards. And they usually look like the traditional materials that make up the things they mimic (stone, feathers, crystal, silver). But once you figure out the thing behind the thing, the artworks lose their aesthetic air like punctured balloons. To that end, the majority of the show — filled mostly with visual puns and clichés — has little shelf life and can be devoured at a

romp's pace. There are exceptions: butterflies made out of record albums, by Paul Villinski; necklaces made out of handgun triggers (Boris Bally) and safety pins (Tamiko Kawata); a chandelier, by Ron Arad and Ingo Maurer, made out of 93 aluminum tubes, and delicate trees carved out of shopping bags, by Yuken Teruya.

The Museum of Arts and Design's director, Holly Hotchner, reminds us that "Second Lives" "reflect[s] the museum's core mission of celebrating materials and process." At the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Tuesday, Manhattan Borough president Scott Stringer remarked, "What could be better than a museum named MAD?"

MAD certainly is a great acronym. And "Elegant Armor" alone is worth the price of admission. But we need more museums that celebrate art — rather than merely "materials and process." Just how original and relevant MAD will prove to be to New York's cultural landscape is yet to be seen. The questions remain: How much of the work at MAD really transforms itself from craft into art? How often is a ceramic pot a gilded lily? And how often do piles of recycled materials warrant the time in the studio, not to mention their presentation in yet another museum?

All exhibitions open Saturday; "Second Lives" until February 15; "Elegant Armor" until May 31; "Permanently MAD" ongoing (2 Columbus Circle, 212-299-7777).