

Beyond the surface, what meaning

Artschwager uses the artifice of an exterior to blur its reality



Richard Artschwager's "Corner Splat II" (2009) at the Barbara Krakow Gallery.

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Every artwork is, in some way, an illusion, and Richard Artschwager has for decades made art that both punctures and celebrates that illusion. "Door," a 1987 piece in his self-titled exhibit at Barbara Krakow Gallery, is a great example.

It looks like a small, wood-mounted cabinet with a mahogany veneer, in a standard office-furniture aesthetic. Open it up, and there's no interior to speak of. The door, a wedge, is thick enough to fill the entire recess behind it - which is also covered with that bland veneer. For Artschwager, exterior and interior are one; what we take to be surface is far more than skin deep.

The small show at Krakow wanders through nearly 30 years of work, all wry and cerebral. Still,

Artschwager's extraordinary attunement to surface evinces a fascination with texture and material.

Wood grain veneer appears again in "Corner Splat II" (2009), which turns expectations on their heads. The wood grain is an eerie blue, and the artist has mounted it on crisscrossing slats of metal in a corner of the gallery. It has the appearance of wood, but blue? On metal? And what splat is rectilinear?

"Untitled (1000 Cubic Inches)" (1996) takes a page from Donald Judd's book of geometric variations. Artschwager here elevates the humble packing crate. Five boxes of plywood, pine, and steel hardware are only big enough to house a bottle of wine or a pair of shoes, much smaller than the crates they're modeled after. Usually, with packing crates, the point is to get inside; who cares what they look like? Artschwager does. The recesses and

hardware along the exterior become a visual vocabulary, employed differently on each box.

It's evident how Artschwager, who long ago was a woodworker, has been influenced by both Pop Art, with its emphasis on everyday objects, and minimalism, with its focus on clean surface. His art sends a viewer down rabbit holes of meaning. Yet the work is so formally simple and direct, you don't even know at first that you are in a hole. Because in Artschwager's world, there's no difference between interior and exterior. There's no hole to be in.

Richard Artschwager

At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,
10 Newbury St.,
through December 3rd.
617-262-4490,
barbarakrakowgallery.com

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