Vanitas by Shirley Vernico

A vanitas (Latin for 'vanity') is a symbolic work of art showing the transience of life, the futility of pleasure, and the certainty of death, often contrasting symbols of wealth with symbols of ephemerality. Regardless of the objects portrayed in the artwork, vanitas evokes a stark truth; we will all die, and therefore we should give thought to our pursuits, our daily practices, and what is truly meaningful.

Vanitas became popular during the 16th Century in Northern Europe, a time of religious tension, when international trade had produced great commercial wealth for some and regular military conflicts across Europe created anxiety and instability for many. It is not difficult to see similarities in our own times: three years of the COVID pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, growing wealth disparity, and the ongoing devastation of frontline communities due to the climate crisis.

Artists Matt Kenyon and Jason J. Ferguson have worked together around the theme of the domestic for over a decade. Their most recent work, exhibited in Homing, is rooted in and reflects on the social and political unraveling that has forced many to reevaluate what is important in their lives and what is, perhaps, simply vanity. Homing addresses both the intimacy and the ephemerality of home while challenging the invisible systems of power and wealth that govern day-to-day existence.
Kenyon's Kicking the Ladder is an installation of hundreds of champagne glasses in a nearly complete pyramid. Each glass contains a miniature model of a house cast out of a material the Kenyon has developed with the same refractive index as water, making the houses invisible when they are submerged. Kicking the Ladder is responding to the ongoing American crisis of property that has lost its value due to the effects of extreme weather. By contrast the opulent image of a champagne glass pyramid with the crisis of climate change and rising flood risk, Kicking the Ladder creates a visual metaphor for the fragility hidden within the current housing market. This crisis is already part of the lexicon—when someone owes more than a house is worth, people say the mortgage is “underwater.”

In Kicking the Ladder, the top layers of the pyramid have been disconnected and overturned. This inversion serves as both a visual and metaphorical element. The overturned glasses no longer function as vessels and their contents seemingly empty onto the floor and across a hydrophobic mat, revealing the ubiquitous “we buy houses” message often seen within distressed urban landscapes. Kenyon’s installation ties together the damage caused to frontline communities by both the housing market. This crisis is already part of the lexicon, creating a visual metaphor for the fragility hidden within the current housing market.

The work Ferguson created for Homing also recalls the vanitas genre. Ferguson continues his investigation of corporeal existence in this Artifact series, using monotonous and repetitive action to embody time while replicating, manipulating, and recontextualizing familiar objects to create unsettling experiences. This collection of sculptures captures poetic moments from the sheltered and unvarying routine of living and working from home during a global pandemic. Each object was created by taking hundreds of photographs of seemingly mundane compositions in Ferguson’s home. We see baseball caps hung on hooks, a snow shovel propped against the doorway, a blanket tossed onto the couch—all suggest an actor and an action missed by the camera. This photogrammetry process became an act of seeing rather than simply looking for Ferguson; of paying closer attention to the quiet, often overlooked, arrangements of objects in space. The ruptured, incomplete forms produced by the 3-D printing highlight the limitations of the software while speaking to the fragility of memory and the passage of time.

Homning includes three of Kenyon’s micro-text projects that function as acts of protest and commemoration. All three are presented as stacks of paper, however each carries a hidden memorial. Though it might look like the paper elementary school students use to learn penmanship, for Alternative Rule, the lines on the paper are made up of names and dates of children who have been victims of gun violence since the Columbine High School shooting. On the yellow pages of Notepad, each ruled line is revealed to be microprinted text enumerating the full names, dates, and locations of each Iraqi civilian death on record over the first three years of the Iraq War.

In Log Rule, the names, dates, and locations of those who have died from COVID are preserved in the micro-printed text that makes up the horizontal and vertical lines. Visitors can read the names on each of the three texts using a moveable video magnifier attached to a large flat screen monitor. Kenyon has displayed large stacks of the printed papers as he intends this work to circulate in the world, both as memorials and as tools to protest injustices. Kenyon invites visitors to write their elected officials using both the paper and their own voice to advocate for change at the local and national level. By writing and posting a letter, visitors help place the paper within the official government archive, adding to a secret memorial housed within system as well as one actively written and unvarying routine of living and working from home during a global pandemic.

Standing alone in the corner of the gallery is Receptacle, an object that combines a 10th century Northern Italian reliquary with a common 55 gallon Rubbermaid BRUTE trash can. Recalling the ivory widely used in Medieval reliquaries, Ferguson has covered the surface in intricate designs featuring vegetal motifs and animals. The color seems more a critique of the “white cube” gallery culture than an indicator of the holy status of Receptacle’s contents, raising questions of context, value, container, and the contained. Ferguson’s critique, along with Kenyon’s call to action, embrace contextual and interactive techniques that encourage active viewer engagement rather than passive consumption. Homing asks viewers to look slowly and carefully, to see the destructive systems governing our lives and to act to commemorate and preserve what is truly meaningful.