

Lewis Stein: Works Since 1971

Lewis Stein is interested in the subtle ways a particular class of familiar objects, such as doormats, garbage cans and culinary tools, organize and structure our lives. The selection included in this exhibition can be imagined to occupy a certain space: the kitchen. We can envision this as within a home, but also potentially a restaurant, or even a cafeteria, since Stein often favors objects with an almost institutional banality. Rather than giving that room its identity, these examples are so mundane and functional as to be almost invisible, taking us far from the implicitly aestheticized Duchampian notion that “the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.” A doormat marks the threshold of indoor and outdoor space, inviting the user to clean their shoes upon entry. While the garbage can is, by design, meant to keep our waste out of sight. These are two objects that thus manage our lives through their involvement in regimes of hygiene.

The cleaver is a butcher’s knife, designed to cut through bone, and is thus implicated in ideas of cleanliness within cooking. In contrast to Stein’s approach of presenting many of his readymade objects, such as the doormats and garbage cans, unaltered, these cleavers are painted in bright, garish color pairings. This body of work, the first of which date to the 1980s, harks back to a way of working Stein introduced as early as 1967, when he began experimenting with such color treatments for tools like hammers. In this way they are simultaneously the oldest—in terms of the age of the idea—and the newest, in terms of the date of manufacture, works in the show.

Their imposing blades dulled by paint, the cleavers are surreally removed from functionality. This is quite unlike the garbage can and doormat which, theoretically at least, are still useable, and—in the case of the can—are meant to be opened and closed by the viewer, who is invited to lift and replace the lid. They thus enact a humorous performance of a typically unanalyzed ritual of daily life, but without its end goal, since nothing will be either added or removed from the can. Nor is there anything special to see within the can itself, which is empty.

This examination, at once playful and with sinister undertones of control, takes the form of an aesthetic tautology in the show’s coda, a drawing whose content is a message thanking the viewer for looking at it. What seems a friendly invitation also, in thanking them for having looked, implies that their time with the work is already over in the very moment it has begun, establishing a provocative erasure of the duration of the act of looking. This work encapsulates the show as a whole, pointing to Stein’s surreal refashioning of systems designed to be tight and closed, reanimating them in curious ways that invite us to reflect anew on some of the most unassuming elements of the world around us.

- Alex Bacon, New York