

Stephanie H. Shih: American Gothic

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I spent the Summer abroad, but returned home with few, if any, souvenirs. I didn't buy anything at the places I visited. I hoped I'd come back with rare little treasures that I found in the gift shop of a basilica or a hole in the wall antique store, places to which I would never return but that would always remind me of the Summer. But mostly I collected things that might be considered trash: hotel stationary, receipts, anything with a logo or address, tickets, things that could all easily be thrown away but for a few weeks would sit on my desk trying to maintain some sentimental value I had forced upon it. Eventually I threw it all away because it didn't matter; everything I wanted to purchase I had already eaten and digested or left behind.

It strikes me that Fall is the ideal time to reflect on the transience of the objects that fill our lives. Stephanie Shih chooses to represent objects that are distinctly recognizable of a kind of '80s American mass culture: Twinkies,

Wonderbread, Prozac. The works, when collected together, take on a bizarre nostalgia (who would be nostalgic for Pepto-bismol?). They seem like objects that might appear in flashes of memory, from the kitchen cabinet on the coffee table of one's childhood. In America where so much of the fabric of daily life is peppered with logos, advertisements, incessant branding, a strange comfort can be created by the presence of such objects. They become evocative.

The title of this exhibition, *American Gothic*, is borrowed from the famous 1930 painting by Grant Wood, an image that has become nearly synonymous with Americana, of dour-faced farmer and his daughter holding a pitchfork in front of a modest 19th-century home. The object in the painting—the pitchfork—is perhaps the most important part of the composition, acting as a kind of third body. In kitschy parodied renderings of the painting I find online, the pitchfork is replaced by a lightsaber or an electric guitar or a gun. Did Wood know in 1930 that his piece would become such a central fixture in the discussion of interwar American painting, and indeed, of Americana itself?

Shih sets out in a similar fashion, grouping her figures sometimes by color, sometimes by type or theme. While her work is resolutely classical in the “old sense,” picking up representational trajectories in sculpture that have existed for centuries, she also touches on more recent concerns, those of Claes Oldenberg, Haim Steinbach, Kimiyo Mishima, Josephine Meckseper. Shih, in rendering these banal objects with a kind of reserved sentimentality, elevates and redefines them. Not cast, but carefully molded from clay, the objects she depicts are most often disposable, an empty McDonald's clamshell container, a newspaper, a plastic shopping bag. Here, they are still disposable, but completely lacking in imperative, narrative, movement or socio political context. They are still and without time.

—Gracie Hadland