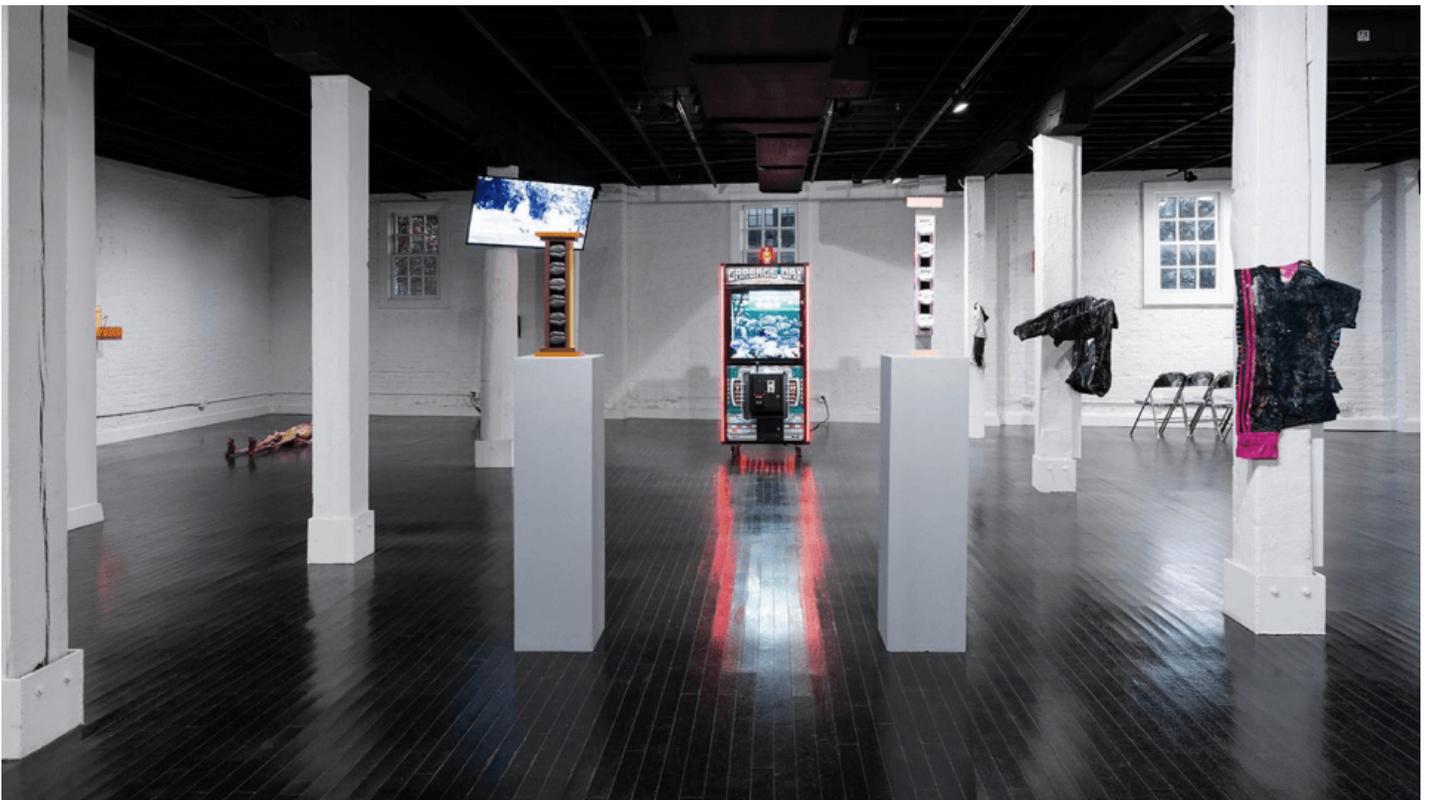




# The Washington Post

How Two Contemporary Art Shows Explore the Power of Work  
Featuring Found Objects

*Focus Group and Exodus examine readymade artwork*



Kriston Capps // 05 DEC 19

Plunk a dollar into Tabor Robak's "Garbage Day" and you might win a prize that nobody wants. The installation is a fully functioning, customized claw machine filled with trash. Rewards include a crushed AriZona iced tea can, empty carryout bags, a red Solo cup, and other garbage. I wailed after I nearly snatched a used Ziploc baggie but lost it in the final stretch. I was aiming for the Marlboro menthols box.

With his sardonic arcade game, Robak is an heir to Marcel Duchamp, the savvy artist who first conceived the found object when he signed "R. Mutt" to a porcelain urinal and dubbed it "Fountain" in 1917. Robak's arcade cabinet even conceptually resembles "Boîte-en-valise," a project for which Duchamp made suitcases filled with tiny miniatures of his original artworks. A century later, Robak is confronting viewers with similarly cheeky questions: Is art a game? Do you care about this junk?

“Garbage Day” is part of *Focus Group*, a show on view at von ammon co. that explores the darker corners of Duchamp’s legacy. More than a dozen artists contributed works that carry forward the conceptual and sculptural strategies for visualizing consumerism as a realm of its own. Today, Duchamp looms so large over contemporary art that a show tracing his influence could mean anything. *Focus Group*, as the title proclaims, is sharper: A palpable dread suffuses the exhibition, a sense of danger that is peculiar to the 21st century.

For example, Tom Holmes’ “untitled Seating Arrangement” features a neat arrangement of seven folding chairs, plated in chrome and arranged to face due south. Lined up against a wall, the rows of chairs resemble stormtroopers hindered from proceeding toward their ominous true purpose. Emily Schubert’s “Ladyfingers (Red)” comprises casts of the artist’s finger in red urethane foam, individually wrapped in plastic and hanging like novelties you might expect to find near the cash register at a bodega. The issues in *Focus Group*—the glossy corporate board on the warpath, the colonized body parts up for sale—feel specific to this moment in history.

Jade Kuriki Olivo, an artist who practices as Puppies Puppies, makes work that addresses her experience with gender transition as well as with a brain tumor. For “Cheetos Bag-O-Bones White Cheddar Cheese Flavored Snacks, 8 oz (Emptied bag),” she (or an executor) simply distributes the contents of a single-serving snack bag onto the gallery floor in a circular pattern. The work is both cheap and ceremonial: bite-sized, nutritionally void skulls and bones that are used to fulfill a personal ritual. Puppies Puppies finds the gallows humor in fraught universal questions about mortality and corporality, but her work also points to individual risks and harms. A Halloween prop on display takes on a vulnerable aspect thanks to its title, which the artist borrows from a description on the product’s packaging: “Rest (Mummified life-size skeleton with realistic face and super strong, super flexible, and super realistic skin. Skin is embedded with tear-resistant mesh. Great for situations such as haunts, escape rooms, and stunts, where stress and rough handling are expected).”

Many of the works on view were made with store-bought stuff that can be purchased at any CVS, including “After ferdinand, the gay bull who never felt like doing anything” by Borna Sammak. The painter makes work using commercial materials, in this case by embroidering fragments of beach towels onto canvas.

“Springvalley\_w\_strippers,” a Petra Cortright landscape made in Flash, features found animations of dancing women culled from porn sites. Here they look silly, but in their native environment, these disposable ads often conceal sophisticated tools for espionage, fraud, and data collection. One finding from *Focus Group* is take nothing for granted ever.

A trio of Alex Bag self portraits—some of the best works on view—feature objects that look like they must be satirical. For her project, which appears in the gallery’s bathroom, Bag pairs pictures of herself and her child in the tub with Zest soap products that go by the names of *Brrrrr!*, *Mmm!*, and *Tssss!* Tender yet subversive, her photo installations could almost be product placements, if the products weren’t so goofy.

*Focus Group* isn’t a Duchamp show per se, although the timing would be right for it, as the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden recently opened the first in a two-part exhibition spanning the entire arc of the artist’s career. The idea of the readymade has evolved in dizzying and terrifying ways since Duchamp elevated the bourgeois to the bespoke. Artists are still tackling it with a sense of sensationalism. On the back of “Garbage Day,” Robak adds an almost-convincing certificate of verified offset emissions for the carbon produced by his garbage-art. As a gesture of faux sincerity, it’s a searing indictment of the state we’re in—and it’s even funnier if it’s sincere.

The thesis in *Focus Group* is tight enough to serve as its own curatorial category. Cameron Rowland’s readymade “Attica Series Desk,” a piece of furniture produced by incarcerated workers in the Attica Correctional Facility in New York, belongs among this sinister selection of dark objects, for example. The show stands in contrast to another brainy sculpture review up in D.C.: *Exodus*, a broader and looser arrangement of post-consumer and found-object works. While the shows overlap in places, they diverge in more ways than would seem possible for a pair of Duchamp tributes.

*Exodus*, a visiting group exhibition from New York’s Bortolami Gallery, transforms a vacant storefront in the Watergate complex into a statement show on found-object artworks. The display—the seventh in a series of shows that pairs an artist-curator with a city, in this case Paul Pfeiffer and D.C.—features works by the likes of Whitney Biennial mainstays Lutz Bacher, Arthur Jafa, and Eric N. Mack. Works by Cady Noland, a sculptor known best for deconstructing American domestic dystopia in the 1980s and ’90s, and Josh Kline, a sculptor who tackles similar themes in the corporate tech sphere today, can be found in both *Exodus* and *Focus Group*.

Only one artist in the show, Danh Vo, addresses the venue's formidable Watergate billing, and his work is the highlight. Back in 2012, the artist bought personal effects from the estate of Robert McNamara, the U.S. secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968, a period of escalation for the Vietnam War. Vo, whose family fled post-war Vietnam, has redeployed McNamara's archives in stunning artworks, including "Lot 19. Test Ban Treaty Signing Pen, 5 August 1963." This work comprises the nib of a pen, suspended like a sacred relic in a cutout space embedded in the building's wall. Years back, Vo's work attracted the attention of Craig McNamara, the secretary's only son, who invited the artist to use the mature wood of walnut trees from the family orchard. Vo's "Walnut Lumber," alongside the paterfamilias' pen, gives two views of resonant objects shaped by history (and an artist's vision).

The pop-up exhibition space, which was most recently a PNC Bank branch, is large enough to swallow even the sizable sculptures on view. An exception comes in Wu Tsang's "The Shape of a Right Statement," which finds an intimate tableau inside the bank's former vault. The piece features Tsang, a filmmaker and MacArthur Fellowship winner, reading part of a text by Amanda Baggs, an advocate for neuroatypicality. Baggs communicates through a speech synthesizer; by reciting, or really, reperforming "In My Language," Tsang is both expressing solidarity with the autism activist and activating her manifesto through performance. Tsang recorded the video piece in the Silver Platter, a landmark Los Angeles trans bar and the subject of the artist's documentary, *Wildness*. Installing this video in a vault makes it precious.

There's humor in *Exodus*—Sondra Perry's "Historic Jamestowne: Share in the Discovery and Take Several Seats," a couch stained with a Jheri curl activator product, is an elaborate play on a scene from *Coming to America*. Studies in found objects can come across as cold or cerebral, but Duchamp always meant for viewers to howl.

*'Focus Group' at von ammon co., Washington, DC. runs until January 11 2020*

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