
Gallery Review | 'Food-Water-Life' defies modernist cliché

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In the realm of modern art, “abstract” often serves as a synonym for “artistic”; that is, nonrepresentational, conceptual pieces somehow reign superior over other works that are more literal and less interpretive. However, in a new collection at the Tufts University Art Gallery, Lucy and Jorge Orta effectively defy this long-held notion of modernism.

In their “Food-Water-Life” exhibition, the Ortas forge a direct connection between each composition and its meaning. By incorporating real-world objects into every sculpture, the Ortas are able to create a commentary on the actual function of these items. For them, porcelain plates, wire shopping carts and metal utensils are all indicative of food, while giant jugs, glass bottles and silver canteens capture the essence of water. Here, conventional, everyday products successfully speak to audiences about important global issues, proving that modern art does not have to be completely abstract to convey a message.

The show, which debuted on Thursday, Sept. 6, is a comprehensive compilation of various projects the Ortas have worked on for the past two decades. Split into the three distinctive categories “Food,” “Water” and “Life,” the Ortas’ artwork aims to create awareness for what they believe to be the “major concerns of the 21st century,” including conservation, sustainability and interaction among different peoples.

Each of these categories is separated spatially within the gallery, which opens with a room dedicated to the “Hortirecycling” (1997-2005) collection. These unique pieces focus specifically on the wastefulness and over-industrialization of current agricultural practices.

One structure, called “Processing Unit,” is essentially an iron trolley adorned with a wooden

countertop, drawers and shelves. With a stainless steel sink set into the surface and various pots and pans scattered across the top, “Processing Unit” almost resembles a standard kitchen workspace. However, the piece is compromised by the body of an old shopping cart, which protrudes sharply off the front of the trolley. Flanked by two bright, reusable nylon bags, the metal cart looks strangely skeletal without its wheels and handrail. By combining small-scale kitchen components with large-scale grocery store elements, the Ortas transform the components in “Processing Unit” from a series of commonplace objects into a striking agricultural critique.

As viewers continue through the gallery, they will soon find themselves in the “Water” region, an area profiling sculptures from the “OrtaWater” (2005-2007) series. As with “Hortirecycling,” these works use various objects associated with water storage, transportation and travel to make audiences more conscious of the scarcity of our most precious resource.

“Bottle Rack,” though simple, is stunning. A metal foundation adorned with hazardous-looking spikes holds translucent, sparkling bottles. Crowned by a clear water-cooler jug, the structure essentially looks like a tree of glass.

Nearby, a larger “OrtaWater” sculpture is clearly the centerpiece of the entire exhibit: “Fluvial Intervention Unit” showcases a huge maple canoe that is supported in what looks to be a tall shelving unit. The canoe is hoisted about halfway up the metal scaffolding, secured with a neon harness. Above the canoe, a cluster of long, plastic, blue-and-silver gloves hang lifeless amidst a tangle of clear plastic tubing strung chaotically across the frame. To the sides, an assortment of more water-oriented items, including water pails, water bottles and water tanks, lines the ledges.

Finally, the gallery concludes with the “Life” zone, comprised of works from “Antarctica” (1990-2009), which chronicles the Ortas’ 2007 “No Borders” expedition to the Antarctic Peninsula.

During their voyage, they created a live-in “village” of 50 domed tents that doubled as an artistic installation. Describing their journey as a “Utopian endeavor” that “reflects on the plight of those struggling to transverse borders,” the Ortas’ “Antarctica” series concentrates on themes such as migration, mobility, communication and community.

In “Life Line – Survival Kit,” a circular floatation device hangs on the wall. Similarly to “Fluvial Intervention Unit,” the life preserver is adorned with colorful plastic hands, a clear-cut symbol of cooperation and collaboration.

Overhead lies a laminated reprint of the Ortas’ “Morse Flag,” a quilt-like banner in which various flags of the world are seen overlapping, melding together with blurred edges. Here, their use of

explicit, identifiable images makes it easy to recognize the social and political implications of the piece.

The Tufts University Art Gallery will be hosting an opening reception for "Food-Water-Life," the Orta's first major showing in the United States, on Tuesday, Sept. 11, from 5:30-8 p.m.

The exhibition will be open to the public until Dec.16.

More information about this exhibit and other work from Lucy and Jorge Orta can be found by visiting www.studio-orta.com.