

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Island Dreamin': Chris Bradley's Meticulous Reconstructions

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | DECEMBER 22, 2014

L-R: Chris Bradley's "Shade #2," "Guardian (Sand and Ice)," and "***Not Yet Titled** (Can with Toothpicks)," all from 2014 and currently on view at Roberto Paradise.
(Courtesy the artist and Roberto Paradise)



The thing about Puerto Rico, even on the cusp of Christmas, is that it's still damn hot, which would have made the bags of ice casually strewn around the main space of Roberto Paradise gallery in San Juan pretty unnerving — were they not actually trompe-l'oeil oddities, the slightly opaque cubes cast from high-quality glass by Chris Bradley, a sculptor known for expending a whole lot of time and effort to make versions of things (pizza boxes, bananas) out of other things (bronze, wood, resin). For "Freezer Fever," on view through February 14,

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2015, those recreated subjects include fire extinguishers, paint cans, key chains, truck doors, and janky palm trees composed of pretzel rods and sliced Heineken boxes. Of course, as Bradley's gallerist admitted, it's quite possible that unwitting spectators might stumble upon the work and wander off unimpressed. As with one of Robert Gober's painstakingly detailed light bulbs or apple-pie boxes, appreciation requires a certain understanding of the peculiar labor involved. "I like making things, and I like skill," explained Bradley, expressing what many might find a contrarian position in today's art world. "It's important for me to feel like I'm learning things and getting better."

While the plethora of palm trees and bananas in "Freezer Fever" might suggest that Bradley was thinking site-specifically for this show, he's actually been working through these tropes for years, partly as a result of living in a very cold place — Chicago — while dreaming of "escaping from where I was as a maker," he said. (Hence a series of DIY palms with titles like "Cancun" or "Havana," which he began in 2011 for an exhibition at Shane Campbell Gallery.) Bradley's overall interest in detailed reconstructions of objects and surfaces dates prior to his time as an undergrad, when he was making painted mock-ups of brick walls, some as large as 8 by 8 feet. And then, he found the potato chip.

The artist had already been interested in junk food — he told me about an earlier project in which he put Cheetos in a kind of leaf-blower contraption, atomizing the crunchy nuggets in order to blast a "big orange color field" on a wall outside. ("It was there through the winter," Bradley said, both impressed and horrified by the chemical snack's staying power.) "It's very base level food, everyone can relate to it," he explained. Pretzel rods appealed for various reasons — "the salt looks like fungus, and it has a particular shape, with the ends flaring out" — and potato chips possessed other formal qualities, namely a resonance with the contours of the human tongue. Bradley began casting them in bronze and then airbrushing and painting the surfaces, installing them half-stuck into the gallery wall, protruding lingually as a self-conscious counterpart to Urs Fischer's "Noisette."

"Freezer Fever" does have a potato chip — so discrete that you might miss it — but overall the vocabulary Bradley is working with in this exhibition is light on the snacks. Instead, he's built a narrative that touches on "being static, stuck in a freezer like you're being preserved" — one sculpture on the far wall depicts the backside of the door to an ice box that you might find outside a deli, as if we're trapped on the inside, looking out. The show is also about "trying to be safe from something that's going to ruin us — floods or fires," hence the fire-extinguishers and the round bases of the palm tree sculptures, cast from concrete, which give the impression that they

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could become an “artificial island, and just float away” in the case of an unexpected deluge. (Other sculptures stray from that narrative slightly — like a diptych of two aluminum-and-steel pizza box lids, or another piece that translates the shape of a truck’s rear door into a minimalist arrangement of blue Formica on wood panel.)

Bradley seemed both excited and nervous about one work in particular: “Guardian (Sand and Ice),” a sculpture of a fire extinguisher in a white metal cabinet. The extinguisher, which is carved from wood, is surrounded by sand; a bag of “ice” slumps atop the cabinet; a painted-bronze banana hangs below, next to the metal slat traditionally used to Smash Glass In Case Of Emergency. While the piece is understated in some ways — install it in an office building’s hallway and you might pass it by without noticing — there’s a lot at play for Bradley. “Fire extinguishers are something we don’t acknowledge that much — they’re so regular,” he said. “I see it as a silent guardian. I started thinking of how *important* it is, and how important art is, [in terms of] making us happy, or safe.” The complex jostling of materials is also characteristic of the artist’s output: Ice cast from glass (Bradley considers both materials to be somewhat temporal and in flux, though at wildly different tempos); a fire extinguisher composed of wood, which, he noted, would actually go up in flames quickly in the event of a disaster; and the sand surrounding the extinguisher — a silica-based type that’s actually more harmful than protective, if you were to inhale it. “I like that conundrum of interactions,” Bradley said.

As for the banana, it’s a sly bit of slapstick, a tropically-tinged anatomical innuendo. “In an emergency, I sometimes think I wouldn’t do so well,” Bradley admitted. “I’d just have my dick in my hand.

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