



Dan Steinhilber creates sculptures out of ubiquitous mass-produced consumer goods such as clear plastic food containers, disposable coffee cups, soda pop, and trash bags. These items are so common in our homes and the urban landscape that we tend not to notice them or identify them as objects capable of inducing an aesthetic response. A keen observer of the everyday, Steinhilber draws upon the inherent properties of his chosen materials—such as the stiffness of dry paper towels and their tendency to curl or the disposition of clothes hangers to turn when strung one on the other—to reveal the poetics of the mundane. He alters the materials ever so slightly, frequently massing objects together, or isolating and repeating basic qualities or gestures, which are inspired by the way in which the objects are perceived or used. He suspends their materiality and, at times, their intended

Fig. 1 Artist with *Untitled*, 2002, plastic trash bags and wet/dry vacuum, dimensions variable; installation view, Signal 66, Washington, D.C. Photo by Mark Gulezian/Quicksilver.

functions, to highlight their aesthetic dimensions. By turning a clear plastic soda bottle on its side and stacking it with other bottles that have been filled with colored beverages, Steinhilber draws attention to the container's shape and form—to the bulbous body and faceted bottom and the brightly colored cap and label—and the surprising brilliance or opacity of its liquid contents when penetrated by natural light. Through subtle interventions, the artist transforms such commonplace items into three-dimensional sculptural components that have visual and chromatic values associated with painting.

Trained initially as a painter, Steinhilber approaches the creation of sculpture from this perspective. Although he began making sculpture in 1995, he continues to delight in the material and transformative properties of paint, the mixing and saturation of pigment in fluid, the suspension of color on a flat vertical surface, and what he describes as the "energy in the wetness" found in a painter's palette. These are all qualities he seeks to harness in his sculptural works. Steinhilber frequently describes his alternative media as the basic "support" for his creations. This is a painter's term that refers to canvas, wood, or paper in the traditional practice of painting. Just as canvas is the support for paint, Steinhilber's paper cups or plastic containers support a variety of soluble and permeable substances—air, light, paint-enhanced water, liquid soap, or flavored soda—which, in essence, serve as this artist's palette. These color- and light-conducting elements allow the works to resonate and thus metaphorically embody the point of "wetness" he seeks to capture in his art. By creating three-dimensional "canvases" into which he invites the viewer, Steinhilber draws on painting's illusionary



potential, in which two-dimensional surfaces are endowed with three-dimensional characteristics. He desires the viewer to experience the same type of suspension of disbelief before his sculptures as they do before painting. This moment, in which a soda bottle may be seen as a pure embodiment of color rather than a soda bottle, is fleeting; proper light conditions, an individual's viewing angle, and his or her willingness to submit to the illusion are all

Fig. 2 Artist's studio, August 2003, showing modular units of soda bottles for Hirshhorn "Directions" project.



factors. For the artist, the "magic" lies in the discovery of these moments.

The architecture, mood, and feeling of a particular space are also key considerations for the artist. Steinhilber often incorporates architectural details and social aspects of a location into his installations. For the Hirshhorn, he has assembled new and existing works that respond to the scale of the Museum's lobby and the views through the glass walls to the outdoor

Sculpture Plaza and fountain. Several hundred dry cleaner's hangers (distinguished by paper covers) are suspended from the lobby's high ceiling coffers in a cascade of white planar forms that reaches all the way to the floor below (see cover). An inflatable sculpture from 2002 (fig. 1), constructed of white kitchen trash bags tied together by their distinctive red drawstrings, swells like a giant flower toward the edge of the Museum's ceiling coffers, and then slowly sinks back down, only to be inflated yet again. The fifteen-minute life cycle is operated by the motor of a wet/dry vacuum. The material and scale of the piece, as well as its recurring action, bring to mind the numbing repetition of domestic routines such as cleaning, taking out the garbage, and gardening. If these tasks are not habitually performed, humanity's accumulations and nature's creations slowly overtake.

In a new work created specifically for this exhibition, hundreds of clear plastic soda bottles filled with Sprite Remix (a clear soda) are assembled into wire racks that have been placed along the Museum lobby's interior glass wall. The serial progression of display stands echoes architectural details in the building, such as the string of windows that describe each level of the central interior facade. Their presentation also mimics the mode of product display in a grocery or convenience store. Placed in proximity to the Museum Shop, Steinhilber draws on their identification as consumer items (he slots the bottles in the racks and leaves the labels visible and untouched) and addresses the penetration of commerce into the Museum as well as the practice of art. That viewers could imagine the effervescence of recently opened soda or the thirst-quenching sensation when consumed are



important to the artist. For Steinhilber, these experiences have a relationship with the activity of the streaming fountain outside and the delight visitors express when observing its function.

A tandem installation on the Museum's Sculpture Plaza features a single tower of soda bottles set within a planting of trees. In this work, the artist focuses on the saturation of colors in the surrounding vegetation rather than on the transparency of the windows and fountain water. Periodically changing the composition of sodas in the rack, Steinhilber executes a kind of sculptural plein-air painting, in which beverages of varying colors are selected and mixed outdoors in response to the shifting tonalities of the overhanging leaves. Here again, Steinhilber underscores his relationship to painting by drawing on a long-held artistic tradition based on direct observation from nature.

Steinhilber's dialogue with painting and his desire to recontextualize the everyday have a long tradition in the history of art. His incorporation of the mundane and appreciation of its aesthetic value is grounded in Pop and minimalist traditions of the 1960s. Like other artists of his generation, including American

Fig. 3 detail of *Untitled*, 1996, 35 mm slide documentation of project in landscape, oil on plastic, 1 x 36 in (2.5 x 91.4 cm).

BIOGRAPHY

born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, 1972. Earned Bachelor of Fine Arts from Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, Wisconsin, 1994. Earned Masters of Fine Arts from American University, Washington, D.C., 2002. Received Small Projects Program Grant, 2002, and Young Artists Grant, 2003, from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. Lives and works in Washington, D.C. since 2000.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 "fission/fusion," Mexican Cultural Institute, Washington, D.C. (brochure)
"Model Home," Artscape, Baltimore, Maryland
"Transparent," Numark Gallery, Washington, D.C.
"CENSUS 03: New Art from D.C.," Corcoran College of Art + Design, Washington, D.C.
"Maggie Michael, Dan Steinhilber," Kimberly Venardos & Company, Inc., New York City
- 2002 "Multiplicity," Gallery Four, Baltimore, Maryland
"Dan Steinhilber," Museum of Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C.
"Nine Painters," G Fine Art, Washington, D.C.
"Recent Sculptures by Dan Steinhilber," Signal 66, Washington, D.C.
"artpoint," Art Basel, Miami Beach, Florida (brochure)
"DB Sides," Decatur Blue, Washington, D.C. (catalogue)
"Peculiarly Pink," Luxe, New York City
- 2001 "Maximum Capacity," Gallery Four, Baltimore, Maryland
"futur skulpture," McLean Project for the Arts, McLean, Virginia
"The Anne Barlow Show," Museum of Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C.

"Dan Steinhilber," Fulcrum Gallery, Washington, D.C.

I Street Gallery, Washington, D.C.

2000 "Art-O-Matic 2000," Washington, D.C.

"ArtRomp10," Studio 7, Washington, D.C.

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Franke-Ruta, Garance. "Dan Steinhilber." *Washington City Paper*, 15 March 2002, pp. 46–47.

Green, Tyler. "D.C. Diary." *artnet.com*, 16 April 2003.

O'Sullivan, Michael. "Steinhilber, Michael: Double Exposure." *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2002, WE pp. 64–65.

O'Sullivan, Michael. "A Singular Vision in Some Very Mixed Media." *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2002, WE pp. 51–52.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works and photographs courtesy the artist unless otherwise indicated.

Untitled, 2003, clothes hangers and plastic rods, dimensions variable.

Untitled, 2003, 2-liter soda bottles, soda, and wire soda racks, dimensions variable.

Untitled, 2003, 2-liter soda bottles, soda, wire soda rack, 16 x 9 x 60 in (40.6 x 22.9 x 152.4 cm); installation on the Museum's Sculpture Plaza.

Untitled, 2002, plastic trash bags and wet/dry vacuum, dimensions variable.



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sculptors Tara Donovan, Tony Feher, and Tom Friedman, who have variously massed found objects, including toothpicks, sugar cubes, and soda bottles, to create dense sculptural accumulations, Steinhilber puts a clever and often whimsical twist on minimalist form and seriality. Steinhilber's connection to painting relates his work more directly to the colorful wall and floor installations of Americans Jessica Stockholder and Polly Apfelbaum, who have since the 1980s deconstructed painting three-dimensionally in their art. Steinhilber's fascination with revealing the underlying aesthetics in nature and the urban landscape suggests an approach more akin to Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, whose poetic sensibility has been a touchstone for many artists working today.

Steinhilber's foray into sculpture from painting began in 1995 when he created his first work of mobile paint elements. He assembled squares cut from thin sheets of painted plastic into clusters or placed in meandering lines in the grass, along a stream, through a field of rocks, and

inside and around tree trunks (fig. 3). This and other ephemeral works were documented by the artist in 35 mm slides. In 1996 Steinhilber moved to Arroyo Seco, a mountainous region outside of Big Sur in Monterey County, California, where Steinhilber worked as a studio assistant to a bronze sculptor. It was during this period of living a primarily rural existence that he began to work increasingly outdoors. In subsequent installations in California and the Southwestern United States (1997–2000), Steinhilber unwove canvas into its constituent threads which he tied to trees and rocks and stretched tautly through a variety of landscapes. He made color notations along these structural lines by building globular densities of paint in response to colors found in the surrounding natural environment. While the paint "aspired to be nature" (by seeming to fuse with colors prevalent in the natural habitat), Steinhilber's emphatic lines in the landscape maintained the integrity of the picture plane in works essentially conceived as disembodied paintings.

Nature continues to provide potent inspiration to the artist, even after relocation to urban Washington, D.C. in 2000. In response to autumn 2001, Steinhilber catalogued the varying gradations of yellow on the leaves of a tree. The color samples, made by diluting paint with quantities of water, were contained in clear plastic food containers which he stacked and clustered in adjacent towers on the floor. That same year he affixed zipper sandwich bags filled with watered-down paint to the outside of a building, drawing attention to the interaction between the color-filled bags, the natural colors of spring, and the brick of the facade. The artist's "concept sketch" for the Hirshhorn (fig. 4), the sculptural

placement of a rack of soda bottles in nearby woods, reveals an ongoing dialogue with nature.

Steinhilber delights in subtle differences, whether found in the changing colors of a fall tree or the variations in the creations of humankind. While individual units in both nature and mass-produced reality may resemble each other, there are always slight variations, even imperfections, among individual component parts. It is in the discovery and surprise of these unanticipated variations that innovation and beauty often appear. Steinhilber welcomes such discoveries and surprises in his own work as he evolves his installations and labors to bring painting and sculpture, nature and artifice, into curious and arresting balance.

Olga M. Viso
Curator of Contemporary Art
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Quotations from the artist were drawn from conversations with the author on August 1 and 19, 2003, in Washington, D.C.

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