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Review: William Powhida wryly eyes the business of art

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So rare is good satire in contemporary art that its appearance — as in the newest exhibition of William Powhida, a New York-based artist who is fast evolving into one of its sharpest practitioners — makes one inclined to stand up and applaud.

The show, called “Bill by Bill,” at Charlie James Gallery, combines the motif that has become Powhida’s trademark — the *trompe l’oeil* painting of a sheet of paper covered in handwritten notes — with a series of artworks conceived on the basis of unspoken but eminently recognizable formulas.

There’s “Informal Materialism” (a chunk of scrap wood and a sheet of paint-stained canvas); “Asset Class Painting” (a trio of blurry, colorful abstractions); “A Taxonomy of Forms on a Shelf” (a cube, a sphere and other glazed ceramic objects lined up in a row); “A Hypothetical Word or Phrase in Neon” (simplified, perhaps for ease of fabrication, into an underscore or strike-through mark); and, what may be my favorite, “A Taxidermied Animal in a Box,” which is just what it implies, complete with foam peanuts.

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The works themselves are not slapdash cracks but dutifully, even earnestly constructed objects, largely indistinguishable from the classes of works that they mock. At a glance, it all reads as your typical group show.

The real pleasure lies in the *trompe l’oeil* notes that Powhida pairs with each work, which detail the concept, process and cost involved in language that playfully derides the absurdity of each of these tropes while occasionally exposing the darker economic conditions underlying them.

Of “DIY Informalism,” a clumsy mélange of bent-up stretcher bars and torn, paint-dripped canvas, Powhida writes: “Idea: To play around with some studio junk and stuff from the hardware store to make a few awkward objects ~~without thinking~~ intuitively with feeling!” (In a gratifying sidebar, Powhida alludes to the Hammer Museum’s recent biennial, which was loaded with just this sort of work.)

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Of “Post minimalism,” a row of tall, slickly finished sculptural columns based on economic statistics, he notes: “Idea: Have the fabricator make some bar graphs into ‘purely’ formal objects. Then apply some Kantian aesthetic logic and ~~separate~~ strip the content from the forms. Income inequality is too political and depressing.”

What saves the work from grating sarcasm or smart aleck cleverness — toward which the artist has erred in the past — is a curious undertone of sincerity. Powhida is not mean-spirited or bitter but seems genuinely driven to understand his subject: the internal mechanisms of this peculiar social and economic ecosystem. How does the art world work and how should we feel about that? How much of ourselves should we reconcile to it?

He clearly takes these questions seriously. If he didn’t, his excoriation wouldn’t be nearly so funny.

Charlie James Gallery, 969 Chung King Road, Los Angeles, (213) 687-0844, through June 8. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.cjamesgallery.com

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