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Ivin Ballen *50/50*

by Lynn Crawford

Winkleman Gallery, New York, New York November 29, 2007 – January 5, 2008

Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan November 9, 2007 – January 5, 2008

Does the term *late capitalism* still define the period preceding the system's predicted downfall, or could it, like *late childhood*, refer to a stage of development? Georges Perec's 1965 novel, *Things (Les Choses)* suggests that there is a connection between things and happiness, that Western consumer culture—troubled as it may be—quite possibly holds previously unseen and unpredicted promise for its citizens' welfare (though the nature of this link might be tricky to discover). In an interview about the novel, Perec said "you have to be absolutely modern to achieve happiness." The artist Ivin Ballen's buoyant renderings of networks and global production systems express a bracing, "thoroughly modern" sensibility and an interest in the existing, and potential, links between consumption and well being.

I first saw Ballen's work in his graduate studio at Cranbrook in 2006. I, like other visitors, thought I was looking at a two-and-three-dimensional assemblage (a la Robert Rauschenberg) made from packaging materials we frequently use, even rely on, but rarely consider (shipping boxes, duct tape, to-go containers, coffee cups, plastic water bottles), and was astonished to learn that the art works were not made with physical objects, but were actually trompe-l'oeil paintings of them. Ballen constructed maquettes from the previously mentioned items, cast them in aqua resin and fiberglass, painted them to look uncannily just like the original things, and used them to build fantastically shaped pieces.

Two years later, Ballen continues in this vein. The works are larger, denser, more visually complex and he occasionally includes pieces of actual elements (wood, stereo wires, bicycle crank, audio speakers) in his constructions. The drab beige color of cardboard and the shiny gray of duct tape are skillfully mimicked and cleverly offset with small patches of



Warren 2007 Fiberglass, Aquaresin, acrylic, oil 22" x 22" x 7"

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brushwork and broad swatches of bright colors. Some (with functioning speakers and wires) play music. Some appear to be commanding aerial views, detailed maps, multi-dimensional terrains. These at once evoke a sense of play (a youth's train track or model village) and things menacing (surveillance, invasion, air attack). Despite my familiarity with Ballen's process, I find myself running a hand along these new pieces, expecting to feel cardboard, Styrofoam, duct tape, rather than painting, and have an urge to touch the actual added-on objects to make sure they are "real" and not depicted.

The show's title, *50/50*, refers to the painting/sculpture hybrid composition of works, the fact that the exhibition is set up in two locations (Winkelman Gallery in New York and Susanne Hilberry Gallery outside of Detroit) and the dual function of materials, operating as equal parts utility and scenery.

Perec's novel deftly captures our modern, object-filled, landscape of interior spaces with careful descriptions of the very content, or *things*, packaged, purchased, unboxed, and placed in their owners' parlors, kitchens, studies (sofas, carpets, light fixtures, shelving). In contrast, Ballen's choice of objects and imagery—packaging used to ship, cart, contain—gives a nod to the unremarkable and everyday. His illustrations are not of precious, rare or even owned items, but ones most people, regardless of class, race, religion, or geographic location, see, touch, open, sip from, toss out, or recycle. His renderings of familiar objects placed in unfamiliar settings have different art historical references, including Robert Rauschenberg's collages. But for me, his work, like Perec's, asks the viewer to consider the culture's contemporary scenery and changing character and fits solidly into the tradition of American landscape painting. The 19th century Hudson River School depicted landscape as nature (trees, skies, fields, bodies of water) and enlightenment. For the Ashcan School of the early 20th century, the landscape was the harsh realities of urban streets. Ballen's depiction of the 21st-century landscape is made up of things produced, packaged, shipped and consumed by networks that are shadowy, hard to pin down, yet are not necessarily judged to be ominous or Kafkaesque. The floating paths, currents, systems, of capital, and ways people negotiate them, possess the potential of supporting, perhaps even generating, links between people, things and happiness, but also, and equally, the potential to squash such transactions. As Perec said, "Modern happiness is not an inner value." Ballen's paintings seem to indicate that achieving degrees of happiness within our "late capitalist" system is possible, even feasible, but only with considered, determined effort.

—Lynn Crawford

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