

ARTFORUM

Libby Black

HEATHER MARX GALLERY

A cooked lobster, a tin of caviar, a golden Louis Vuitton champagne bucket containing a bottle of Cristal, and a Chanel picnic basket with a baguette protruding from it are spread on a Burberry blanket in a feast of name-brand luxury. All that's missing is the diner, who has kicked off her magenta Prada high heels and quit the scene. One clue to her mode of departure might be the nearby boat emblazoned with a cheerful floral motif more often applied to pricey handbags and fitted with a life preserver bearing the iconic LV monogram. The tableau, *Picnic Set*, 2005, was constructed by Libby Black, who made each life-size object by hand from paper, hot glue, and acrylic, and arranged them like props in a low-budget set for a high-society farce, a murder mystery, or an updated dramatization of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.



Black has worked in this manner before, exhibiting a faux boutique at San Francisco's Manolo Garcia Gallery in 2003. More recently, for "Bay Area Now 4" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, she fabricated a convincing replica of San Francisco's Kate Spade store, stocked with handbags, personal organizers, and shoes, and accompanied by a loungey sound track. The project marked an advance in terms of craft yet also marked the limit of this particular aspect of Black's practice. The strategy of remaking luxury designer goods in cheap materials in order to comment upon their questionable appeal and value was a strategy that had, it seemed, run its course. This show, Black's first at Heather Marx, found the artist extending her investigations in darker and more nuanced directions.

The vividness of Black's sculptures was here tempered by eight more-pared-down, even somber, graphite drawings, based on magazine advertisements for high-end clothing. These sources are glossy and multicolored, but the works they have inspired are distinguished by a dull sheen and only one color. Rendered in a style that mixes assurance with naïveté, they suggest a melancholic narrative and a depth of feeling absent from the three-dimensional works. *Burberry Horseman*, 2004, for example, depicts a jockey in a forest landscape dressed in plaid pants and jacket and an antique helmet. Self-consciously theatrical, he could be a knight in shining armor or a dangerous psychopath.

A comparable ambiguity appears in three drawings of fashion models. *Louis Vuitton Woman*, 2005, depicts a reclining Kate Moss type with well-coiffed hair and an impossibly beautiful face frozen in an expression of either ecstasy or pain. (Considered alongside those evacuated shoes and Gucci "Old Town" Canoe, 2005, the work acquires an Ophelian subtext.) *Woman with Net*, 2005, is a portrait in which the subject seems overwhelmed by a snood that covers her head. It evokes 1950s fashion photography, but again, the use of graphite hints at a tragic subtext, as the subject is trapped like a fairy-tale heroine.

Black wisely punctuated the show with *Flowers in a Vase with Gucci Purse*, 2005, a still-life drawing based on an advertisement that parodies an art-historical precedent in which an abundant bouquet overpowers a tiny purse. The setup is modeled after a seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas painting, but by draining it of color, Black transforms it into a nature morte. Fashion, she reminds us, is an endless cycle of yearning, obsolescence, and rebirth, and in these works she captures the complex range of emotions that shadow the guilty pleasure of paying too much.

—Glen Helfand

Originally printed in *Artforum Magazine*, November 2005