

THE RIB



Transcendent Functionalism at Jeff Bailey Gallery

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HUDSON, NEW YORK | RESPONSE

BY CAITLIN MACBRIDE
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CODY BARBER
COLBY BIRD
NICOLE CHERUBINI
NICK DeMARCO
STEPHEN EAKIN
SYLVIA HEISEL
DOUG JOHNSTON
MAIA RUTH LEE

KIM MARKEL
ELISE McMAHON
SHARI MENDELSON
EMMETT MOORE
SARA GREENBERGER RAFFERTY
RICHARD ROTH
with objects from the SHAKER MUSEUM

"If it is not useful or necessary, free yourself from imagining that you need to make it.

"If it is useful and necessary, free yourself from imagining that you need to enhance it by adding what is not an integral part of its usefulness or necessity.

"And finally: If it is both useful and necessary and you can recognize and eliminate what is not essential, then go ahead and make it as beautifully as you can."

- The rule of thumb for Shaker creations, from *ShakerBuilt* by Paul Rochleau & June Sprigg
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Jeff Bailey Gallery's current show *Transcendent Functionalism* features artists and designers who consider usefulness as a guiding principle. The exhibition asks: what is usefulness? Humor? Obsession? Is the past useful? Is the future?

The makers included in *Transcendent Functionalism* consider all possibilities to these questions from the jump. Viewers are offered chairs, planters, vessels, lights, a cloak. The dark humor of 2017 seems to rattle around the gallery. In the wake of a year that left many grappling with their function and worth as citizens, it's particularly useful to consider the American history of object-making. Gallerist Jeff Bailey leads us on a path of contemporary art-making while also harkening back to the history of design established by the utopian community of the Shakers.

This is not the first time art's relationship to Shaker design has been explored. The Parrish Museum paired Shaker objects alongside Donald Judd's furniture in 1996 with the twin exhibits "Shaker: The Art of Craftsmanship" and "Focus: Donald Judd Furniture." The modernist pairing was explored again at The Met last year with "Simple Gifts," which placed the museum's Shaker objects alongside work by artists such as Martha Graham's modern dance "Appalachian Spring," featuring set design by Isamu Noguchi and a score by Aaron Copeland. All three artists were inspired by Shaker life and aesthetics.



Stephen Eakin, *I Found This Level In My Grandparent's Barn*, 2015.
Image courtesy Jeff Bailey Gallery.

Transcendent Functionalism feels timely in a way that goes beyond the aesthetic. The thrift-minded economy and intentional focus with which these objects are made calls to mind the American tenacity I recognize to be more true than the "America" we are often fed by high budget movies and certain gold-plated oligarchs.

Stephen Eakin's *I Found This Level In My Grandparent's Barn* features an old, yet beautiful, wooden level sunk into a wooden structure built by the artist. Entwined together they hang on the wall from a series of Shaker-style coat hooks. The use value of the level is submerged in the artistic value of the art piece. This style of carpenter levels are more commonly known as "Spirit Levels," which is in keeping with Eakin's interest in both the Shakers and his own cross-generational family influences. It appears as if the artist/carpenter's tools became stuck in and absorbed by his finished piece. Eakin is clearly thinking of use value with his other piece in the show *This Keyboard Is A Piece Of Shit*, which resurrects a broken computer keyboard by placing it within a wooden structure topped by a red ladder pointing toward heaven.

Works by Shari Mendelson, Emmett Moore, Kim Markel, Elise McMahan, and others repurpose common materials into functional objects, albeit ones that are perhaps too beautiful to actually use. Recycled plastic bottles become delicate archaic-looking vessels in Mendelson's work, while Markel repurposes her

plastics to be sensitively sturdy chairs. Artists are familiar with the reputation of being members of society who are considered useless while somehow having infinite technical skills and problem solving prowess. In many ways this show explores the current political sensation of considering one's effectiveness or agency in our country and the smaller communities we call home. Simultaneously it considers the work of the artist, the responsibility to consider everything useful material, from our emotions to our trash.



Colby Bird, *Candles: "Dinner, Andes, NY"*. Image courtesy Jeff Bailey Gallery.

In a quiet moment just as one enters the gallery are two woven basket-like pieces by artist Doug Johnston. *Filter*, 2017 and *Magnet*, 2017, both made of American-flag rope and nylon thread appear as a net-like structure attached to the wall and a basket sitting below it on the floor. The intricacy of these structures and the delicate care with which they have been constructed remind the viewer that

usefulness is not only in the finished product, but in the meditative process of the making. The spiritual value that the Shakers esteemed was often in the quiet, fervent repetition notable in the woven seats of their chairs, one of which is featured in the show. The same meditative spiritual compulsion that is their name sake, given to them for the "shaking" dance moves they performed, is not dissimilar to the movements my generation found solace and transcendence in at '90s raves or the '00s underground noise shows.

A darkly ominous photo of candles against a background of vines and leaves by artist Colby Bird is a solarized photostatic print coated all the way through with multiple layers of oil-based woodstain and charcoal. The photo's surface reflects the objects in the center of the gallery, most notably the Shaker cloak. This rose hued wool cloak perched upon a mannequin feels like a ghostly presence in the space. Its resemblance to the women of Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" weighs heavy on the other objects in the room. This piece feels frighteningly prescient as our political climate beckons us back to another era. While the Shakers were socially progressive, guided by a belief in racial and sexual equality, pacifism, and common property, they were also limited by their repressive stance against procreation as well as the rapidly changing culture at large. They stand a reminder that every utopian movement has its flaws and the best of progressive intentions can be derailed. Yet, what their hands created remains with us. Hearts to God, and Hands to Work, this show stands to prove that through art making and design they will persist.



Installation view, *Transcendent Fuctionalism*. Image courtesy Jeff Bailey Gallery.

Jeff Bailey Gallery is a contemporary art gallery located in Hudson, New York. The gallery opened in New York City in 2003 and moved to Hudson in 2014. The gallery is a member of the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA).
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RESPONSE

A feature of project reviews experienced in person. Response will provide artists with much needed critical response to their work. Response is opinion-based but is not an op-ed.

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