

22.10.13

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Mingel: Are You Here? at London's Pace Gallery

OPINION

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Objects in Conversation

London

19 October 2013

If objects could talk, what would they say? How do artefacts communicate their ideas and establish affinities with, or differences from, their material counterparts?

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Two shows have recently opened in London that explore precisely this idea of objects in conversation – Mingei: Are You Here? at Pace Gallery and Spaces in Between at Gallery Libby Sellers. While different in their content and curation, both exhibitions put objects of different authors in dialogue in order to explore what commonalities and influences they share.

Out of the two, Spaces in Between is the more explicitly engaged with this idea. It is itself a form of conversation; the gallery invited Dutch designer Aldo Bakker to curate a show as a way to start talking about working together. He responded by selecting objects from the gallery's existing inventory of designers – including Formafantasma, Max Lamb, Julia Lohmann and Gero Grundmann – and pairing them with pieces from his own back catalogue.

The objects have been assembled into individual interchanges organised according to themes such as function, process and structure. They include Bakker's Le Lac table from 2007, the deep green Urushi (coloured Japanese lacquer) surface of which has been juxtaposed with Peter Marigold's cast bronze Wooden Vases A&B from 2011.

These offer two opposed, but equally seductive, riffs on the aesthetic of craftsmanship: Bakker's painstaking removal of any visible human intervention is the antithesis of Marigold's freeze-framing of his objects' messy, spontaneous making. Yet not all the juxtapositions are about contrast; Bakker's Copper Watering Can and Jonathan Muecke's copper Step Stool both consist of an object whose appearance is functionally ambiguous, with it falling to their names to explicate their intended uses.

Unlocking the meaning of objects is also at the centre of Mingei: Are You Here?, the first group exhibition to be held at Pace London, the newest branch of the American gallery giant. The exhibition examines the legacy of Mingei, the early twentieth-century Japanese folk craft movement led by Japanese intellectual Sōetsu Yanagi, which sought to assert the values of the nation's anonymous and vernacular crafts amidst the pernicious processes of industrialisation, modernisation and Westernisation.

The 25 international artists, designers and architects selected cover the period from the movement's inception in the 1920s to the present. They are a diverse but impressive bunch, ranging from the artists Anni and Josef Albers, Isamu Noguchi and Lee Ufan, to the designers Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison and the architect Kenzo Tange.

Ideas of design are central to the exhibition. Mingei championed everyday materials and useful and honest forms, qualities that Yanagi's son, Sori Yanagi, fed into his 1954 Butterfly bent plywood stool. With its Eastern-inspired design and mass-scale production, the stool expressed a cultural hybridity that was at Mingei's core and a seemingly timeless, universal quality that attracted several Modernist designers to the movement.

Charlotte Perriand travelled to Japan in the early 1940s and re-created her European designs with local materials and techniques. More recently, Morrison and Fukasawa have demonstrated their interest in the movement's values in both their own, minimalist design work, and their curation of the 2006 exhibition *Super Normal: Sensations of the Ordinary*, which put the commonplace centre stage in both anonymous and authored objects alike.

The curation of *Mingei: Are You Here?* is curious. Occupying the length of one side of the gallery, the display consists of stepped surfaces on which works of different media, authors and eras are juxtaposed. It is intended to invoke the display system of the ethnographic museum, one that has historically defined the presentation of folk crafts.

Yet while this effect is achieved, it is not clear how it comments on, rather than duplicates this problematic display mode. The display serves to prioritise the visual over the material and contextual; this is not just because it denies seeing objects in the round, but also because no labels are present on the objects themselves. Explication is instead confined to an accompanying pamphlet.

Making mute objects talk is a difficult exercise, and neither exhibition entirely achieves it. For one thing, the conversation is simply too one-sided. It would be interesting to know what Bakkers' selected designers think of his use of their works, just as it would be to know what the Pace Gallery exhibitors have to say about any influence Mingei has exerted on their practice.

Nevertheless, both exhibitions offer interesting openers for future activity; whether that is the works that Bakker creates next, or an exploration of the influence of folk and the vernacular on designers in other cultures. Ultimately what is most valuable about these exhibitions' attempt to make connections between objects is what these reveal about the exhibits themselves; these unexpected and unusual assemblages heighten the personalities of the individual objects and draw out qualities that tend to be hidden in individual or more conventional group exhibitions - something that the curators are to be commended for.

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Spaces In Between is on display at Gallery Libby Sellers on Berners Street until 14 December

Mingei: Are You Here? is on display at Pace London on Lexington Street until 14 December