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In Detroit, Artists Explore the Riches of the 99-Cent Store

By Chris Hampton

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DETROIT — Like the aisles of a discount shop, the gallery space is overstocked. The goods on view appear similar, too: kitchen gadgets, balloons, toys, office supplies, small electronics, and packaging marked by logos, some belonging to familiar brands. Taking on the subject of the 99-cent shop, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, known as MOCAD, has begun to resemble one. And, as if dictated by some retail merchandising strategy, the abundance and jumble of artworks on display is overwhelming.

MOCAD's summer exhibition, "99 Cents or Less," asked more than 100 artists based in the United States to make new works from materials purchased only at dollar stores, with a total budget of \$99 each. The museum's senior curator at large, Jens Hoffmann, invited participants to consider the dollar store — and its proliferation since the Great Recession — as an emblem of widening economic inequality, globalization, complex supply chains and rampant consumerism.



Scott Hocking, inspired by graffiti that said “empty vessels make the most noise,” used an oily rope to link several used shopping carts for this installation.

Laura McDermott for The New York Times

His call mentioned its forbears — including Arte Povera, the 1960s and '70s Italian avant-garde movement that used everyday items as art materials, and Marcel Duchamp's ready-made sculptures, celebrating their 100th year in 2017 — as historical references. The project gained extra gravity by virtue of its setting, Detroit: The birthplace of mass production and former industrial capital of the country, the city in 2013 also made the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in United States history.

Detroit has an especially high concentration of dollar stores, Mr. Hoffmann pointed out. Products that might once have been made there are now born in South, Southeast and East Asian factories — delivered and sold for less than a buck. Like the dollar store, it's the quantity and variety of objects at “99 Cents or Less,” which runs through Aug. 6, that first captures gallery visitors — many made by brand-name talents, like John Baldessari, Alex Israel, Rob Pruitt, Matt Mullican and Josephine Meckseper, to name a few.

For his piece, Sean Raspet gave surface cleansers to the museum's maintenance staff.

Laura McDermott for The New York Times

Mr. Pruitt has laid out 48 gradient poster boards to create a massive color-field wall hanging. Mr. Israel made a Calder-ish mobile. Ms. Meckseper created a shelf assemblage of engaging mirrored items not dissimilar to those she typically explores in her art. Mr. Baldessari, on the other hand, considered a minimalist, went crazy with sparkle glue, feathers and found images of horses (with the help of his assistant and her 2½-year-old daughter).

From the outset, Mr. Hoffmann, like many of the participating artists, was mindful, he said, of the criticism that the show could be seen as another exercise in what he describes as “the fancy art world gone slumming.” “There’s certainly a humorous element,” he says, but at the same time, the exhibition is meant to begin serious dialogues. Just like stock in a dollar shop, there’s an astonishing range of quality: Some offerings appear perfunctory and flimsy, while other works — the true bargains — thoughtfully engage the assignment.

Mark Handforth’s candle installation. Laura McDermott for The New York Times

Some artists weren’t comfortable spending their budget on dollar-store goods, and so the workarounds, protests and solutions they devised embodied their responses. Scott Hocking, a local artist who has previously worked with decaying and eroding man-made objects and was wary of the unethical labor practices potentially involved in the manufacture of dollar-store wares, chose instead to spend his \$99 on seven used shopping carts bought from a mom-and-pop discount store in the suburb of Hamtramck. He tied them together using an oily rope he had in his studio, emulating a scrap collector’s cart train, but left the buggies empty, inspired by a piece of graffiti that said “empty vessels make the most noise.”

Jason Lazarus, with only a tin of black shoe polish, outlined the storefront of a Family Dollar shop on the gallery wall. He donated the rest of his budget to the Campaign for Healthier Solutions — an initiative asking discount retailers to adopt corporate policies to identify and remove harmful chemicals from their stores.

“Untitled (Piggy Bank Change),” Virginia Overton’s contribution to “99 Cents or Less.”
Laura McDermott for The New York Times

Other participants explored the ubiquity of dollar-store products. Acknowledging “it’s where most of America shops,” the Los Angeles-based artist Sean Raspet sampled surface cleaners available in Detroit dollar stores and mixed them together, turning the resulting solution over to the maintenance staff to use on their regular rounds, emphasizing the sort of labor and goods that are often made invisible.

Agnieszka Kurant offered a darker take, likening dollar-store goods to palliatives, painkillers and placebos. She bought items like self-help books, hula hoops, cooking utensils, ramen noodles and had the lot industrially pulverized, then pressed by a compacting company into pills. Dependence

on cheap and unsustainable consumer goods is like an addiction, she suggests.

Hanging in the main gallery space, Osman Khan has built a 13-foot donkey piñata he called “The Allegory of the Horse” after a Mongol story in which a high priest instructs survivors of a famine to sacrifice their horses in order to be showered with gifts from the gods. For Mr. Khan, his donkey-horse represents labor.

During the first week of August, the piñata will be bashed open and out will tumble an egg separator, graduation party favors, lawn ornaments, “all of the most useless things I could find,” Mr. Khan said. He will sacrifice the horse — now, for the riches of the dollar store.

99 Cents or Less

Through Aug. 6, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit; mocadetroit.org/

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