

# At Area Galleries, Singularly Focused Groups

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At local art galleries, August is the month for group shows, often grouped thematically. One of the current exhibitions, Project 4's "Useless," offers an interesting angle on the gaps between the aesthetic and the practical, and the singular and the mass-produced. Indirectly, it also provides a possible way at looking at some of the other group displays in town.

For much of human history, the very notion of "Useless" would have been inexplicable. All art had a purpose, whether it was to be decorative, glorify God or simply flatter a patron. But as art became pure self-expression, and then increasingly conceptual, a divide developed between the artist and a world awash in consumer products. In a sense, all modern art became useless.

In "Useless," artists pay rueful tribute to architecture and industrial design by making objects that look as if they ought to be purposeful but aren't. Pull David Ruy and Karel Klein's "Wallpaper Furniture" off the wall and it could almost be a sled. Its red tendrils have the sleekness of an object that's meant to move but a shape that's designed for, well, nothing practical.

Some of the pieces emulate, alter or parody real things, often furniture. A bed frame hangs by threads, as if snared by a giant spider; three molded plastic forms in shades of black and gray seem to almost be seats; and decorative "books" in a stack feature mirrored covers and spines. The show's exemplary entry, Mark Wentzel's "Xlounge," bloats a leather Eames chair and ottoman until they lose their relaxation factor. A cat or perhaps a kid could perch here, but an adult would find no comfort.

Benjamin Jurgensen's "From Nothing to Less Than Something" (which could have been the show's title) is a yellow pump attached to a lime-green tricycle. The bright colors suggest plastic, the ultimate consumer material, but this toy of a toy has to settle for being painted wood. Almost a century after Marcel Duchamp first exhibited his "ready-mades" -- everyday items transformed simply by being placed in a gallery -- high art is still a little in awe of the manufactured object.

"Useless" includes Cory Ingram's packaging and poster for a macho fragrance called "Crude," which seems to contain crude oil. At Honfleur Gallery, "Girl Machine" explores femininity, although not with fictional products.

The items in the installation that give the show its name are all real and mostly pink. Katie Cercone assembled a bed, a mannequin and a refrigerator stuffed with "girlish" items: cupcakes and Q-tips, ice cream and gum, pink toilet paper and pink baby bottles. In two smaller collages, "Lovely Me Banner" and "My Last Night in Bulimia," she employs musical talismans (Madonna and [Jane Fonda](#)'s workout on cassette; Crosby, Stills & Nash in a pink eight-track shell) and ready-made virgin-or-whore images: the [Virgin Mary](#), Hello Kitty and voluptuous nudes.

The latter juxtaposition is predictable, and none of Cercone's work is startling. But it's constructed with

energy and wit, is packed with associations and demonstrates how girls -- and, by implication, boys, too -- assemble their identities from merchandised images. Those worn Bambi sheets on the bed, for example, are probably genuine artifacts from Cercone's childhood.

The show, which closes this weekend, includes works by Holly Andres and Jeanette May that also conjure the formative influence of girlhood. Andres's high-definition glossy photographs depict a grim little girl in settings that evoke the artist's upbringing, and May places photos of real women's faces at the center of drawings of such super-heroines as Wonder Woman and Batwoman.

Baby bottles are also on display in "Introductions3," Irvine Contemporary's exhibition of art by recent graduates from top art schools throughout the country. Akemi Maegawa makes porcelain bottles with part of an image on each one; when lined up as intended, they reveal the silhouette of a telescopic rifle. Like all the work in the show, "Baby Bottles With Gun" is beautifully made. But its link between birth and death seems glib. More evocative is the D.C. artist's "Wrapping Project -- New Studio," a table full of commonplace items, each endowed with mystery by being wrapped in felt. The piece reduces such simple objects as hammers to their essential shapes by covering them; the things become their own Platonic forms, yet underneath they're just stuff from any hardware store.

The diverse show includes photographs, paintings, video, sculpture and constructions by 10 additional young artists. Much of the work seems a little too art-schooled, but the level of craftsmanship is consistently high.

Everything is two-dimensional in "sub-text," a first-rate photographic show at Randall Scott Gallery. Yet Mexican photographer Alejandra Laviada's "Juarez #56," a suite of 16 photos, is a fantasia of workaday objects. Shot in an abandoned office building, the images depict marred walls and shopworn junk, all of which could hardly be more ordinary. Yet Laviada is not simply an observer.

She's a choreographer of the obsolete, stacking battered chairs and pale-yellow telephones and scattering fluorescent tubes like pickup sticks.

Complete transformation is not her goal; all these things are easily identifiable. But she does find unexpected radiance in the industrial hues of coiled wires and battered brooms. Laviada's photographs offer a different definition of "useless" -- formerly useful things that are now outmoded -- only to find new use in their factory-made beauty.

The exhibit also includes Victor Cobo's sumptuously gritty images of [San Francisco](#) lowlifes, Lindsey McCracken's otherworldly views of the nexus between nature and man (and man's trash), and two approaches to female identity, by Sarah Wilner and Caitlin Phillips.

*USELESS* Through Sept. 8 at Project 4, 903 U St. NW. 202-232-4340.<http://www.project4gallery.com>.

*GIRL MACHINE* Through Saturday at Honfleur Gallery, 1241 Good Hope Rd. SE. 202-889-5000.<http://www.honfleurgallery.com>.

*INTRODUCTIONS3* Through Sept. 8 at Irvine Contemporary, 1412 14th St NW. 202-332-8767.<http://www.irvinecontemporary.com>.

*SUB-TEXT* Through Sept. 8 at Randall Scott Gallery, 1326 14th St. NW. 202-332-0806.<http://www.randallscottgallery.com>.

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