PAINTING WITH OBJECTS

A SERIES OF EXPERIMENTAL WORKS CALLED *CONTRIVED NOTIONS* SHOWS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SMALL OBJECTS ARE CONFINED TO THE FORMAT OF PAINTING

Mike Shaffer

The *Contrived Notions* Series is so named because in most cases the completed work, generally made up of from a few objects to many, consists of components that have been quizzically devised, invented or forced into one of several specific formats. The formats address issues of order, classification and organization using individual and similar objects and multiples. All of the over 60 works in the series are designed as studies for larger projects and installations

By using objects in unusual ways such as can be accomplished with out of character juxtapositioning, transforming them with paint and other mediums and treatments, using them out of context and gathering them as multiples into groups, I can perhaps offer viewers object-paintings that provoke their thinking, not only about what art is, but also about the points along the continuum bounded on one end by (call it) painting and the other by (call it) sculpture.

Wholeness (as it applies to abstraction), the idea that a work should be viewed in its entirety and not in terms of its components, is important in all of my work. By intermingling objects the way one ordinarily combines pigments or by arranging them in ways that suggest varying degrees of order and confining the results to the essentially two-dimensional format of painting, I am trying to make abstract entities out of non-abstract parts. The viewer's job is to see the work as a painting and not as a group or arrangement of things. Generally I have found that the larger the works are with respect to the size of their components and the more tightly packed the objects are, the more they will get homogenized in the mix or take on the character of bricks in a wall, resulting in viewers being more likely to be able to visualize their texture or pattern and respond to them as if they were paintings.

Another property of this series centers around the recognizability of the objects, a factor that obviously relates a great deal to the experience of the observer. Objects, such as pieces of laboratory equipment, for example, might very well appear abstract to those unfamiliar with them but illicit a surprise response to persons with backgrounds in the sciences. In another scenario, it is reasonable to conjecture that the more readily one recognizes or "identifies with" the component objects, the more difficult it would be to avoid being distracted by them and appreciate the work's abstractness in the manner in which it is intended. I expect that for most viewers, works made using mass marketed products such grocery or food items would not likely be influenced by the abstractness of their presentation. Moreover, seeing only one or two works would not likely convey much in the way of concepts related to order and classification. Another aim is to use certain multiple objects in a way that will magnify their importance rather than diminish it as with the bricks in a wall effect.

Objects that make up the works in the series are organized according to one of several specific schemes. Different items in *Sinus Tea Money Gum* (left), are set out individually into an "Arrangement." A "Collection" is a group of objects placed into columns and rows as in *Nine Easy Pieces*, (right). Other named groups include "Aggregations" and "Accumulations."

I noticed in retrospect that as I progressed into the series I moved away from using "non-object-like objects" (i.e., featureless objects such as pieces of wood) and took up with more "object-like objects," that is to say, recognizable objects such as mouse traps and paint brushes. And, as a result, some works take on a quality that makes them difficult to see as being paintings. I suspect that for these kinds of works, viewers may find it more challenging to appreciate them for what they are intended to be than for the way they appear. ✣