

“I want to avoid classical music,
bragging about its intelligence,
punk’s redundant suicides.
I want to get as close as possible to rain
without actually being in it,
my umbrella in total collapse,
just another metaphysical argument.
I would rather spend an hour with a dying squirrel
than tour a cathedral
although I like the poor lighting,
the tortured frescos
as if you could be threatened into paradise”

- Dean Young, from “Paradise Poem”

Tender Alchemists explores the arbitrary designations of value assigned to objects, artistic methods, and materials.

I. But does it spark joy?

In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution generated an excess of consumer goods, and with it, a mania for collecting and novelty. Paperweights, aquariums, taxidermy—a cacophony of knickknacks birthed by innovations in manufacturing—peppered Victorian interiors. The libidinous act of acquisition, once the exclusive domain of lords and merchants, was suddenly accessible to all.

Commodities are commonly associated with the existential bareness of mass culture, but in the industrial era, they quickly became extensions of the personal identity and experience of the consumer. Cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin dubbed the early collector of consumer goods the “furnished man” —a specifically modern subject whose psyche exists symbiotically with its surrounding objects. As Marie Kondo’s popular maxim confirms, objects demand certain responses from subjects. They seduce consumers by drawing them close, by offering an intimacy that unfolds in the owner’s imagination.

Today, mass culture is global in scope, and its products resonate with both personal and shared significance. Walter Benjamin once remarked that since modern people

lack universal cultural lore, customs, or religion, they also lack forms of communal symbolic language that have traditionally served as the basis for group coherence and mutual understanding. In its place, consumer goods, technologies, novelty items—anything definitive of a shared place and time—shoulder the burden of common symbolism and poetic resonance.

Many contemporary artists acknowledge the near-universal currency of mass culture, and that there is no creative modality free from its ubiquity, or from Western hierarchies of taste that pit kitsch against fine art. One way these artists cull meaning from the commercialized homogeneity of modern life is to call attention to the friction between the broader cultural mythologies embedded in mass-produced objects and the seemingly personal meanings they tend to invoke. The objects in Dean Young's dying squirrel poem—a ringtone, a broken umbrella—that engender meaningful experiences for the speaker are neither culturally valuable nor commercially viable. Global capitalism's vampiric dependency on hyper-production requires that its products be abandoned, sloughed off like dead skin in the wake of modernity's pursuit of novelty and progress. Young's collapsed umbrella resonates because its dysfunction makes it a symbol of capitalist processes of production and consumption, desirability and abandonment. In the purgatory between functional consumer object and waste, it suffers a loss of identity, but becomes an ontological proposition. Trash? Treasure? The object's vulnerability feels familiar.

II. Spells

Porsche, Whole Foods, Neimans--a litany of names recited, conjured, incanted. Little word-long protection spells.

The venn diagram of self-identification with luxury brands and the witchiness of high-end, commodified wellness culture is a single circle. Both require magical thinking, or at least faith in the elevating power of luxury. Fendi. A fetish.

Like a white lady at a Goop summit, luxury is fragile. Luxury is a condition that only exists by cultivating a qualitative difference from the things it is not: the austere, the shabby, the tacky, the mundane. Luxury maintains the boundaries of lack and is defined by those same contours in turn; it can only exist under the threat of loss. Under these conditions, agents of the culture industry make histrionic claims wealth's power

to satisfy: "Lashes and diamonds, ATM machines/Buy myself all of my favorite things//Whoever said money can't solve your problems/ Must not have had enough money to solve 'em."

Luxury is also an elastic category, or so we learn when one group of people legislate resources away from another, re-defining the routine goods and services that make life more bearable (washing machines, cab rides) as frivolous expenditures. They scrupulously chart luxury's territory and police its borders, aware that late-stage capitalism--an optimistic term for an economic system with an indefinite end--breeds precarity across its spectrum.

But while luxury is fundamentally an economic paradigm, its shadow is an aesthetic concept--one which, much like Peter Pan's shadow, can be liberated from its host.

III. Tender Alchemists

The artists in *Tender Alchemists* undermine the false dichotomies of luxury and austerity, art and craft, and form and function.

Joshua Kent creates abstract compositions with discarded objects. These sensitive compositions are highly formal, however, given the state of some of the found materials Kent works with, they could be (and have been) mistaken for parodies of formalism. But the histories these objects reference are not art's but their own. In Kent's words, the materials collected have been "imposed upon" by the world. They signify the riverbanks from which they were pulled, the sunlight that faded their colors, the pocket that carried them home. Kent's meticulous arrangements intentionally adhere to the Modernist doctrine of Significant Form while embodying the terroir of the environments from which their component parts were found. The gum wrappers or broken plates that find their way into Kent's work, already historically rich, acquire additional meaning, and contingent preciousness, when they become art.

With a nod to the homemaking practices of pioneer America and Pakistan, Zehra Khan simulates traditional textiles with vernacular materials such as permanent marker and hot glue--humble craft items that simultaneously reference mass production, childhood nostalgia, and DIY embellishment-on-a-budget. Khan also draws from an array of aesthetic sources, including Post-Impressionist pointillism, which enjoys global visibility via prestigious museums, and Pakistani truck art, which remains largely confined to the

streets of South Asia. Notably, these forms of painting share specific formal concerns. Both are defined by painstakingly crafted, vibrantly colored details that are visually arresting on a granular level, yet harmonize with their respective artworks' total compositions.

If both artists focus on formalism, why claim that this exhibition is about arbitrary designations of value? The answer has to do with "art" as an ontological category and the invisible frame categorization draws around an object. Calling a mundane object or material art suggests that it is worthy of attention, and attention calls forth the meanings and resonances that accumulate and attach to the things populating daily life; especially things presumed to be beneath our notice. In this sense, Joshua Kent and Zehra Khan are tender alchemists, although it might be wrong to say that their chrysopoetic gestures turn crude materials into gold. Their magic is contextual. By re-presenting marginalia as objects worthy of being beheld, they validate the quiet opulence of everyday experience.