

REPETITION GIVES THE ART GUYS A BIG SCORE

Regina Hackett, Seattle Post Intelligencer, 1999



Suitcase Wheel, 1995, suitcase, steel

Who uses the most annoying song in the English language as inspiration for subtly beautiful art? The Art Guys from Houston, now at the Tacoma Art Museum. Organized by associate curator Greg Bell, "The Art Guys Again and Again" concentrates on the sculptures, drawings and collages that emphasize the pair's dogged determination to repeat themselves. Their reasoning would be familiar to any junkie. If one is good, a hundred's better and so forth. For them, "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" has the resonance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

The Art Guys' '99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall' is just that. The purity of the design - no labels, tops sandblasted to a silvery sheen - and the absurdity of the premise gives the piece its punch.

Less collectively known as Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth, the Art Guys have been fused at the hip, aesthetically speaking, since the 1980s. By teaming up, they found a way to make distinctive art from commonplace materials, similar to Gilbert & George in London and Komar & Melamid in New Jersey.

Attitude sets the Art Guys apart. They put their stamp on elements of popular culture but insist it's a stamp of approval. They could be the least alienated artists in America, or maybe they're faking.

In a 1988 performance, "Food for Thought," they sat in a booth at a Denny's Restaurant for 24 hours. Why? To celebrate the winter solstice in a significant place. They dig Denny's. Doesn't everybody?

For "Suits: Clothes Make the Man," the Art Guys became walking billboards. After leasing advertising space on suits they wear for a year (through July), they've festooned themselves with messages from pant cuffs to padded shoulders.

They're getting paid for what many Americans do for free: wear the label on the outside. Wearing labels is an ordinary act. Wearing them in this quantity becomes ridiculous. Bulk turns the piece into an incisive critique of corporate body snatching, in spite of the artists' protests to the contrary.

To hear them tell it, they love advertising and just want to get in on the action. Why do athletes get paid to push products, and not artists?

As in the case of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, it's hard to tell if their art is smarter than they are or if they're brilliant straight men. They score either way.

In selecting material, the Art Guys are the opposite of jackdaws: They're drawn to everything that doesn't glitter. Hence, visiting a friend in San Francisco, they were fascinated not by the Golden Gate Bridge but by the gum ground into the pavement on their friend's street, 498 pieces in various states of decay.

They took photos, printed them 3 inches high by 5 inches wide, laid them into a grid and the rest is history: "All the Gum on the Sidewalk Outside Our House at 65 Capp Street," from 1995.

They alone knew that long, stringy carrots could become a sculpture: "Carrot Ring" (1993-96), and that processed cheese slices laid end to end in a square on the floor ("Cheese Grid," 1998), could smartly update Carl Andre's pioneering piece of flat-on-the-floor, metal Minimalism.

Remember making streamers woven from gum wrappers to decorate the den? Don't be ashamed. You were ahead of your time. The Art Guys take a similar approach to

marbles, Life Savers and Tootie Fruitie cereal. Their church made of pencils merges Gothic architecture with Tramp art decor.

The best piece in the show, however, has to be their "Suitcase Wheel," 1990-95, roughly 8 feet around and 2 feet thick, made of Samsonite luggage from the 1950s and 1960s. In an airport, this piece would stop travelers in their tracks and fill them with awe - the familiar made magnificent.

As Donald Barthelme, Houston's greatest fiction writer, was fond of pointing out, there was no comedy before the Fall. "No one cracked jokes in Eden; there was no need." Trouble creates both psychosis and humor, which is why, Barthelme said, the 20th century "staggers to a close in a blizzard of one-liners."

The Art Guys are obviously doing their heroic best to keep their audiences cool and uncrazy. If their work isn't everybody's idea of deep, it beats grief, drugs or therapy.