

Gaylen Gerber

Galerie Emanuel Layr, Rome 26 November – 17 February

Gaylen Gerber's first solo show in Emanuel Layr's Rome gallery offers cause for reflection on the diversity of objects that populate our collective global history. Indebted both to the readymade and the monochrome, the exhibition features 21 found objects from diverse origins, all of them uniformly painted by the American artist in one of two colours: an institutional grey and an off-white.

These objects, all named *Support* (no date) and positioned on seven untreated MDF plinths, appear both homogenised and, at the same time, more clearly differentiated by their uniform colouring. This contradiction is met with another, as the works are somehow freed from their history in undergoing a process of standardisation, without effacing their origins. The positioning of, for example, an earthenware statuette of the Tang Dynasty (618–800 CE) next to an earthenware bowl made by the Anasazi (Ancient Pueblo peoples) – who populated the Southwestern United States from 800 to 1200 CE – appears to elevate both of them. Through a myriad of juxtapositions between objects placed on the same plinth and across different plinths, the uniqueness of each item is somehow emphasised. From aluminium drinks cans to protective statuettes and icons made to ward off bad spirits, to a Hindu musical trumpet

of the late-nineteenth-to-early-twentieth century, something of the diversity of human activity is convened under one roof.

Naturally the tendency is to look for, or invent, narratives spun from the correlation between objects. According to the laws of Gestalt psychology, we are bound to do so whether we intend to or not. In this light the first plinth seems particularly rife with associations, hosting as it does an off-white aluminium drinks can in a paper bag (a rare differently coloured element), a cinematic prop of a severed ear from the Hughes Brothers' film *Dead Presidents* (1995) and a concrete fragment of 3400 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles: the location of the hotel where Robert Kennedy was shot in 1968. Whether one is aware of the provenance of the objects or not, the suggestion of alcoholism is evoked by the can sitting in its paper sack – it is common in the US for vagrants to carry their drinks concealed due to prohibitions on public drinking. The severed ear suggests violence; the concrete block on its metal support might further support this assumption. We have all the inspirations necessary to write a short and very troubled story. Yet in a twist the viewer might find both endearing and infuriating, Gerber himself apparently claims no intention

behind the positioning of given objects within a constellation, which are intended to be seen as independent of each other. Once known, this fact presents a kind of task for the audience: to see each object as complete in itself.

The result is a kind of antiarchive, as materials are freed by their institutional categorisation (in this case as 'artworks' in a contemporary art gallery) rather than captured by it. This arises as the sameness imposed on the objects, and the injunction to see them one by one, focuses the viewer on their individual properties in the present, rather than on a conjured historical association. In this light the off-white-painted Cambodian lintel fragment depicting Kala of Angkor, a Hindu and Buddhist deity – placed on the plinth situated farthest from the gallery's entrance – can be appreciated for its formal properties as much as for its religious associations. Gerber rids objects of the folkic peculiarities that tend to cloud our perceptions of them by making them conform to a uniform and institutional aesthetic, leaving us free to investigate their cultural associations if we wish. In our current political climate, where cultural appropriation can easily offend, he deftly balances the subjugation and enhancement of his objects' cultural backgrounds.

Mike Watson



Gaylen Gerber, 2017 (installation view).
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna & Rome