

Jason Willaford: Reclaimed Icons

Jason Willaford's multi-layered oeuvre is both referential and of its time. His re-purposed billboard series, collectively titled Reclaimed Icons, is a suite of several unique irregularly shaped wall works, giant and complex quilt-like paintings and a very sweet, very large soft sculpture that may be reposed on the occasion of each installation. Brawny in appearance yet surprisingly sensitive in concept and execution, each work is made using reclaimed vinyl billboard signs that Willaford first scavenges, then cuts, reassembles, stuffs and sews. The final outcome is on all accounts is striking, not least because the works recoup the bright bold brand name colors and graphic black and white commercial imagery of their source material.

Willaford's re-purposed vinyl billboard series can be readily located within the Pop Art tradition, which grew out of a period of drastic shifts in consumer culture that inspired new ways of understanding the world and a new prominence for the work of art as cultural mediator. Pop borrowed strategies and techniques such as appropriation and montage from the earlier Dada movement, combining these with real-life artifacts from American culture to create a new art form celebrating the distinctly postwar values of popularity, transience, expendability, wit, sexiness, gimmickry and glamour—all inexpensive to mass produce and good for the bottom line.[1] <#_ftn1> Willaford's media of choice, recycled billboard vinyl is perhaps the ultimate material expression of the above-listed qualities—a genuine American artifact located at the intersection of industry and leisure, art and commerce, glamour and mundanity.

The titles of these new works—Clockwork Orange, Baby Elephant Walking, Bullring, and Devil's Haircut, to name a few—clearly derive from popular culture and can be read as keys to understanding his work. Clockwork Orange, of course, references the 1962 futuristic dystopian novella by English writer Anthony Burgess. The significance of this choice of title can be found in the book's narrative, which describes a violent and anarchic possible future. Burgess experiments with language, writing swaths of dialogue in a futurist punk Russian slang—forcing readers to refer to the dictionary in the back of the book to try to grasp the broken language. With this title, then, Willaford opens up a discussion around how viewers may engage with his images as text.

Vestiges of the works of some of America's great Pop artists—including John Chamberlain, Stuart Davis, and Claes Oldenburg—can be seen in Willaford's billboard works. His mixing of found-object appropriation, commercial design, and social critique places his work firmly along a trajectory of a fundamentally American artistic sensibility.

Formally Willaford's current series has a lot in common with the work of the late American sculptor John Chamberlain, best-known for his "car crash" sculptures, made entirely of scrap metal auto parts. Like Chamberlain's crunched, compacted and compressed sculptures, Willaford's pieces rely on discarded highway materials; Transformed by cutting, sewing, and quilting, the graphics and text originally conceived to sell products reappear broken, as part-words, piled up on each other as if they've

endured some sort of metaphorical car crash. Both artists simultaneously reveal and conceal the origins of their materials, their works turning, to some degree, on the tension between the echoes of violence inherent in their source material and the aesthetic reclamation of industrial objects.

A second point of reference for Willaford's works is Stuart Davis, whose oils from the 1950s use cubist arrangements and flat cutouts to explore color-space theory; Like Davis, Willaford breathes new life into the visual detritus of American life, appropriating the color schemes and subject matter of advertisements and transforming their meanings, but also at the same time revealing how they continue to act as forms of branding even after they have been disassembled and remade in a new format.

Finally, Willaford's use of soft materials, quilting techniques, and dramatic experiments in scale formally links his work to that of Swedish-born American artist Claes Oldenburg, who inverts the typically hard-edged Pop Art analysis of the aesthetics of commercial products on a monumental scale, at once commemorating consumer culture and pointing to the dark underbelly beneath its giant servings. Willaford, like Oldenburg, traces and documents our ambivalent relationship to consumer culture. In a departure from his quilted wall works, he uses reclaimed billboard vinyl to build a giant stuffed "Exxon" tiger, playfully titled TANK, a reference to that ubiquitous old slogan, "put a tiger in your tank." Willaford's oversized toy, like Oldenburg's oversized ice cream cone, points to mass consumption by literally blowing it up in this critically engaging, monumentally scaled work.

Willaford's Reclaimed Icons combine Chamberlain's homage to America's highways, Davis' creative use of found graphic imagery and Oldenburg's manipulation of form and scale to create a suite of works that is substantively new. Like those of his antecedents, Willaford's works exist in a complex interplay with the original advertising graphics and branding that they reference. Like the Pop artists, he mines large-scale public commercials for the space they occupy and for their social content, analyzing how the information conveyed on bright surfaces, and more recently on screens of all types, tells spectators "what to do, what to buy, and where to buy it."^[2]

The jostling between mass media graphics and the artist's intuitive sewing that operates within Willaford's works creates a surprisingly sensitive disruption. The transformation of meaning from source to finished artwork is not merely a consequence of reordering and reconstructing the billboards' graphic elements. Each stage of the artist's hands-on process—from cutting to collaging to quilting—adds a layer of mediation to the materials, dramatically foregrounding the subjective, the human, and the dialectical nature of our interactions with consumer culture. The operations that take the work from concept to finished object in a sense mirror mechanical processes but at the same time reclaim them from the industrial machine. The care and attention with which Willaford transforms his materials engage the history of craft—and its historical opposition to "high art"—adding yet another layer of meaning to the works.

Quintessentially a Pop Art project, Willaford's re-purposed billboards operate as both signs and designs, borrowing freely from their original media while interrogating the very matter that constitutes them: fossil fuel based plastics. The use of the Exxon tiger as the source material for his giant soft sculpture is not an arbitrary choice on Willaford's part. An earlier work, *Out of Sight—Out of Site*, was comprised of fifty-five chromed oil barrels, symbols of our deeply ambivalent relationship to the petroleum industry. Petroleum, Willaford points out, is the basis for all man-made materials: those that we associate with environmental trauma writ large, but also, more insidiously, everyday materials such as vinyl, nylon and polyester. The culture of American consumerism—from gas-guzzling autos to the billboards that ornament their journeys—is staked on what is concealed or excluded from the bright, sunny pictures that make up the façade.

The reconstruction of consumerism's detritus into a large cuddly tiger dramatizes this process of concealment and denial. While commercial culture itself is not responsible for Enbridge's more than 800 spills throughout the Midwest this decade, or BP's massive 2010 Gulf of Mexico spill, nor the criminal charges brought to bear on Exxon in 1989 for dumping into the once-pristine waters of Prince William Sound, Alaska, our collective mileage probably is. Though the official record would insist that these disasters have been mostly "cleaned up," they have left lasting effects on the environment, and on our collective consciousness.

In effect a POP Art project, Jason Willaford's re-purposed billboard series, *Reclaimed Icons*, is already classic 21st American Art.

Carla Garnet, 08/2012

Carla Garnet, curator of the Art Gallery of Peterborough in Ontario, Canada, holds an AOCA from the Ontario College of Art and Design and a Master's in Art History from York University in Toronto. As the founder and director of Garnet Press Gallery from 1984 to 1997, Garnet worked to support contemporary Canadian art, artists and culture through a variety of shows and cultural initiatives examining the politics of aesthetics. Between 1997 and 2010, when she joined the AGP, she worked as an independent curator, art consultant and appraiser, curating shows for many important Canadian galleries including the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography – National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, ON, the University of Toronto Art Centre, Toronto, ON, Art Gallery of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MA, Mt Saint Vincent, Halifax, Gallery Stratford, Stratford, ON, Lethbridge University Art Gallery, Lethbridge, AL, Centre A, Vancouver, BC, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, ON and the McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton, ON. In recent years she has curated and produced publications for solo shows featuring Suzy Lake, Robert Houle and Allyson Mitchell, and the critically lauded group shows *Drowning Ophelia*, *Streaming Alterity*, and *Flowers and Photography*.

[1] <#_ftnref1> Richard Hamilton in conversation with Mario Amaya during a London studio visit in 1965, quoted in Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1945 (World of Art)*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 135

[2] <#_ftnref2> Jason Willaford, "Reclaimed Icons," Artist Statement, 2012.