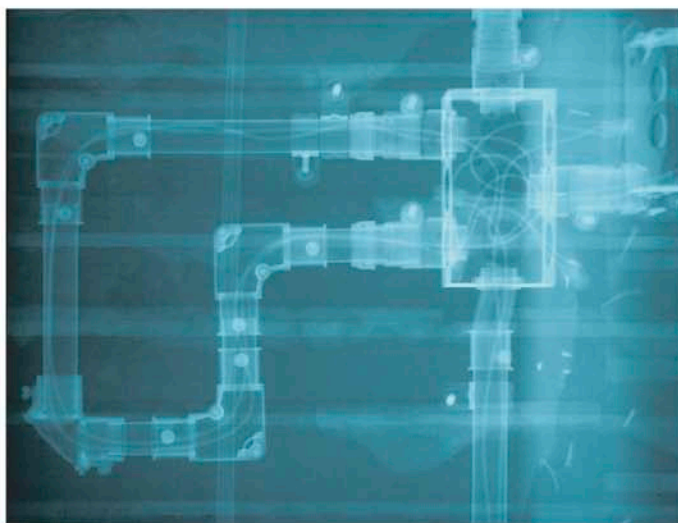


What the Bag Might Hold: Dean Kessmann's Plastic on Paper

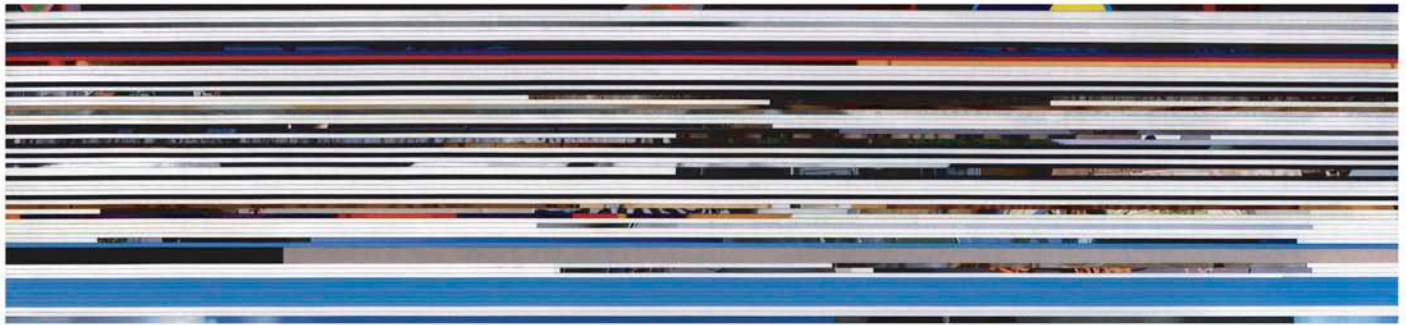
A bloody core expands within a transparent membrane, ordering itself into the red rings of the retailer Target's familiar logo. Edged in watery blue, a mashed yolk reveals itself to be another icon of contemporary American life—the "Have a nice day" smiley-face. As the images in Dean Kessmann's *Plastic on Paper* (2005) series resolve themselves from abstractions suggestive of bodily substances and organic processes into representations of the plastic bags that populate our consumer society, provocative analogies emerge. Has corporate graphic identity and the act of shopping, which it signifies and stimulates, come to exist as a fundamental system through which human activity organizes itself, as vital an infrastructure on a macro level as the cellular arrangement of life is on a microscopic scale? Is human consumption metastasizing-escalating at such a hyper-pace that it can only lead to social and environmental ills? Or are plastic bags not so much negative symbols of an affluent society's excesses, but matter-of-fact indicators of a key channel of circulation within our world? With all the potential and ambiguity of the embryos they can resemble, Kessmann's images raise many questions but withhold simple answers.

The artist created this complex body of work through the fairly straightforward technique of crumpling and then digitally scanning plastic shopping bags, outputting the resulting images on pristine white fields of paper. Although involving state-of-the-art equipment, this method belongs to one of the most immediate modes of image making: a thing triggering its own

representation via direct contact. By using light to penetrate and expose multiple layers of a material and its form, the scans hold the fascination of X-ray vision; and, indeed, the artist employed X-rays to make his *The Spaces In Between* (2001-2003) series of views into the interior of a gallery's walls. Yet the scanograms also suggest the delight of placing one's hand on a photocopier or allowing a thing's contours to burn directly into light-sensitive paper. To follow this chronology into even more ancient territory, each scan seems a high-tech variant of a fossil. Every crinkle and crease of the bags is embedded into and recorded by the waiting medium, albeit an electronic one. The result replaces the wonder of imprinting the



Untitled (Park Avenue Gallery, St. Louis, MO), 2001, from The Spaces In Between, X-ray in Lightbox



Art Review International Edition, Volume 1, Number 12, 2003 (front), 2004, from Cover to Cover, Digital Pigment Print

remains of a plant or animal into stone over eons with the mystery of a relatively instantaneous and complete transfer of physical information from one object to another, with the source's shape and surface articulated in exact detail, but compressed and floating on top of a two-dimensional ground.

This fossil comparison encourages a consideration of the ecological implications of Kessmann's art. Most plastic bags are made from polyethylene, which in turn is made from crude oil and natural gas. Once mined and consolidated into new forms, these resources are non-renewable, while the plastic bags produced resist decomposition,ⁱ existing simultaneously as a lightweight, mundane convenience and a troublesome and long-term blight to the landscape. Consequently, the ubiquitous plastic shopping bag could well be among the most enduring artifacts of our civilization, the equivalent of arrowheads or pottery shards that future centuries will use to decipher ours.

In addition to acting as an anticipated archeological signifier of the present, Kessmann's work participates in and updates the twentieth century's art historical category of the readymade. Although the artist modifies his images with computer software and varies the

original scale of the bags in the final prints, the source for his art is located firmly in the everyday, and at the heart of his practice is the re-contextualizing of humble and functional objects into catalysts for broader explorations of culture. The artist, who also produces photographs with large and small format cameras, traces his interest in the subject to a picture he took about a decade ago upon encountering a plastic bag in a puddle of water. The impression of that image later resonated with the experience of accumulating shopping bags in his domestic life and led to a questioning of both the material presence and societal meaning of this accretion.

Kessmann's choice of a digital scanner as the mechanism for unhinging plastic bags from their utilitarian purpose into a more open-ended artistic and critical framework seems particularly apt. According to the Environmental Protection Agency's website, plastic shopping bags were introduced in the mid-1970s, making them a fairly recent "invention" to facilitate the circulation of commercial goods.ⁱⁱ Likewise the scanner is emblematic of newer digital tools employed to embody (in text, graphics, and photographs) and disseminate information, including the advertisements that saturate our visual environment due to their

placement on such things as plastic shopping bags. It might even be argued that imagery associated with commerce is so widespread and effective that it serves as a language, which not only communicates about products but about contemporary personhood. In other words, by carrying a Best Buy, Toys R Us, or Borders bag, an individual not only promotes a commercial brand, but advertises a certain identity for his or herself. Kessmann's art, therefore, is located at a ripe intersection of intentional and subliminal strategies for communication and exchange.

The investigation of bags relates to one of the artist's earlier projects, *Cover to Cover* (2004), a scanned series of the page edges of contemporary art magazines. In a world flooded with photographic and digitally reproduced imagery, these magazines are ultimately a disposable, mass-produced vehicle for marketing commodities, advancing particular brands and trends, and establishing personal identity through affinity—in short, yet another contemporary channel for circulating things and ideas. Consequently, both *Plastic on Paper* and *Cover to Cover* might be considered of-the-moment examples of pop art, if that term is taken to identify art that deals with the aesthetics and pervasiveness of our society's commercial products.

Another previous project, *Transubstantiation: Bread & Wine, Body & Blood* (2000), explores the notion of circulation but from a different perspective—a spiritual one. Looking remarkably like collections of living blood cells, these images of communion wafers soaked in wine—the artist's first scanograms—evoke thoughts about how religious belief is made material and conveyed from clergy to layperson, from believer to non-believer, or even from deity to mortal. While



Untitled (Blood Cells), 2000, from *Transubstantiation: Bread & Wine, Body & Blood*, Digital Duratrans in Lightbox

this subject is ages-old rather than specifically contemporary, once again Kessmann's sensitivity to the logic of the readymade and physical technique of scanning are integral to his exploration of a system in which faith is manifested in humble forms and transferred through direct contact. It is through a cleric's handling and blessing of wine and wafers and a congregant's consumption of them that those food-stuffs become transformed with symbolic meaning and the Christian ritual of communion proceeds.

Because process and content are so thoughtfully matched in his work, there is an impulse to broadly label the artist's practice conceptual. Yet there is an aesthetic achievement in Kessmann's output that feeds his conceptual investigation and is worth acknowledging in its own right. He reduces his subjects to the cusp of indecipherability. Logos on the bags are largely obscured; only fragments of the magazines are reproduced. While this enables the images to become Rorschach-like prompts for viewers' speculations

(and, in fact, the artist engaged with the concept of the Rorschach test in a 1996 series of photographs of ink-stained bible pages), the works also have a powerful abstract presence. Taking their referents out of the analysis, the *Plastic on Paper* images comprise tangles of line, masses of glowing, translucent color, and complicated relationships of surface and depth—vibrant, messy, and unsettling in an indefinable way. Equally striking to the eye, the *Cover to Cover* pictures consist of precise, bold bands of color crisply spanning horizontal fields.



Rorschach Bible Pages #3, 1996, from *Rorschach Bible Pages*, Ilfochrome Print

Despite their contrasting visual moods, for both series the artist most often chooses to leave the works unframed. This decision again impacts appearance and message. Pinned to the wall and therefore tangibly evident to the viewer, the paper of the prints recalls the materiality of magazine pages or the simultaneously fragile yet functional substance of plastic bags. Kessmann's inclination to work in series is also relevant. It goes without saying that a serial format well serves an examination of art periodicals. Isolating individual shopping bags, as if pulling them out of a pile from inside a kitchen closet or cabinet under the sink, and then re-grouping the single specimens into rows within a gallery points at once to efforts at product

differentiation and the slyer processes of consumption centered around these bags—the often inconspicuous but steady stream of material goods into our daily lives, each buyer's small contribution to vast corporate profits, and the cumulative impact of each person's wastefulness on the environment.

It is difficult to leave a discussion of Kessmann's *Plastic on Paper* without mentioning Sam Mendes' 1999 film *American Beauty*. When talking about his own work, Kessmann references a twice-repeated sequence in the movie in which a young adult with a troubled family and penchant for video-recording the world around him identifies footage of a bag at play in gushes of wind as the most beautiful thing he has ever filmed. While simple and even sad in its cast-off state, the "dancing" bag achieves a freedom and therefore a profundity that eludes the tragic characters that inhabit this story of decadence, self-absorption, and existential crisis in an upper middle class American suburb. Similarly, Kessmann's art takes a modest object and frees it to become a visually potent image with both metaphorical and critical significance.

ⁱ According to the article Questions about Your Community: Shopping Bags: Paper or Plastic or...? on the Environmental Protection Agency's website some plastic bags may exist up to 1000 years before degrading. <http://www.epa.gov/region1/communities/shopbags.html>, January 2, 2007.

ⁱⁱ See above.

Kristen Hileman works as an Assistant Curator at The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Her work has included projects with John Baldessari, Cai Guo-Qiang, Oliver Herring, Jim Hodges, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Wolfgang Tillmans. She has taught at both The Corcoran College of Art and Design and The George Washington University.