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Dean Kessmann

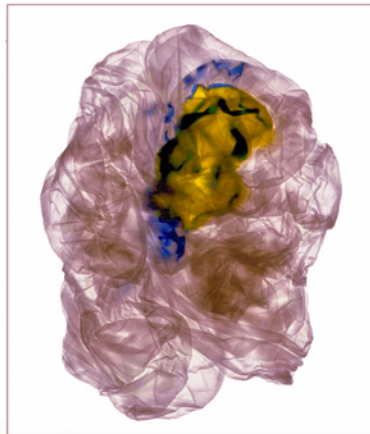
CONNER CONTEMPORARY ART

The translucent, quasi-organic, saclike forms that are the subjects of Dean Kessmann's recent color digital prints are curious and inviting, but also a little disturbing. They appear to be embryonic forms so brilliantly backlit that their innards are visible, and their crumpled surfaces suggest impending desiccation. But these things are no longer organic at all. Hundreds of millions of years ago they were plant and animal life, but they subsequently turned into oil that was pumped out of the ground and made into cheap carryalls emblazoned with smiley faces. Yes, they're plastic bags.

Kessmann's elegant work rescues these ubiquitous objects from ignominy (as well as, temporarily, from the recycling bin) and cleverly transforms them from aesthetically desolate trash into radiant sculptural forms. Each of the large digital pigment prints in the series "Plastic on Paper," 2005, depicts a single, wrinkled bag against an incandescent white background. The images are slightly larger than life, yet somehow transcend questions of scale. The crumpling (and a touch of Photoshop manipulation) blurs and condenses text, logos, and other identifiers into indeterminate shapes that seem to hover within their diaphanous confines.

Enshrining and fetishizing—while at the same time ridiculing—the world of commerce is hardly a new strategy, but Kessmann's brand of objectification offers a fresh acknowledgment of the moral ambiguity inherent in "environmentally conscious" consumerism. His is a beautiful and subtly comic body of work that nonetheless manages to implicate us in the first world's profligate exploitation of resources. To paraphrase Kessmann's artist's statement, these glowing shapes invariably remain recognizable, but transcend their base origins to achieve an unexpected beauty.

Kessmann has been using photography to examine and alter the contexts and values of culturally loaded objects for some time now—two previous series focused on communion wafers and art magazines—but "Plastic on Paper" goes further by contemplating the fate of objects *after* they have been used. Once emptied, the bag's necessity is gone, allowing the artist to elevate it to a new status and suggest a novel purpose. He is also able to probe the dialogue between representation and abstraction: The photographs, all produced in 2005, are most intriguing when their sources are most ambiguous. *Best Buy* (almost all of the titles refer to the store of origin), for example, appears to depict a system of



Dean Kessman, *Have a Nice Day* (detail), 2005, digital pigment print, 34 x 24". From the series "Plastic on Paper," 2005.

necrotic black veins suspended in lemonade, while *Target* features a twisted, bloated red larval form, and *Borders* seems to include a recumbent blue cruciform figure. Alternatively, the recognizable, though mangled, smiley face in *Have a Nice Day* allows one to revel in the possibility that the irritating Wal-Mart mascot has finally been beaten senseless in some back alley.

The artist's technical finesse lends his project a certain elegance, permitting the investigation of minute subtleties of surface texture, luminosity, and color. The surface in *Connecticut Wine, Liquor & Deli*, for example, seems drier than the others, gray and ashen as though the plastic equivalent of rigor mortis is setting in. *Best Buy*, by contrast, has the brilliance of a topaz.

Kessmann's work succeeds on several levels: by using objectification to interrogate contemporary patterns of consumption; as a Duchampian exercise in trash-to-treasure; and simply as a guarantee that we'll never again be able to look at a cheap plastic bag in quite the same way again.

—Nord Wennerstrom