

RISD MUSEUM

Styrofoam, March 14, 2008-July 20, 2008

Ubiquitous in our culture, styrofoam is used to insulate buildings, package computers and other consumer products, and produce picnic coolers and containers for fast food and take-out. For decades, artists have employed styrofoam in the making of models and molds for casting. Today, however, more and more of them are exploring it as a primary material or a subject in its own right, using it in new and ingenious ways to create sculpture, paintings, photographs, and installations. Taking advantage of styrofoam's lightness and cheapness, as well as the ease with which it can be shaped, artists are carving into it, molding it, casting from it, and assembling it into entirely new forms and images. A number of artists re-use pre-existing elements that they find unexpectedly in the course of their daily activities, whereas others start with large industrial sheets.

Styrofoam is, in fact, a trademarked name applied to extruded polystyrene foam products manufactured by the Dow Chemical Company and identified by their distinctive shade of blue. Natural plant-based polystyrene was discovered in Germany in 1839 but was not developed for commercial use until the 1930s. As far as common American usage is concerned, the word styrofoam has come to mean any brand or form of polystyrene foam. Because it is neither biodegradable nor cost effective to recycle, styrofoam carries a generally negative connotation. However, because its use as insulation reduces energy requirements to heat and cool buildings, styrofoam also has a beneficial effect on the environment.

The artists presented in this exhibition span several generations, and their work varies considerably in style, form, and content. They all, however, transform lowly styrofoam into objects of singular artistic value while maintaining the material's distinct characteristics. Running the gamut from great humor and wit to more sober visions of upheaval and disaster, their works open our eyes to the richness of possibilities this mundane source offers. In the process, they raise our consciousness about the world around us as well

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Shirley Tse, American, b. 1968
Do Cinderblocks Dream of Being Styrofoam?, 2003
Extruded polystyrene foam
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2008.61

The title of this work mimics the title of Philip K. Dick's science-fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, on which the film *Blade Runner* is based. Tse found the bright pink blocks in Japan and was amused by how the normally heavy gray cinderblock had been converted into a featherweight, pastel-colored form. She added hand-carved patterns "so the imprint from factory and my own carvings become seamlessly intertwined." Tse has worked extensively

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with plastics for the past decade and is particularly attracted to polystyrene "for its implications of transience, mobility, mutation, and multiplicity."