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The Extraordinary Banality of the Ordinary as Art

Article

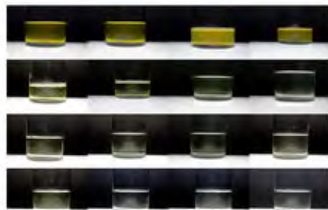
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By ERIC FELTEN

Next week at the Chicago Cultural Center an artist named Jim Zimpel will present a work called "Angle." He will take the stage with fishing rod, bait bucket and some fish in a barrel. He will fish. And as part of the "installation" he will let five people each Sunday take turns holding the rod. If any manage to catch a fish, they get to choose whether to release or eat it. Thus is angling transformed from an art into Art.

Feel free to roll your eyes.



Enlarge Image

Industry of the Ordinary

'Phosphorus' (2004), one of the works by the Industry of the Ordinary artist collaborative. The caption reads: 'Industry of the Ordinary drink a crate of beer and document the change in color of their urine.'

Mr. Zimpel's fishy conceit is part of a retrospective of "Industry of the Ordinary," a collaborative led by artists Adam Brooks and Mathew Wilson, "whose work," according to the Chicago Cultural Center, "is a celebration of the everyday."

Of course, art has long captured or expressed the everyday. Camille Pissarro was fond of farmhands harvesting; Pieter Bruegel painted children playing games in the street. Nothing could have been a more commonplace subject than hunting

back when caves were canvases. But that's not the sort of art being celebrated in Chicago—not the ordinary as subject, but the ordinary presented as art itself.

Messrs. Brooks and Wilson have mounted dozens of conceptual works over the years, presenting the everyday with a postmodern wink-and-a-nudge. They have often handed out T-shirts with quotes or slogans. Take the project in which "Industry of the Ordinary host a Fancy Dress Ball to which attendees are invited to come as a particular political personality." And then—oh, I'm sorry, that was all there was to it.

One day the artists of the ordinary took a table-football game out onto Michigan Avenue and played a match "first to 1000 goals."

And consider the project in which the artists walked an "ice sculpture of the Ten Commandments from the Museum of Contemporary Art to the Art Institute of Chicago." As the tablets melted, the artists bottled the run-off and offered it to passers-by.

If the goal of such silliness is to be ordinary, it succeeds—the melting ice schtick is so

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commonplace it's become shopworn. A pair of politically minded artists recently announced they will carve the phrase "Middle Class" in large blocks of ice and leave the blocks to melt in parks outside the Republican and Democratic conventions. A few years ago a Brazilian artist froze a thousand little figurines and sat them on some Berlin city steps in the summer. They melted. (Thus were we taught a lesson about the perils of global warming.)

Once upon a time the stunt of presenting the ordinary with all the self-seriousness of high art was strange and startling. But by now these would-be novelties are far past being novel: It's been nearly a century since Marcel Duchamp presented a urinal as a work of art. It was the font of much (far too much) to come. What was once provocative is perfectly pedestrian, such as the 2004 work "Phosphorus," in which "Industry of the Ordinary" drink a crate of beer and document the change in color of their urine."

The art of the ordinary may well be art (as it would seem anything that claims to be "art" is by definition "art"), but that doesn't mean it does anything for us. Is it too much to ask for art that is extraordinary?

We have an unfortunate tendency to turn art into sport—television is lousy with singing competitions, dance competitions, design competitions. It doesn't exactly make for great art. But that doesn't mean art can't learn something valuable from sports. Why have so many of us watched the Olympics over the past couple of weeks? It isn't for the maudlin tales of loss and hardship (stories all too ordinary, alas); it isn't just to indulge in a little nationalistic medal counting; it isn't because we've been dying to find out who will triumph in the women's handball final. No, we watch to marvel at those who do things that most of us can't do. We long to be astonished.

Most of us would hesitate to hazard any sort of jump off the 10-meter diving platform, let alone hurl ourselves toward the water twisting and twirling in unison with another fearless wonder. The gymnastics competitions give us the spectacle of young women doing backflips on a piece of wood 4 inches wide. And then there are the men, as heavily muscled as they are diminutive, doing the "iron cross"—holding themselves aloft from the rings with their arms straight out from their bodies. It's a simple feat of strength, but we are amazed at it. Arts should strive for feats that amaze—feats of beauty or truth or revelation. A Bernini bust astounds us, not just because the likeness is so real we expect it to speak, but because we recognize it as a surpassing triumph of man over marble.

Touting the forthcoming "Industry of the Ordinary" retrospective, Chicago culture commissioner Michelle T. Boone praised the exhibit for "blurring the boundaries between artist and the viewer." But there's something to be said for certain basic boundaries in art, notably the ones that separate those with remarkable talents from those whose gifts are—how shall we put it?—mundane.

What we want from art is the extraordinary. Whether it's in execution or concept, I'm eager for art that rivets us because it couldn't have been done by just anyone. Don't show me the ordinary. Show me what man at his most accomplished, most imaginative, most skilled, most perceptive can achieve. That's the art that makes us thrill to be human.

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