

## STEVEN BROWER

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FINE ARTS

Of all the contemporary work that extends neo-Conceptual art into the realm of architecture (from Tom Burr's peepbooths to Andrea Zittel's "escape vehicles"), Steven Brower's may well be the cutest, which is not to say it lacks substance. If anything, the artist gives you too many ideas to consider, too many forms abundant with associations, and too many clever titles. In "Downsize," Brower's first solo exhibition, viewers were greeted with a six-foot-tall yellow pencil, *Overwhelming Implement*, 1995, leaning against the wall. Any similarity, conceptually or morphologically, to Claes Oldenburg's work began and ended there. Visitors would then approach the main gallery and, according to plan, bump into a stack of plastic buckets filled with plaster that someone presumably forgot to clear out after the last installation. A look inside the top bucket revealed it to be an *objet d'art* after all: a little inhabitable world of ladders and levels staring back (burdened with the overwhelming title "Even With All These Gifts, He Still Occasionally Felt Dissatisfied," 1995). From the oversized to the miniature, this show messed with the viewer's sense of proportion from the outset.

Occupying the main gallery space was the exhibition's would-be centerpiece, *Pine Valley Orchard Manner*, 1995-96. A butch version of a dollhouse (a raw-wood frame with the junkshop price tag still attached), the structure was elevated by artful-but-shitty-looking plywood scraps that also supported various prosthetic extensions of the typical suburban home (a perfectly white clapboard garage complete with weathervane, basketball net, barbecue grill, birdbath, and a terrifyingly adorable, anthropomorphized tractor mower with a fiendish face that recalled its cartoon origins), all handmade by Brower.



Steven Brower, *You Are What You Eat*, 1995, plastic, paper, 6 x 30 x 15".

Competing for attention with *Pine Valley Orchard Manner* was the most ambitious, most autobiographical, and arguably least successful piece in the show: *Armoire/Locker*, 1995-96. This hybrid piece of furniture was at once an archaeology of Brower's closet and an exploration of the stereotypes he embodies in his day job as a handyman. The never-used leather toolbelt hanging on the door worked most effectively here, with a few one-liners (like the electric-drill-cum-stuffed-bunny titled *Hunting Trophy*, which, we were told, was "killed by Steven Brower 18 December 1995, Brooklyn, New York") preventing the piece from getting too serious about itself, but at the expense of it ever being taken seriously in the first place.

The smaller projects in the adjacent gallery focused Brower's wit considerably, as he called attention to the fantasy of building dreams in the form of dream houses. The artist followed the instructions on the cover of his *3-D Home Kit*, 1995 ("Build a three-dimensional scale model of your own home, addition, or remodeling project the way architects do"), and constructed a typical trailer-park dwelling. *You Are What You Eat*, 1995, a magnificent model of Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House constructed from patriotic-colored Domino's Pizza boxes, succinctly captured the twisted ambitions of architect turned pizza mogul turned pro-lifer turned obsessive Wright collector Thomas Monaghan. Finally, *Cut Out and Build Your Own Tower of Babel*, 1993, a book with directions that arbitrarily switched languages in the middle of connecting parts #2,455 and #2,455a, was as hilarious as it was smart in its cryptically encoded messages. Though "Downsize" often erred on the side of too

cute, it also revealed an overactive mind generous enough to engage the viewer.

—Ernest Pascucci