



Images from the Museum of Contemporary Art.

ADDING VALUE: A portion of Máximo González's room-size "Where have all the flowers gone?" — made of cut-up devalued currency.

ART REVIEW

Out of the ordinary

Works of significance are created from mundane, disposable items in the refreshing 'Poetics of the Handmade' at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to *The Times*

Twentieth century art pretty much dispensed with the idea that its job was to give viewers access to the infinite, or even a glimpse of it. That had been one of art's functions for millenniums as is evident in the pyramids, altarpieces and paintings various cultures have made throughout the ages. But Modern art generally has opposed such grandiose ambitions, stripping away the suffocating clichés that often accompany them and focusing instead on art's place in everyday life — among mundane, not sublime, subjects.

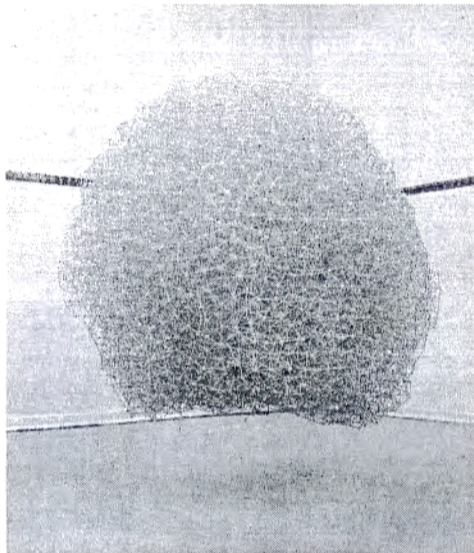
At the Museum of Contemporary Art, a refreshingly unpretentious exhibition suggests that all this is beginning to change. The 19 pieces the eight artists in "Poetics of the Handmade" made from 2000 through 2007 combine the down-to-earth impetus of much 20th century art with a renewed interest in something more than the quotidian. Call it pedestrian transcendence. Or the do-it-yourself sublime.

Organized by curator Alma Ruiz, "Poetics of the Handmade" makes a place for meaningful experiences of mind-blowing vastness amid the limitless cascade of disposable items churned out by post-industrial societies all over the globe. Its artists transform such incidental objects as toothpicks, cotton swabs, cocktail napkins, aluminum foil, stacks of paper, tubes of lipstick and wads of currency into provocative pieces that are as accessible as ordinary household conveniences and as loaded with significance as much pre-Modern art.

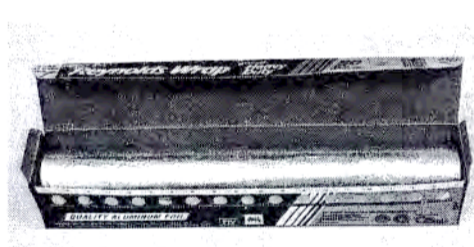
Works by three of the artists encapsulate the best features of the show. In the first gallery, Magdalena Atria has suspended an irregular orb, with a 5-foot diameter, from the ceiling. Made of thousands of toothpicks stuck into little balls of flesh-toned modeling clay, the abstract sculpture, "Smiling desperately I" is an idiosyncratic lattice of equilateral triangles. Light permeates its outer regions. But its core is so dense that you cannot see through it. Think Buckminster Fuller meets homemade meteorite via low-budget kid's toy.

The Chilean artist's labor-intensive sculpture makes a great first impression. But its effect wears thin. That's because Atria's piece recalls the scaled-down Eiffel Towers and White Houses obsessive hobbyists regularly craft from toothpicks. It comes off as a life-size rendition of a conventional Minimalist sculpture, a recycled work of art about art that behaves too much like a well-mannered parlor game.

Atria's other work is far more fascinating. Installed at eye level and wrapping around three walls, "Smiling desperately II" is a 66-



COMMON OBJECTS: Magdalena Atria used toothpicks and clay for "Smiling desperately I," above, and Marco Maggi used foil for "Untitled Reynolds (L.A.)."



foot-long, 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-wide slab of multicolored modeling clay. To scan the surrogate painting is to see its indescribable shapes of bright pink, purple, green, yellow, blue, orange, red, gray and aqua mutate, as if pictured on individual frames of film. It's like watching a sputtering kaleidoscope in action or a freeze-frame film of a lava lamp.

To get the effect, Atria smushed all the colors of clay together, forming a rectangular column. She then cut it into lunch-meat-like slices and arranged them side by side, repeating the process to create an abstract storyboard.

Part of the pleasure of her trippy, Rorschach-style work is that it's difficult to figure out just how she made it. Even better, knowing how it was made takes nothing away from its visual effect. Some of its shapes resemble insects, faces, the Buddha, Jabba the Hut, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Persian ornamentation. Its format recalls MRI transmissions. And its slice-of-time structure mimics flip books. In Atria's hands, a common material and a simple technique yield an expansive universe of potentially infinite meaning.

Something similar transpires in the next gallery, where Máximo González's room-size installation, "Where have all the flowers gone?," takes viewers on flights of fancy without leaving the real world's real problems behind. The Argentine artist has cut up devalued currency from around the world and glued together the thumbnail-size bits to

form fantastic machines and creatures, factories and forests, clouds and flowers.

Each element, pasted to the wall, is a spindly collage jampacked with delicious details. There are propeller people and Leonardo-style aircraft, military tanks that resemble vacuum cleaners and animated factories inspired by Dr. Seuss' cartoons, Joyce Lightbody's collages and Bruce Conner's inkblot drawings. Together the hundreds of whimsical inventions in González's imaginative world tell a tale of creation and destruction, hubris and futility, greed and its consequences. He is a virtuoso storyteller whose silent epic is the highlight of the show.

In the third gallery, Marco Maggi has made delicate etchings on four sheets of aluminum foil. Three are framed, their finely wrought surfaces covered with meandering geometric configurations that recall computer circuitry, maps of cities and mind-boggling labyrinths. One has been rerolled and returned to its original box, where it rests like a futuristic scroll awaiting translation.

On a low pedestal, the Uruguayan artist has laid out 96 stacks of white paper. He has incised fine lines in the top sheets, bending parts of each page to form a sort of Minimalist origami. But Maggi's evocation of works by Carl Andre and Felix González-Torres weighs down his slight piece, which lacks the deft elegance of his embossed sheets of foil. Like Atria's toothpick orb, his paper piece is too enamored of its artsiness — too insistent on its pedigree — to be more than superficially engaging.

The same goes for Eduardo Abaroa's gigantic molecular model, made of cotton swabs glued to rubber balls; Livia Marin's display of 2,200 tubes of lipstick, each carefully carved into a geometric abstraction; and Dario Escobar's skateboards, pingpong paddle and surfboard, all covered with a thick layer of embossed silver, like Baroque ornaments.

Mónica Bengoa's picture of crowded bookshelves, rendered on 2,112 juxtaposed paper napkins, and Fernando Bryce's hand-drawn copies of magazine covers insist that time-consuming workmanship is an end in itself. Long on labor, they are short on poetry.

In contrast, the best works in the show treat the hard work of art-making and the long hours artists put into it as just the beginning.

'Poetics of the Handmade'

Where: Museum of Contemporary Art, 250 S. Grand Ave.

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays and Fridays, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays

Ends: Aug. 13

Price: \$5 to \$8

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