

Vestigial Manoeuvres

shyra de souza

January 30 – March 12, 2016

Our relationship with objects is complex: objects are useful or decorative and become our day-to-day companions, but they must also be held in check so that they don't end up dominating our spaces. Shyra De Souza is interested in the phenomenon of object accumulation, not for a deliberate and selective grouping, such as a collection, but from a perspective of abundance. She examines the journey things make as they are physically transported from a factory to a domestic setting and, eventually, to the dumping grounds. Using objects found in thrift shops, bazaars, and church basements, she creates works that allude to the fetishization of the object as a site of memory and mutation, while at the same time insinuating an act of resistance to consumer culture. The sculptures in *Vestigial Manoeuvres* display a detailed Baroque aesthetic, echoing material excess.

De Souza's handling of forms and focus on a piece's organic appearance lead to works that exist between artifact and aesthetic curiosity. In reference to vestiges, she evokes the traces of hind limbs on a dolphin's skeleton, evidence of this mammal's former amphibian nature. The artist seeks to develop structures that show evolutionary cycles: What comes from the past; What comes from the present; And what could foreshadow the future? Each cycle undoubtedly suffers a loss or a gain.

De Souza's practice deals with "what remains," the traces that time has not yet erased. She rescues markers of our desires, and in so doing, reveals our excesses. Using a method of three-dimensional collage, she mutates the object, stripping it of its monetary or sentimental value. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart proposes that "the further the object is removed from use value, the more abstract it becomes and the more multivocal is its referentiality."¹ The gleaned elements of De Souza's sculptures raise questions about the memories they hold: To whom did they belong? Who livened up her boudoir with this figurine? What end table did this porcelain elephant ornament? These elements cannot be separated from their temporality, since memory has nothing to do with perception or conception; it is an affective state that we experience for one thing or another and which depends on the passage of time. Memory is not born by the present; it is formed entirely by the past.

The dolphin's vestigial limbs are doomed to disappear, and they will carry away some of the world's history with them. The installation *Phantom Limb* (2012) unmistakably evoked dinosaur skeletons displayed in natural history museums—archaeological objects that reveal the history of the planet. In this installation, De Souza presents an abundance of uniformly white forms, clearly alluding to a "whitewashing" of the past. What parts of history will endure in our collective memory? While the assembled objects pose questions regarding their origins, one might also wonder what will remain of them in two years, ten years, a hundred years.

The works in *Vestigial Manoeuvres* thus appear like an act of resistance—resistance to the erosion of history and to overconsumption. Drawing on a sensual aesthetic, the artist plays the seduction game to give the viewer an active status. Nicolas Bourriaud explains that "the individual has shifted from a passive status, purely receptive, to minimal activities dictated by market forces."² Therefore, it is the mechanism of

consumerism that will belie the system. Yet this opulence is a double-edged sword, since the real origin of the objects quickly replaces the seduction as they get discarded. Evoking the technique of “mimetic exacerbation,” coined by Hal Foster and preceded by Dada, the artist offers us our own refuse, showing that our excess is what feeds her works.

Living in Calgary and having a front-line experience of the effects of oil exploitation, De Souza has strong views on consumer culture. At its most fundamental level, her work is a critique of the capitalist system and the fact that many milieus still refute global warming. While De Souza’s sculptures tackle mutation from several standpoints, the most convincing one is perhaps also the least visible, namely the profound metamorphosis that humans are about to experience, by which we must radically change our life styles if life on earth is to continue. She brilliantly illustrates this “tipping point”³ by placing her sculptures and the visitors in a position of imbalance. Her works thus encourage us to wonder whether the vestiges evoked in the title will disappear or be reintegrated into a natural cycle. It is up to us to decide whether we will simply be seduced or transformed. Or both.

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Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

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1. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 164.
 2. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2001), 117. [Our translation.]
 3. The expression “tipping point” has been widely used—most recently at the Paris Conference on Climate Change in the Fall of 2015—to refer to an environmental point of no return when the average global temperature of the planet will have risen by two degrees since the beginning of the industrial era.

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