

ONE MAN'S TRASH IS ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE.

We've heard it before, more than once. Clichés get tired and worn out for a good reason. They are used and abused over and over not just because they are catchy, simple and easy to apply in a one-size-fits-all, broad-brush-stroke, no training or thought required, user-friendly kinda way (which they are), but because usually, they actually contain an element of truth. A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush. It is wise to look before you leap. One man's trash is another man's treasure. So trite, yet so true.

This little bit of homespun wisdom has been translated into a TV ad by a major credit card company. We see a small child rejecting the expensive toy, which her parents have bought on credit, in favour of the box it came in. A calm disembodied voice declares that this behaviour is "priceless" and advises that while there are some things money can't buy, for everything else there's the old plastic-fantastic. It's funny; an example of a dry, ironically self-deprecating, particularly middle class humour. But like the cliché it channels, this ad also holds a deeper truth. In our society, packaging is just as desirable and important as the contents.

Artist Benedict Ernst is well aware of this fact. He's a card-carrying citizen of "The Society of the Spectacle", a consumer-driven territory, named, explored and mapped in 1967 by French philosopher and Situationist, Guy Debord.¹ Fellow Frenchman Jean Baudrillard went on to dub capitalist reality, hyperreality: a condition in which the fundamental boundary between fact and fantasy has dissolved. In this nebulous zone, image and object are indivisible,

the hype is the product, the simulacra is authentic and advertising provides the moral compass for consumers with voracious appetites who avidly worship at the altar of individuality.² This is the world we live in and Ernst makes the most of it.

For Ernst, the advertising which drives our hyperreality is exciting and energised, and the packaging which our self-defining, aspirational purchases come in is not necessarily disposable. He literally collects trash and turns it into treasure.

In earlier work, Ernst used chocolate wrappers in beautiful collaged paintings inspired by Japanese Ukiyo-e prints, images of *The Floating World*. Made in the Edo period, 1603-1867, these woodblock prints chronicle an urban society dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure and leisure. Ernst points out that this world is not so different from our own. Its images are similar to pages ripped from *Hello!* or *Who Weekly* magazines. Many of them were cheap and mass-produced: disposable records of celebrity Kabuki actors and famous courtesans performing acrobatic sex; a rough hard-copy equivalent to Paris Hilton's sex tape. Today, mellowed and aestheticised by time, they are sought after works of erotic art. It's that trash to treasure thing again.

However, while Ernst continues to celebrate the dynamism of advertising and the authenticity of packaging, he is not so blinded by their flashing neon lights and seductive shiny surfaces that he can't see a downside to the rapacious cult of individuality which they feed, a lasting

legacy of the European Enlightenment. This 18th century 'Age of Reason' fostered the crazy ideas that it is both possible and desirable to know everything, that the rights of the one outweigh the rights of the many, that progress and discovery are inherently good, and that nature is a resource capable of being dominated.

In his *Garden of Love*, Ernst challenges this monumental hubris. Using consumer detritus: polystyrene packing beads, scrap bits of timber, cardboard and Kit Kat chocolate wrappers, he constructs a giant model of a Japanese rock garden and bonsai tree. Ernst's reference to Asian art forms highlights his impression that in some non-western cultures, "being defined by a social role is more important than being an individual." And perhaps more significantly, his manipulation of scale puts mankind back in proportion to nature; not the centre of all things, but small and insignificant. Using trash, Benedict Ernst reminds us that nature is a treasure, both delicate and powerful. In an age characterized by seemingly unfettered greed and the looming threat of complete ecological meltdown, it's a point worth remembering.

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- I. Guy Debord first published *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967. An English translation by Ken Knabb is available online < <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SV/debord/> >.
- II. 170,172-177, 180. And Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Objects', *Ibid.*, 16-17.

