

FAKE SALE

For Real? Betabeat Goes Fake Shopping for Made-Up Brands

“I want people to have a double-take reaction.”

By Kelly Faircloth 11/19 7:30pm

[Twitter](#) 8 [Facebook](#) 3 [Reddit](#) [LinkedIn](#) [StumbleUpon](#) [Email](#) [Print](#)



Valley must-haves!

As Betabeat stood surveying the whimsical offerings of Montalvo Historical Fabrications and Souvenirs, a colleague reached out and, from among the Steve Jobs prayer candles and spontaneous marriage proposal packets, grabbed a bottle of “Dot-Com Bubbles” for a closer look. She quickly returned it with a rueful expression, remembering this was an art exhibit and not, despite all the price tags and other signs screaming “retail,” an actual novelty shop.

“As Real as It Gets,” a new exhibition at Tribeca’s apexart, is about fictional brands made flesh, as it were, and we weren’t alone in our confusion. Shortly thereafter, we saw curator **Rob**

apexart

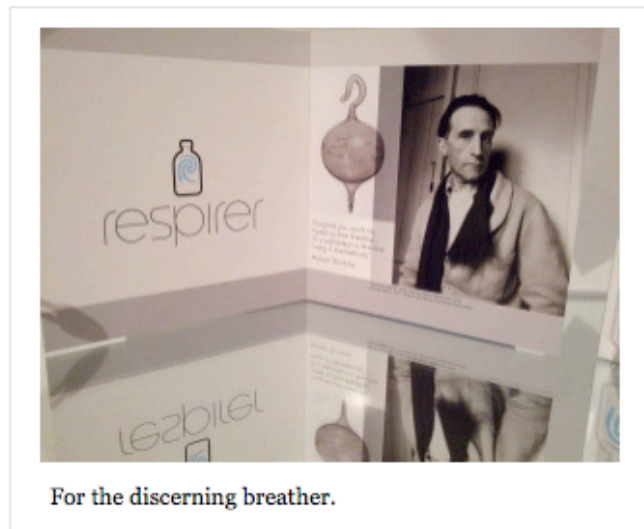
Walker, former “Consumed” columnist at the *Times Magazine* and author of *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are* (Random House 2010), wave a couple away from one of the installations—a baby blue “bathtub synthesizer,” for making music while bathing, explaining that it wasn’t actually functional.

“In the context of a gallery, I think you know you’re not supposed to touch things,” Mr. Walker told Betabeat from his station in front of several illustrations by futurist **Steven M. Johnson** depicting unlikely innovations (a desk that’s also a hideaway bed!). “On the other hand, in the context of retail, it’s all about grabbing something and going and paying for it. A lot of what this show is about is ambiguity and uncertainty about what’s going on there, and it’s kind of maybe making people think twice.”

“You have to make a decision,” he added.

The brands on display were all invented. Then again, they weren’t necessarily any less real than what you’d see in the supermarket. Take Respirer, a brand of luxury air dreamed up for the show. A ludicrous idea, right? But the packaging, created by a real design firm, turned a nonsensical notion into something that wouldn’t look out of place at Sephora.

Jammed into a back corner was a Makerbot churning out another absurd product called a RemoverInstaller. (The crowd seemed disinterested in the 3D printer, though every time the Transom looked up, there seemed to be another bespectacled man drifting over to inspect its innards.)



But mixed in, and amping up the double-take factor, were products that started out fictional but are now available in any mall in America. There was a table full of T-shirts made by Last Exit to Nowhere, a company that specializes in clothing decorated with the logos of nefarious-but-fictional organizations. Think Blade Runner’s Tyrell Corporation.

Also included were several items from Omni Consumer Products—“a leader in de-fictionalization,” according to Mr. Walker—including, most notably, an IRL version of *Idiocracy*’s Brawndo energy drink.

apexart

The whole scene gave off a faint whiff of Urban Outfitters. In assembling the show, Mr. Walker wasn't looking for a straightforwardly anti-consumerist perspective. He wanted artists "approaching the subject in a way that wasn't preachy, wasn't like, 'Oh, shopping sucks and you're stupid if you shop,'" he explained. The goal was to find people "seizing the language of branding and the marketplace and using that language for their own ends."

"I want people to have a double-take reaction," Mr. Walker concluded.

As we shouldered through the crowd on our way toward the door, we saw a man lurch into Montalvo Historical Fabrications and Souvenirs, iPhone at the ready for a snapshot. "I love this. This is so good," he gushed.

Follow Kelly Faircloth [on Twitter](#) or [via RSS](#). kfaircloth@observer.com
