Conspicuous consumption: Rob Walker takes his consumer critique into the art gallery

The things we buy wind up owning us as much as we own them.

That has been the animating insight of much of Rob Walker’s work, the impulse behind his “Consumed” column in The New York Times Magazine (which ran from 2004 to 2011), the basic premise of Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are, his 2008 book about the intersection of branding, marketing, and identity. (It was in Buying In that Walker first articulated the now widely employed concept of “marketing,” the “murky marketing” strategies branding experts use to muddle the lines between product and culture, between entertainment and advertisement.)

And it is now the organizing principle of As Real As It Gets, the recently opened show he has curated at Tribeca’s Apexart gallery; in Walker’s companion essay, he characterizes the exhibition as “an experiment in using marketplace forms to unexpected and sometimes paradoxical ends.”
In Walker’s handling, “tell me what you’ve bought, and I’ll tell you who you are” is less an accusation than an intellectual puzzle, an investigation into the ways the marketplace of products is also a marketplace of selves:

“Branded material culture is something we tend to take for granted and don’t think about very seriously,” Walker wrote to me in an email exchange on the eve of the show’s opening. “And it’s a pretty constant goal of everything I do to try to prod people to see something new in what’s previously been overlooked.”

Walker wrote to me about his interest in “ambiguity and blurry lines” and in “imagination as a mode of critique.”

“So when apexart very generously offered to let me organize a show,” he wrote, “I started with thinking about various artists I admire who have devised imaginary brands and products and so on as a medium for their ideas, not just about consumer culture but about human nature or other notions.... And then I just started riffing from there about the directions the show could move in, the different ways the concept of a ‘fake product’ or ‘imaginary brand’ can be used: as activism, as parody, as business.”

The show comes across as all of those things, devoting equal space to ersatz products displayed as they would be in a real store (T-shirts folded on a tabletop; packaged objects hung on the wall, sometimes several deep; pricetags hung from items) and visual records of fake products, imaginary brands, and subversive public projects involving such things (like Ryan Watkins-Hughes’ Shopdropping Project, where canned food labels have been replaced with artist images and put back on shelves).
Walker said he was especially pleased to have Shawn Wolfe’s *RemoverInstaller™* in the show, which he called one of his all-time favorite fake brands. Also in the show were what he called “defictionalized” products, which he defined as “brands that at one time existed only in fiction (such as a movie) but that was subsequently brought to the real-world marketplace.” The show thus includes T-shirts for Soylent Green and the Tyrell Corporation (*Blade Runner*) and cans of Brawndo, the sports-drink from *Idiocracy* (official tag line: “The Thirst Mutilator”).

“Part of what I was really interested in doing with *As Real As It Gets* was, in addition to showing examples, causing some new ones to come into existence,” Walker said. “Several design firms and artists and others have thus created branding materials for various imaginary entities, from novels, from research experiments, and so on. So, this amounts to stealing the idea that brands try to devise cultural expression to promote business—I wanted to take the ‘devise cultural expression’ bit without the ‘promote business’ bit. So for that pursuit, an imagined brand is ideal.”

The result is half hipster-pop-up-mart, half colorfully earnest showcase of product-as-idea, idea-as-product. *As Real As It Gets* is also a sort of analytical essay, a foray into criticism from a writer who has, in the past, repeatedly denied that he was a critic.

“I would not say that I am neutral in putting together *As Real As It Gets,*” Walker wrote. “I’m still not particularly interested in saying ‘OK, so here is what it all means!’ because I think that’s just insulting to the reader/viewer. But a huge amount of consideration and thought went into selecting this particular group of objects and creations and contributors. The results should be provocative, and entertaining.”
But not being a critic doesn’t mean Walker can’t be comfortable being open about his point of view, a distinction which inside the journalism trade is well understood.

“I do have a point of view; a set of beliefs about how to look at and think about the world, about what matters and what doesn’t, about what should be questioned and what should be scrutinized and even what should be appreciated,” he wrote. In part to explore that methodological distinction, next year he’ll be teaching what he called a “sort of mini-class” on Point of View for an M.F.A. program for product designers recently established at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan.

As Real As It Gets is at once the culmination of many of Walker’s ideas, explored over the course of some 300 “Consumed” columns, a book, and several collaborative projects. (One of these projects—The Hypothetical Development Organization, designed with his wife Ellen Susan and G.K. Darby, conceiving improbable ends for abandoned buildings—was included in the U.S. exhibition at the Venice Architecture Biennale earlier this year.) But it also suggests the possibility of new trajectories. It is at once wholly believable as a section in an actual store—Urban Outfitters comes immediately to mind—and as a parody of such a section. A satirical homage, the show is a profoundly sincere, caustically sarcastic tribute to and protest against consumerism.

Perhaps some of this delicate balancing is due to Walker’s relocation to Savannah, Ga., where he has been living with Susan, a photographer, for the past few years. When I asked him how the places he’s lived—including New York and New Orleans—have influenced his sense of consumer culture, Walker seemed to say that his current location affords him a different perspective on the culture in general.
“I can have what I believe is a fairly good sense of the New York/San Francisco/L.A. perspective through various online sources and regular visits and so on,” he explained, “but I can maybe counter-balance that against what I’m seeing and experiencing here. There are pros and cons to all this, but I think probably it’s the right scenario for someone like me, because I’m not really interested in being ‘the first to write about trend x and technology y,’ I’m interested in standing back a bit and trying to see what others are missing, what the bigger story or contradiction or paradox or theme or idea might be.”

‘As Real As It Gets’ is on view now at Apexart gallery, 291 Church St., New York, NY. For more information visit Apexart.org or call 212-431-5270.

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