

The Deceptive Everyday

by Tom McGlynn

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Installation view: *The Deceptive Everyday*, Fresh Window, New York, 2019. Courtesy Fresh Window.

Everyday events are deceptive in that their very ordinariness can remain transparent to us. It is a somewhat irrational human impulse to maintain a more exalted interval between the art of life and naked subsistence. Who hasn't harbored a secret wish, formed perhaps in the magical thinking of childhood, that we can be artists of our own lives, authors of our own destinies—that we can make "me" a world. Those who are fortunate enough to have that idealist conceit chipped away by the grace of daily experience are left with the fundamental realization that it is the world, actually, that makes us. The art of living, in other words, is inextricably constituted of the quotidian. We come to understand that relation through the humble tools we've pragmatically fashioned as the vehicles of our own being/becoming. Herein lies the basic premise of *The Deceptive Everyday*, curated by Alma Egger at Fresh Window. Comprising the works of three artists who, according to the director's narrative, examine "everyday objects beyond their utilitarian purposes and see their deceptive and extraordinary nature." The show balances what Heidegger termed "tool-being" (or a graspable metaphysic) with a nuanced reading of ontological cunning—as in Michel de Certeau's definition, in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, of the creatively tactical nature of our daily navigation of existence. Certeau describes this tactical nature as being composed of "clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things ... joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike." It is this inflection of the quotidian that the curator emphasizes in this grouping of otherwise disparate artists.

Jeff Feld's collection of *Totems* (2018) dominates the center of the gallery. Each *Totem* is elegantly composed of the inelegant, basic materials of used household broomsticks mortised together to create tall, spindly, and wavering vectors, originally multicolored from their source materials and topped with plastic loops used to hang brooms for storage. Each sculpture is embedded in a simple block base, also of polyglot found materials. The gentle palette of generic colors wonderfully cross-sections this group of precarious (conceptually contingent and literally leaning) pieces. What is unexpected, or deceptive, here is the simplicity of form amplified by its absurd extension. Feld also shows a similarly fragile and provisional wall piece entitled *Hello* (2018), which is made up of the word "hello" spelled out awkwardly in duct tape stuck to cheap plywood. One comes across such hurriedly made and temporary signs on a construction site, or propped up by a homeless person. In each instance the direct expression is transparently revealed via its humble means. Feld's expression serves to wryly undermine any notion of exalted artwork through the provisional medium of such a frank address.



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Christine Zufferey takes a much more materially removed stance than Feld in her deployment of common objects. In *Random Access Memory (Leading Back To The Unknown)* (2010 – ongoing), what looks like a simple band of twisted paper lined with a slightly green ribbon trim sits isolated in an inkjet image mounted on the wall under plexiglass. The wall on which the print is mounted is painted with a slim green line, similar in hue but larger in width than the one on the depicted band of paper. The combined effect produced a dystopic vision of what one might encounter at a minimally designed stationary display at an office-supply store. Zufferey's presentational aesthetic is also reminiscent of the display tactics of conceptual artists who have deployed fragments of photography in interrogative ensembles, such as Victor Burgin and Christopher Williams. Like these artists, Zufferey doesn't take as a given the traditionally passive role of photography. She actively extends its reach beyond its orthodox otherness or "framing" via an almost documentary facticity. Her flat-footed approach fits into the show's program paradoxically, in that her rather abject pictures of everyday objects placed in generic settings are only (albeit poetically) deceptive in that their critical reflections are hiding in plain sight. Take her *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2016): here an inked and embossed print with acrylic paint on board mimics what seems to be a cancelled bus or metro ticket. A magnetic strip goes fully across the "ticket" yet where a date stamp would usually appear one finds the title of the piece, which is borrowed from the novel of the same name by Milan Kundera, in which that author writes, "There is no perfection, only life." Our only life, Zufferey concedes, is the one in which we sign up—take our ticket and go.

Magdalen Wong's presentation seems at first to be the most traditional of the three artists'. Her wall of framed watercolor flowers on paper are rich with associations of 19th-century botanical illustrations and also the diaristic mementos of pressed flowers. Studying the titles, though, it becomes evident that something is off here. Each watercolor is named *Plasticus Flos Botanica* (all 2017) with geographical subtitles (Athens, Hong Kong, Los Angeles) that indicate where each *plastic* flower was encountered. The simulacra of nature in each ersatz flower arrangement is seamlessly transmuted into a traditional medium that "naturalizes" each in an arcane academic exercise. What was once banal becomes banally captured. The question remains whether or not the stand-in plastic object gets fully redeemed in the decorous alchemy of watercolor mediums and methods, whether one banality cancels out another.

Gertrude Stein playfully flipped the grammatical term of the present continuous tense (one which she would activate to extraordinarily prodigious effect) into "the continuous present" or her notion of composition as vital explanation. Of this literary continuous present, she wrote, "There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking." We can similarly imagine the everyday—the tactic of existence—as such a fully realized present, continuous in its being, without any arty difference or distinction outside of its own generation. The variously connected concepts of basic existence explored in *The Deceptive Everyday* approach such a continuum.