

ARTSEEN CHICAGO

THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 2009

FRIEZE MAGAZINE REVIEWS LOADED

Loaded: Hunting Culture in America is currently on view at Columbia College Chicago's [Glass Curtain Gallery](#).

Frieze.com published this article on April 8, 2009. It was written by Jason Foumberg, a most excellent writer and reviewer for [New City](#) in Chicago.

Erika Larsen, Wedding Ring (2005)



genitalia); of course, he shot and killed it. On the magazine's facing page is an ad for an erectile dysfunction pill. In a quest to understand modern hunting

In the April 2009 issue of hunting magazine Outdoor Life, a hunter tells an anecdote about coming across a rare 'transgendered deer' (with male polished antlers and female

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culture, it was satisfying to smirk at these and other mentions of complicated sexuality in the context of killing animals, since hunting is often defended as tradition. More telling, though, was the insertion of such urban concepts as 'transgendered' and Viagra within an age-old activity, revealing how bloodsports have been modernized and commercialized. This, too, is the intention of 'Loaded: Hunting Culture in America', a thematic exhibition that combines documentary photography, contemporary art, hunting-chic décor and hunting paraphernalia.

Hunting magazines comprise two main types of imagery: a photo-op of the proudly smiling hunter holding his (dead) catch, and wildlife (alive) in its natural habitat, looking pretty for the shoot. The exhibition, too, picks up on these standard poses. Erika Larsen's series of colour photographs, 'Young Blood' (2007), documents the lives of various families that hunt together. Especially difficult to view are portraits of children and young adults posing with rifles, bloodied squirrels and turkeys in hand. Similarly, Brian Lesterberg's photograph Hoof Track with Blood (2003) shows a depression on a plane of white snow, dappled with blood drippings from a fresh kill recently carted off. Each photograph could act as a condemnation of the bloodsport, though these are insiders' views: Larsen contributes photographs to Field & Stream, a popular hunting magazine in the US, while Lesterberg is a hunter himself.



Mathieu
Lévesque, John-
Paul (2006).
Enamel, oil and
carving on brass

But what do the art establishment, and even urban or suburban dwellers, know about the seemingly backwoods hunting community? Lots, apparently. Like punk rock or S&M, the gear and gadgets from hunting subculture have trickled through to the mainstream. Sure, the brew gets watered-down and the bite is softened as contemporary artists and designers pick it up, but curators Audrey Michelle Mast and Ann Wiens don't seem interested in expressing exactly what it feels

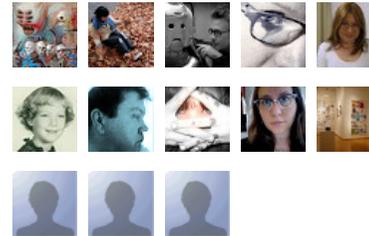
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ABOUT ARTSEEN CHICAGO



like to track and kill an animal; rather, it's the look, the fashion and the stuff - the culture - of the hunt that is on display here.

There are a handful of 'real' objects and scenes from hunting culture - not only Lesterberg's and Larsen's documentary footage but also duck decoys from the collection of an award-winning decoy sculptor. The life-like painted wooden ducks are both functioning tools and sculptural objects (though not necessarily 'sculpture' as we're comfortable with the term).



Diana Guerrero-Macia, Kill Shots (2007). Wool, leather, vinyl and cotton

The step from the duck decoys, popular in some faux-rustic dens, to ironic kitsch is easy to make, and the curators follow

through by exhibiting a cardboard trophy buck head, made to adorn, presumably, college dorm rooms. The difference between the wooden decoys and the cardboard head is the seriousness with which the decoy maker works and the smugness of the cardboard joke. The contrast is similarly played-out with a taxidermied and mounted jackalope (the folkloric antlered bunny), and designer salt and pepper shakers in the shape of stag heads. Whereas the jackalope was a junk-shop prize find and is a token lowbrow curio, the spice shakers are made of stainless steel and sell for US\$43. Elsewhere in the exhibition, you can play Nintendo's popular Duck Hunt (1985). A trajectory



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takes shape, detailing the progression of the hunting subculture's step-by-step manoeuvre into middle-class life.

As for the contemporary art on view, there are similar reversals and transpositions of high and low taste. Jenn Wilson's lush oil painting of a bear recalls a hunter's morbid love affair with nature and the sport's curious self-justification of environmental conservationism. *Bear* (2008) could hang just as easily in a lodge as it does in the Glass Curtain Gallery. Kimberly Hart's *Hunting Stand with Unicorn Bait* (2007) is an installation that updates the Metropolitan Museum's famous 'The Hunt of the Unicorn' (1495–1505) tapestries, using hobby-shop materials such as plastic beads and pastel pom-poms. On the side of sentimentality are Josh Winegar's altered photographs of hunters parading their trophy kills, in which the artist has whitewashed the proud hunters with paint until they're almost completely faded out, though leaving the animals intact. In *Mtn. Lion* (2007), a large, limp feline is given a painted bandage in a sweetly futile gesture of redemption.

Hunting culture is so ripe with artistic metaphors - decoys and doubles, the quietude of a collection and the violence of ownership - yet the curators don't deviate from the historical slice they aim to present (except, perhaps, the inclusion of Diana Guerrero-Maciá's stitched ransom note, which reads, 'Designed to deliver kill shots', and may be aimed at viewers). By balancing pictures of carcasses and guns alongside cultural relics, hunting is shown to be a disturbingly assimilated pastime.

Jason Foumberg

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