

Suspended Animation

PAUL GALVEZ ON THE ART OF ISABELLE CORNARO

View of "Isabelle Cornaro," 2013, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland. Three works from the series "Homonymes I," 2010–12.



Left: Isabelle Cornaro, *Paysage avec poussin et témoins oculaires (version VI)* (Landscape with Poussin and Eyewitnesses [version VI]), 2014, wood, paint, brass sheet, log, stone, marble, brass urn, opaline, velvet, terra-cotta, bronze, brass chain, velvet. From the series "Paysage avec poussin et témoins oculaires," 2008–. Installation view, M Museum Leuven, Belgium. Photo: Dirk Pauwels.

Right: Isabelle Cornaro, *God Boxes (columns)*, 2014, steel, resin. From the series "God Boxes (columns)," 2014. Installation view, High Line, New York, 2014. Photo: Guillaume Zicarelli.



ON NEW YORK'S HIGH LINE, between Gansevoort Street and the Standard Hotel, a black monolith encrusted with strange paneled reliefs rises from the disused railroad tracks that run through this elevated park. There seem to be objects embedded within the reliefs, but on closer inspection, it turns out that these are not actually lengths of rope or bricks, but casts of them fossilized in a tar-like rubber. Their ornamental arrangement suggests a message written in code, like the indecipherable hieroglyphics of some alien civilization emerging from the wreckage of our own. Thus arises the paradox that the obelisk seems to speak both a common contemporary parlance and a lost tongue.

Such reconfigurations of quotidian objects are typical of the work of the French artist Isabelle Cornaro, who has in recent years established herself as one of the leading younger artists working with diverse kinds of assemblage and installation. Like many of her generation, she is as at ease in painting and sculpture as she is in digital imaging and video. But unlike many in her cohort, she is rigorously consistent in her approach across media and in her choice of materials, which often come from a specific period of postwar industrial production. Her process invariably involves taking cast-off detritus—things like old pieces of metal, five-and-dime ceramics, vintage carpets, used lightbulbs, discarded tools, and other anonymous bric-a-brac—and reassembling it according to a simple system or set of categories.

Sometimes Cornaro borrows her logic from another artist: The High Line piece is premised on instructions detailed in an unrealized project by Edward Kienholz; the installations titled *Paysage avec poussin et témoins oculaires* (Landscape with Poussin and Eyewitnesses), 2008–, are groupings of objects and plinths that reconstruct in 3-D the systems of perspective found in Nicolas Poussin's paintings, with mass-produced items standing in for

toga-clad figures and temples receding in space to a distant vanishing point. Usually, however, the organizational system is of her own design. In a 2013 interview, for example, she described the methodology by which she divided the objects cast in gray plaster to form the series of sculptures "Homonymes I," 2010–12. "I identified three distinct families of objects: naturalistic objects (even when streamlined) in the shape of a duck, a flower, etc.; objects carved with decorative motifs, repeated and stylized; and objects sporting geometrical form. . . . In other words, my categories were naturalism, stylization, and abstraction."

Within the collections that are the primary locus of her work, Cornaro tends to use rather colorless kitsch (not the over-the-top, campy kind), and she avoids the psychosexual imagery one associates with fashion and advertising. She has stated on numerous occasions her aversion to shopping, despite the necessity of doing so to find things for her work. She



Clockwise, from left: Isabelle Cornaro, *Homonymes I*, 2010, dyed plaster, 47 ¼ × 23 ¾ × 13 ¾". Isabelle Cornaro, *Homonymes I*, 2010, dyed plaster, 47 ¼ × 23 ¾ × 14 ¾". Isabelle Cornaro, *Homonymes I*, 2010, dyed plaster, 47 ¼ × 23 ¾ × 6 ¾". All from the series "Homonymes I," 2010–12. Installation views, Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris, 2010. Photos: Guillaume Zicarelli.

also has described the experience of flea markets as "slightly pornographic . . . half-sentimental, half-lecherous." In other words, there is a deep resistance within Cornaro's work to the irrational fetishism that Marx famously argued lay at the heart of our relationship to the commodity, even while her charged wording seems to concede the inevitability of such projections, and perhaps even her own susceptibility to them. It might be useful, then, to think of her collections as a form of counterdiscourse. They mimic the way the modern world imposes a system of order—a taxonomy that purports to bring some kind of rationality to the disorienting phantasmagoria of consumer capitalism—on its products, whether in the supermarket aisle or in the museum. But by submitting those products to another logic,

the work unhinges or upsets the dominant system, however briefly. It's notable that the systems Cornaro marshals against consumer systems are often explicitly linked to art, whether based on the ideas of artists (Kienholz or Poussin) or on stylistic categories (naturalism, stylization, abstraction). If she militates against fetishism and spectacle, she doesn't militate against the aesthetic—to the contrary, she attends to style, form, the composition of a frame of film or the contours of objects with what might almost seem rapt fascination, as if in secret acknowledgment that the anti-aesthetic has run its course (and has been irrevocably co-opted by the market). In Cornaro's hands, the aesthetic is not so much the classic antagonist of consumer culture; it is rather that culture's shadow and double.

CORNARO'S ENIGMATIC INSTALLATIONS distance her work from that of a slightly earlier generation of French artists. It was painfully clear in the recent Paris double bill of Pierre Huyghe at the Centre Pompidou and Philippe Parreno at the Palais de Tokyo that critical practice, in order to function at all, is increasingly obliged to adopt the baroque scale and blockbuster scenography of mass entertainment. It is against the background of this recent history—not unique to France, of course—that Cornaro's deceptively unassuming work must be read.

Perhaps the most literal example of Cornaro's antispectacular attitude is *Le proche et le lointain I* (The Near and the Distant I), 2011, a set of six table-height vitrines housing various configurations of the artist's usual defunct objects, grouped according to their degree of abstraction and verisimilitude. In one glass case, a stack of simple wooden blocks laid on red paper locks horns with a motley crew of faded bibelots, while a blue-and-white Oriental carpet serves as intermediary. The blocks themselves clearly allude to the geometric, constructive nature of modernist abstraction, though here filtered through a child's eyes, as if a five-year-old had built a Suprematist architectural model. The adjacent tchotchkes appear as the blocks' decorative, debased other. The two strands—avant-garde and kitsch—are literally interwoven in the form of the carpet, here simultaneously color field and ornament.

Since gaining traction in the late-1990s era of archive fever, the faux museum display has become such a well-established trope as to have lost all power to surprise, threatening to devolve into the kitschiness of curatorial navel-gazing. Cornaro, however,

Isabelle Cornaro, *Le proche et le lointain I* (The Near and the Distant I) (detail), 2011, six vitrines, colored paper, found objects, found fabrics, dimensions variable.

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Left: Isabelle Cornaro, *Homonymes II* (#1, grey monochrome), 2012, dyed plaster, 70 1/8 x 47 1/4 x 7 1/8". From the series "Homonymes II," 2012–13.

Right: Isabelle Cornaro, *Le proche et le lointain I* (The Near and the Distant I) (detail), 2011, six vitrines, colored paper, found objects, found fabrics, dimensions variable.



Above and left: Four stills from Isabelle Cornaro's *Premier rêve d'Oskar Fischinger* (Oskar Fischinger's First Dream), 2009, two 16-mm films transferred to two-channel HD video, color, silent, 1 minute 48 seconds and 1 minute 33 seconds.



chooses *not* to overdramatize the vitrine's historicizing function. Her colorful, oddly elegant displays have little to do with the deliberately grimy, old-fashioned vitrines of Marcel Broodthaers's fictive museum or Christian Philipp Müller's display cases. *Le proche et le lointain I* completely banishes photography and text, Conceptual art's classic tools for laying low the primacy of painting and sculpture.

But this does not mean that Cornaro is simply reversing Conceptual art's initial reversal; just because photo-text disappears does not mean that painting-sculpture returns with a vengeance, bringing the spectacularity to which it is proximate along with it. The playing field is still leveled, just without the prompting of figures, numbers, and labels. One can see this tendency toward equivalence at work particularly in Cornaro's attitude toward abstraction, which is manifest in her habit of nonchalantly inserting monochromes and nonrepresentational forms into her collections. Having come of age in an era when it goes without saying that naturalism is never really natural and abstraction is never really abstract, Cornaro privileges neither.

IT WOULD BE TEMPTING to situate Cornaro in a critical lineage of object gatherers running the gamut from Walter Benjamin's book collector to Claude Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur. But unlike the bibliophile and the do-it-yourselfer, whose relationship to things is one of passionate acquisition and makeshift

reconstruction, respectively, for Cornaro collecting is merely the beginning of a process of continual permutation and transformation. Many of the props used in *Le proche et le lointain I*, for instance, reappear in the series of large gray plaster panels called "Homonymes II," 2012–13, while the objects in "Homonymes I" similarly appeared initially in other works. Housing the ghostly remnants of earlier pieces, these reliefs are as much mausoleum as collection. Due to their utterly matte texture and dull, monochromatic tone, they take the shine off of the commodities assembled in Cornaro's other installations, as if in response to Freud's famous comparison of the fetish to a glimmer of light glancing off of one's nose or to Benjamin's idea, as characterized by Theodor Adorno, that "everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things." If a similar strategy appears to inform Cornaro's vitrines, which freeze objects into aestheticized stasis, the ultimate fate of her tableaux, disarranged in these colorless masses, suggests a flux that is always at least potentially poised to shift things from one context to another—or even to liquidate things entirely. The systems or structures that sustain the commodity can never really be considered finished, total, or absolute. For instance, the "Homonymes" subvert Cornaro's earlier systems and perhaps, ultimately, their own, literally dissolving them into a pool of gray matter (with a historical assist, of course, from the equally deadening example

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of Jasper Johns's Sculp-Metal paint cans and light-bulbs). If this is a dramatization of how the reduction of objects to sheer exchange value obliterates difference and therefore meaning, just as physical decay will, it doesn't foreclose the possibility that some kind of new object or new meaning will reconstitute itself from this homogeneous matter.

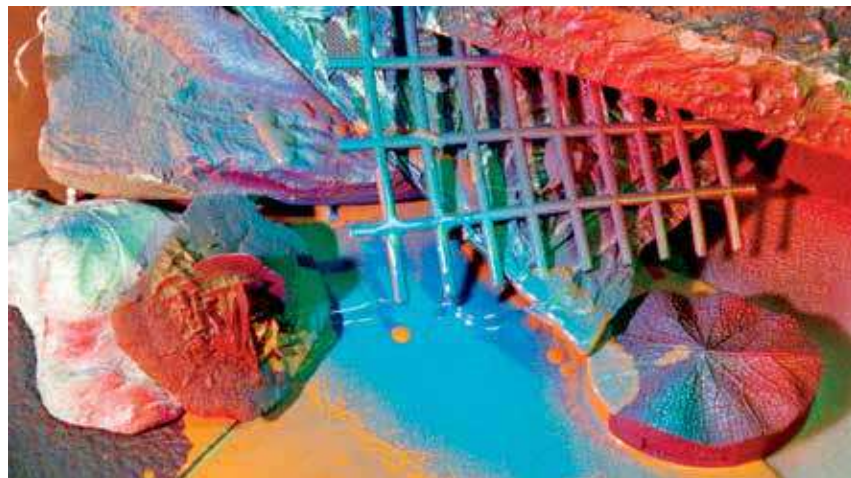
THE HIGH LINE PIECE has its origin in a series of earlier sculptures by Cornaro, each titled *God Box* and dated 2013, three of which were first shown in Switzerland at the Kunsthalle Bern that year. At the opening, I immediately saw them as a curious reaction to Minimalism, such was their elegant spacing in the kunsthalle's neoclassical galleries. To my surprise, the work stemmed from an unrealized project by an artist not normally associated with so restrained an aesthetic. In 1963, before becoming famous for his Pop tableaux, the California-based Kienholz drafted a list of works to be realized, including "The *God Box* #3," which called for a "box numbered



Left: Isabelle Cornaro, *God Box* #4, 2013, steel, rubber, 58 1/4 x 42 1/2 x 35 3/8". From the series "God Boxes," 2013.

Right: Isabelle Cornaro, *God Box* #5, 2013, steel, rubber, 58 1/4 x 42 1/2 x 35 3/8". From the series "God Boxes," 2013.





Three stills from Isabelle Cornaro's *Choses (Things)*, 2014, 16 mm transferred to HD video, color, silent, 2 minutes 6 seconds.



three in a series of boxes in size somewhere between Reich's Orgone Accumulators and a Western outhouse [whose] sole purpose is to stimulate thoughts on organized religions and what they have done to and for civilization."

Using Kienholz's voice from the grave as her template, Cornaro dutifully decorated her "God Boxes" with motifs cast, like the High Line piece, in black rubber. In order to "stimulate thoughts on religion," objects are organized according to different approaches to spirituality. For example, talismanic mandalas composed of coins and chains encapsulate for Cornaro the single-minded, repetitive, almost obsessive belief structures of monotheism. Whether this is an accurate picture of monotheism is beside the point. What is crucial is how Cornaro rereads the project through her own aesthetic, reanimating the productive tension between Minimalism and Pop by resurrecting a forgotten '60s moment of confluence between the readymade and the specific object, to which Kienholz's boxes are at least morphologically akin. The project points up a salient difference between Cornaro's practice and those of many other contemporary artists, whose work engages assemblage and recombination. If such practices often seem to address technology (via the types of artifacts they present, for example) without taking up the question of how digital technology could or should inflect insistently material art, Cornaro again adopts a different strategy, highlighting and critically activating the anachronism of assemblage, and accessing history in the process.

CORNARO'S HISTORICAL AWARENESS is an aspect of her practice that is lost on some of her critics. I'm thinking especially of certain New York cognoscenti who, expecting bells and whistles or maybe just a USB stick added on somewhere, were fooled by the High Line piece's sobriety and superficial resemblance to the sculpture of Louise Nevelson. For a corpus of work that deliberately eschews the wow-factor of fake novelty, this dismissal might be considered a badge of honor. The negative reaction highlights another important attribute of Cornaro's work: that its depth and range are best appreciated across media, not only in painting, sculpture, and installation but also in film. When I saw her recent solo exhibitions in Bern and at Le Magasin in Grenoble, France (reviewed in these pages in 2012), the importance of that medium was plain to see.

At first, this might seem strange. After all, film is the spectacular medium par excellence. However, Cornaro's films continue the investigation of object relations previously pursued in her plastic work. Just as in her sculptures and installations, things are organized into ensembles, only to eventually succumb to

other operations. Sometimes this process is achieved via technical means, such as when a tabletop version of *Paysage avec poussin et témoins oculaires* is unsettled by a simple camera pan, close-up, or change in selective focus. At other times, the film captures the changes as they happen; in *Choses (Things)*, 2014, an unsuspecting mass of objects is attacked by a blob of paint. And sometimes the transformation is more suggested than explicit: A deliberately unslick, nonprofessional look gives Cornaro's shorts a certain perceptual "matteness"—the antithesis of HD. It is the cinematic equivalent of her nullifying rubber and plaster casts.

Celebration, 2013, a triptych of films shot on 16 mm and combining outtakes from some of the artist's other moving-image works (such as *Premier rêve d'Oskar Fischinger* [Oskar Fischinger's First Dream], 2009) with slo-mo clips of classic Disney movies, is symptomatic of Cornaro's work as a whole. One sequence comes from *Beauty and the Beast*. The narrative elements of this fairy tale are of no interest to Cornaro, who focuses instead on the supporting cast of anthropomorphic housewares, really the Beast's cursed royal entourage transformed into clocks, door handles, and so forth. What for Disney is an occasion for saccharine comic relief is in Cornaro's hands an almost painfully slow dissection of the way in which objects acquire the anthropomorphism that is also one of the defining traits of the commodity fetish. In Marx, the process by which commodities replace human beings, practically becoming persons themselves, was hidden, almost magical. *Celebration*, then, is a kind of miniallegory of object relations under capitalism, in which dead things substitute for real people. At an earlier moment in the history of modernity, it was possible for Sergei Eisenstein to think of Disney cartoons as a kind of slippery, unruly resistance to mechanization. But shortly thereafter—and subsequently—large-scale animation was revealed to be an extension of, not an obstacle to, the commodification of everyday life. For as the history of advertising attests, animation is even better at selling products than it is at visually transforming them into living entities ("Celebration," after all, is also the name of an entire town under the aegis of the Disney brand). In *Celebration*, Cornaro uses slow motion and rewinding to delay and thus expose the process of metamorphosis, just as her vitrines and casts delay the displayed object's promise of immediate gratification. Her oeuvre as a whole is fundamentally about demystifying this process, debunking both its uncanny anthropomorphisms and its totalizing petrifications. It is not concerned with the *presence* of objects so much as with calling our attention to their transient *passage*. □

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Three stills from Isabelle Cornaro's *Celebration*, 2013, three 16-mm films transferred to HD video, black-and-white and color, sound, infinite duration.

