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Artist-Designed Multiples on View at
National Museum of Women in the Arts | May 3–Sept. 22, 2019

WASHINGTON—The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) presents More is More: Multiples, on view May 3–Sept. 22, 2019. Challenging the notion that a work of art must be singular or unique to have value, the exhibition celebrates multiples as a medium by presenting approximately 25 artist-designed objects that bridge the gap between works of fine art and limited-edition retail items. More is More presents dinner plates, tote bags, sunglasses, toys and more created by artists including Barbara Kruger, Helen Marten, Jiha Moon, Cindy Sherman and Mickalene Thomas.

“Combining utilitarian characteristics and innovative artistry, these objects offer celebratory and tongue-in-cheek commentary on stereotypical attributes of femininity,” said curatorial assistant Hannah Shambrroom. “The exhibition, drawn primarily from NMWA’s collection, highlights women artists’ contributions to the medium from the 1980s to the present, reflecting on themes like mass-production and commercialization, domestic tropes and democratization of access to art.”

Some works, such as the baby onesie inspired by Louise Bourgeois’ Be Calm (2005) reference a theme, in this case motherhood, through the object’s function as well as its imagery. Others, like Mickalene Thomas’s Pocket Mirror (2016), call attention to narrow beauty standards and aesthetic representations of women. Both of these objects are produced by design company Third Drawer Down in partnership with the artists’ studios, exemplifying the collaboration inherent in this medium. Several works carry biting social messages, including Barbara Kruger’s “Your gaze hits the side of my face” sunglasses (2013), and Sophie Calle’s The Pig dinner service (2013), a set of porcelain plates inscribed with a story about a man who insulted the artist’s eating habits.

While the majority of works featured in the exhibition have a functional purpose, their aesthetic appeal and high level of artistry transcend the everyday; as a hybrid object the artist-designed multiple democratizes the exclusivity associated with the world of “high” art.
Background: Multiples from Renaissance to Retail

A multiple is a three-dimensional art object designed by an artist and produced using industrial or commercial processes in a series of identical editions. Generally, these pieces are more affordable than a unique work of art, but are still desirable as “originals.” Their lower cost makes multiples accessible to a broader consumer and collector base. Further, many artists choose to donate proceeds from sales of these works to benefit causes or charities. While much scholarly attention has been paid to prints, photographs and other art forms produced in editions, surprisingly little light has been cast on these playful sculptural pieces and, in particular, women’s contributions to the medium.

The history of producing works of art in multiple extends as far back as the Renaissance, when sculptors began producing editioned casts of bronze sculptures. Innovations in printmaking enabled the reproduction of two-dimensional works, while the inventions of lithography in the 18th century and screen-printing in the early 20th century opened the medium to artists interested in exploring techniques beyond woodcut, engraving or etching.

In the early 20th century, “Readymades” by Marcel Duchamp recontextualized everyday objects into works of art, paving the way for modern multiples (themselves often regular commodities designed by artists) by the middle of the century. In the 1950s, artists Yaacov Agam and Jean Tinguely proposed the idea of creating large, potentially unlimited editions of works that could be produced and sold inexpensively using industrial processes; Galerie Denise René in Paris began producing and selling these pieces in 1962. Concurrently, in the late 1950s, artist Daniel Spoerri founded Edition MAT, a project with a goal of producing modestly priced works by well-known artists.

In the 1960s, the Pop Art movement took an interest in mass consumption. Artists began to look beyond traditional mediums and methods of artistic practice in favor of tools and machines of mass production. A work of art no longer needed to have the unique mark of an artist’s hand, but could instead appear automated and manufactured. Pop Art also introduced the influence of advertising, creating a strong link between the commercial world and the art world. This new artistic sensibility upended economic hierarchies within the visual arts, creating space for younger participants, broader audiences and fresh sensibilities. By the end of the 20th century, technology allowed artists to more easily produce their work en masse, and publishers, gallerists and workshops developed an interest in creating multiples.

Today’s multiples are the products of centuries of innovation by artists, rooted in the desire to replicate their art easily and identically. Often still considered avant-garde in material and production, these collectible works offer the viewer/user both aesthetic pleasure and functional purpose. They exhibit the same level of high-quality design and creativity as a more traditional work of art, while being affordable and relatable enough to engage a wide audience and consumer.
market. Multiples, in their whimsy, irony and kitsch, purposefully blur the distinctions between the art world and consumer culture.

More is More is drawn primarily from NMWA’s extensive collection of multiples, created through the generosity of museum patron Steven Scott and other donors enthusiastic about the art form. Additional works are drawn from the collection of the Akron Art Museum, which has long committed to collecting multiples, and renowned multiples publisher Brooke Alexander, Inc.

More is More: Multiples, presented in the Teresa Lozano Long Gallery of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, is organized by the museum and generously supported by the members of NMWA.

National Museum of Women in the Arts
The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) is the only major museum in the world solely dedicated to championing women through the arts. With its collections, exhibitions, programs and online content, the museum inspires dynamic exchanges about art and ideas. NMWA advocates for better representation of women artists and serves as a vital center for thought leadership, community engagement and social change. NMWA addresses the gender imbalance in the presentation of art by bringing to light important women artists of the past while promoting great women artists working today. The collections highlight painting, sculpture, photography and video by artists including Louise Bourgeois, Mary Cassatt, Judy Chicago, Frida Kahlo, Shirin Neshat, Faith Ringgold, Pipilotti Rist, Amy Sherald and Élisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun.

NMWA is located at 1250 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. It is open Mon.–Sat., 10 a.m.–5 p.m. and Sun., noon–5 p.m. Admission is $10 for adults, $8 for visitors 65 and over and students, and free for NMWA members and youths 18 and under. Admission is free the first Sunday of each month. For information, call 202-783-5000, visit nmwa.org, Broad Strokes Blog, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.

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Image credit line: Mickalene Thomas, Pocket Mirror, 2016: Brushed bronze with epoxy-coated artwork, 2 7/8 in. diameter; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Steven Scott, Baltimore, in honor of NMWA Chief Curator, Kathryn A. Wat; Photo by Lee Stalsworth

Jiha Moon, Lady in K-Garden (with packaging), 2017; Porcelain, underglaze, and glaze, with takeout box packaging, 2 x 3 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.; Created for CUE Art Foundation; On loan from Adrienne L. Gayoso; Image courtesy of the artist