Free Box

A site-specific installation by Rachel Grobstein

72½ Union Square
Somerville, MA 02143
Themicromuseum.com

MUSEUM

Rachel Grobstein’s exploration of the narratives and value in streetside detritus makes ideal use of the Mμseum’s unique geography; the work is simultaneously presented in a gallery setting, while still literally being in a box at the edge of the sidewalk.

Grobstein's mixed-media works combine painstakingly recreated miniature objects with an eye for the poignancy of the mundane. Meticulous, photo-realistic painting makes the objects appear at first glance to be collage. However, it is the virtuoso craftsmanship that goes into each minute item that imbues it with depth and feeling.

“Free Box” detail
1.5x1.25x1.5 inches

Grobstein herself discusses the childhood appeal of both the free box and the vocabulary of the miniature, while contrasting some of the darker (and very adult) potential implications inherent in the subject matter (her reference to the perhaps-apocryphal Hemingway micro-fiction “For sale: baby shoes, never worn" is wonderfully apropos.)

“Free Box” detail
3.5x3.5 inches 1x1x0.75 inches

This pull between childhood glee and adult concern is part of what I find so appealing about the work. As a child, whenever I walked outdoors my eyes were trained on the ground searching for “treasures” (lost buttons, bazooka joe comics, single earrings). To a kid like me, curbside free boxes were like urban geodes; delving into their dirty, unassuming shells could yield more grimy debris, or it could reveal a glittering cache of prizes.

These last-resort depositories contained some of the treasure-hunting thrill of yard sales, but without the anxiety of former owners and money.

“Free Box” detail
1x0.5x1.25 inches

Yard sales are an environment where both parties - seller and potential buyer - make themselves vulnerable; while proprietors are putting bits of their lives on display (out of context) to be seen and judged, attendees endure the anxiety of potentially offending with response or lack of interest. It is an exchange between voyeur and exhibitionist, where the watchers’ reactions are in turn observed. The free box is decadently one-sided; one is free to pillage, reject, interpret and even judge without the consequences of observation. It is voyeurism without the repercussions.

Living in a college town, free boxes pop up seasonally like farmer's markets. I encounter them regularly, but I have found that as an adult my experience of the free box has changed dramatically. No more a discovery laden with potential treasure, Instead these curbside piles trigger nostalgia for moves past and life stages completed, bittersweet memories and a niggling feeling of guilt over my own unsorted basement boxes.

There is an irony in the free box as artistic installation that is not lost on Grobstein. In many ways, these conglomerations of objects are the opposite-of-curated; they contain the bits and pieces that don't fit into the cohesive whole we attempt to make of our lives. “Free Box” is a carefully curated anti-collection, executed with precision, sentiment and wit.

Judith Klausner
Curator

“Free Box” detail
1x1.5.0.75 inches