

'Accumulated Actions' at the Sonoma Museum of Visual Art

In the mid 1960s, a group of sculptors and painters found themselves acutely interested in the means of making art—and less so in its ends. These “process” artists, including Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Hans Haacke, Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Robert Morris and others, abandoned rigid materials and chose, instead, softer ones such as fabric, wax, hair, plants and ice, subjecting their works to the natural

influences of time, gravity, decay and weather. What happened during the making of such art mattered more than what resulted.

This spring, *Accumulated Actions: Art Rising from Process*, a group exhibition at this tiny public gallery north of Santa Rosa, offered up a new generation of process artists, who revisited the sub-genre with interesting new concepts, materials and influences. While not proof of a fully germinating revival, the Sonoma Museum of Visual Art show—which included three individual artists and one collective—sowed some provocative seeds.

Works by Nicole Phungrasamee Fein were among the most purely process-based. For *Beyond 01-04*, the artist dipped a brush into watercolor, painted a single freehand stroke, took a break and returned later to paint the next. The cumulative result was a series of bright, rigid grids, like tightly woven baskets of gold or crimson that hummed with tension. Similarly, for *One By One*, Fein painstakingly glued thousands of single paper confettos into a single, vertiginous stack, which rose from the floor and trembled with each passing movement. As intriguing as the concept itself were the muted colors layered inside the column, like a renegade DNA strand snaking high into the air.

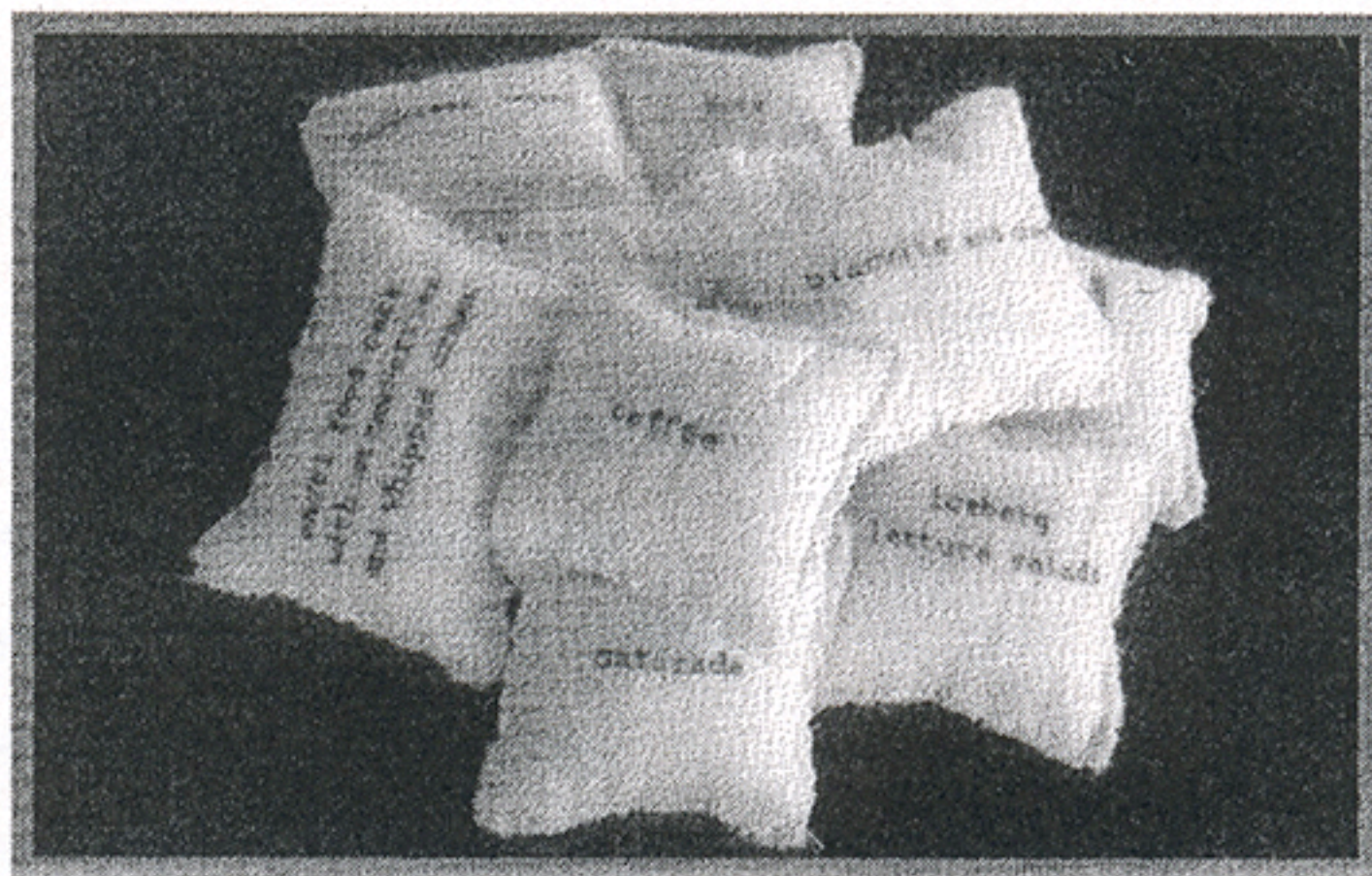
Some contributors chose, as their medium, objects shaped (at first, anyway) by natural processes. The Corte Madera-based collective Meadowsweet Dairy gathered sea-carved driftwood for its organic portfolio: *Tapestry* featured a large mesh of steel wire tangled with hundreds of wood chunks to create a greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts effect, not unlike Deborah Butterfield's cast-driftwood horses. For the show's loveliest works, sculptor Amanda Haas tweaked a pair of rough-hewn oak logs by augmenting them with an edge of kitchen-countertop laminate (for *Boomerang*) and a wash of shimmering gold resin (inside *Hollow*). These subtle textural alterations suggested some form of forest-grown cyborg.

Heather Johnson used sewing materials to blend the tenets of process and conceptual art. *Once upon [a] blotted-out time* unfolded across the gallery's west wall, a nails-and-thread map of an unnamed (and surely American) locale where long, meandering stretches of highway linked blocky suburban developments and streets leading nowhere. Scattered throughout were tiny embroideries of body parts—hands, ears, hair-

cuts, knees—like nearly forgotten memories. A compelling installation inspired by recollections of her native North Dakota and Los Angeles, the piece evoked a lonely and soulless place, like much of the sprawling West.

Empty Table & Chairs in the Desert used similar materials to different effect. Here, the artist fashioned hundreds of cheap pillows from discarded mattress pads, each embroidered with a single-line memory supplied by viewers (this is the “process” element of Johnson's work). Heaped in an alcove, the pillows—and their quirky collective memories—purported to comfort us; yet their effect was disquieting, hollow and antiseptic.

Forty years ago, process artists were reacting to the staid structures of minimalism (and even, as curator Gay Dawson suggested, Bauhaus's “form follows func-



Heather Johnson, *Comfort Items*, 2002, at the Sonoma Museum of Visual Art, Santa Rosa.

tion” axiom). For them, process trumped product. At SMOVA, a generation of younger artists stood in the footsteps of their forebears, studying what it means to make art and not merely objectify the final piece, choosing to celebrate the epiphanies that occur in the process. Is this a new movement? The jury is still out.

—Colin Berry

Accumulated Actions: Art Arising From Process closed May 4 at the Sonoma Museum of Visual Art, Santa Rosa.

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