

Lost and Found: Featuring Kim Alsbrooks and Nikki Couppee

The incorporation of “non-art” materials into artworks is generally regarded as a modern approach, art historically dating to the early 1900s. These materials are usually found objects. The artist may alter them slightly for use in their work, but often, the original appearance is retained to construct layers of meaning.

While individual artists may have experimented with using found objects prior to this time, the recorded use of such materials in a more concentrated and deliberate way seems to coincide with the advent of industry and capitalism. The mass production of goods is an actual, quantifiable act, yet it is linked to a social and cultural psychology regarding how human beings value products and materials. We can hold sentiment or emotion for something that is not unique—if the context in which it came into our lives is significant as related to place, time, or person. But we are now operating in a system where disposability is almost regarded as an asset. It is acceptable to rid ourselves of clothes, devices, packaging, and food because we can easily get more. This convenience—tied into consumption—also suggests wealth and abundance. All of these factors—and more—play into why found objects (things “discovered” by someone, often discarded by others) can be rich materials for artists to use in the creation of their work. Artists gravitate towards using found objects for numerous reasons: the objects may suggest another time or space; encourage a reconsideration of something familiar; and/or be used to draw on personal, historical, political, social, or pop culture references.



(above)
Nikki Couppee
Cascades Necklace, 2012
Plexiglas®, brass, leather, shell,
found objects, fishbone, faux pearls,
and acrylic resin
18 x 5 1/2 x 3/4 inches
Collection of the Artist

(left)
Kim Alsbrooks
Lorraine Divine (detail), 2015
Oil on found aluminum
8 x 4 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the Artist
Photography Courtesy of the Artists

Often, the fact that viewers may recognize the found objects—and thereby draw on meaning as both the objects they once were and what they now are—is significant. The original content adds a layer of meaning to media in a new context. If the found objects go unnoticed, a viewer can still confront



their presence through the listing of materials used. In this exhibition alone, visitors could find recycled traffic signs and tin containers, used envelopes, staples, wooden clothespins, magazine clippings, safety pins, machine parts, buttons, and many other recognizable objects and images.

Lost and Found underscores how some artists recontextualize the marginalized or overlooked and imbue the ordinary with something extraordinary.

Two artists who approach the concept of “lost and found” in fresh ways are **Kim Alsbrooks** and **Nikki Couppee**. Borrowed from the artists and private lenders, their work is featured in an exhibition that is otherwise comprised of pieces from RAM’s diverse collection. While Alsbrooks’ painted cans and Couppee’s jewelry may be different aesthetically, both artists center their investigations on the links between materiality, identity, and status.

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Kim Alsbrooks

For eleven years, Kim Alsbrooks has married past and present, combining modern trash with delicate portraits of historical figures. Motivated by a desire to explore social and cultural constructs such as stratification by wealth, birth, race, or gender, Alsbrooks subverts the potential “haughtiness” of the portrait subjects by rendering their image on flattened aluminum cans or fast food containers. Eighteenth-century historical miniature ivory paintings offer her inspiration, both in form and content.

Not a painter before starting the series, she has taught herself to paint in order to render subjects in graphite and oils. Alsbrooks finds already flattened trash—in her own words, “One cannot flatten the trash. It just doesn't work”—and picks subjects that are somehow complimentary to the found materials.



For the artist, the paintings are a “statement reflecting on status, of family, of names, of what and who we think is important, of art itself.” What does it mean when these sitters are taken out of their historical context and put in a modern one? Does their power and influence (enough that they were captured in a miniature portrait during times when this was reserved for the elite) mean the same thing today as it did then?

Nikki Couppee

Nikki Couppee's jewelry is like costume jewelry, but also not. Jewelry has often been associated with luxury and status. The material value of certain stones or metals can imbue monetary importance while history of ownership can serve to offer legitimacy and social standing. Most often made of imitation and faux gemstones, costume jewelry has allowed for an opulent look without extraordinary cost.

Made of non-precious and found components, Couppee's extravagant and colorful earrings, brooches, and neckpieces echo royal or precious jewelry, yet the often more “humble” origin of the materials links their value to overall design and the skill of the artist. Couppee uses the aesthetic of historical jewelry. She incorporates certain cuts or shapes with her stones and settings, and in so doing, creates her own “version” of gemstones. Material choices that include brass, sterling silver, wood, enamel, quartz, stainless steel, Plexiglas®, polymer, and found objects link old and new technologies while the color and texture are juxtaposed in a way that feels like modern abstract painting.

Featured among the work of newer artists Alsbrooks and Couppee, pieces from RAM's collection reflect the legacy of found object use in contemporary art. Interestingly, **Lost and Found** presents work newly acquired by RAM from some long-term proponents of such materials—a dedicated group of related artists and friends whose adornment, sculpture, and correspondence reflects the efforts and interests of a community that have been inspired by one another as well as by their daily surroundings. These artists—**Teri Blond, Robert W. Ebendorf, John J. Grant, Bobby Hansson, and Judith Hoyt**—have produced work independently and as collaborators (they collaborate with others beyond the group as well). There are multiple examples of their work in the collection. Their collage focused aesthetic—with images and objects rooted in popular culture—is distinctive, exemplifying humor and ingenuity as well as a reverence for art history.

One of the most recent gifts—*Roy Rogers Lunchbox*—was created by Teri Blond and Bobby Hansson, and given to RAM by Robert W. Ebendorf in honor of his friend, collaborator, and fellow professor, Hansson. Combining a Roy Rogers lunchbox, an old tin toy car, an oilcan, a coat hanger, and a tin tube, this piece blends popular culture, sentiment, youthful interests, and an imaginative composition.

(above)
Teri Blond and Bobby Hansson
Roy Rogers Lunchbox, ca. 1995
Found toy car, found objects, tin, and leather
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Robert W. Ebendorf
in Honor of Professor Bobby Hansson

(right)
Boris Bally
Transit Chair, 2003
Found metal traffic signs, champagne
corks, and metal fasteners
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Boris Bally
Photography: Jon Bolton



Lena Vigna
Curator of Exhibitions

RAM