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Two Guys from Lincoln: Cameron Shaw and Craig Roper

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TWO GUYS FROM LINCOLN:
CAMERON SHAW AND CRAIG ROPER

APRIL 27 - JULY 11, 1993

Two Guys from Lincoln: Cameron Shaw and Craig Roper

Two Guys from Lincoln :

Cameron Shaw and Craig Roper offers the work of two contemporary artists who are inheritors of the anti-art tradition that continued in the wake of Duchamp with Warhol's use of popular imagery and, more recently, Koons' controversial kitsch sculpture. Though distinct in their visions of art and the world, Shaw and Roper share more than their home town. As social and aesthetic contemporaries these two artists arrive at conclusions that suggest a generational commonality. Both artists use assemblage to address issues such as the disillusionment of youth, emblems of male dominance, the ambiguity of history, and the death of the American dream. And both artists have developed iconographies that convey multiple meanings about our collective memory. Shaw's highly crafted constructions and his interest in history complement Roper's irreverent objects and his investigations of popular culture. Together they form a compelling commentary on contemporary values.

A combination of found and made elements, Craig Roper's objects are at once casual and confrontational. But their informal appearance belies serious content. *Cheap Art, Cheap Bourbon #2* incorporates a photographic diptych representing a jackalope labeled "cheap art" and the image of a framed wildlife painting of a duck inscribed as "cheap bourbon." The two photos are mounted with thumb tacks onto a crude sheet of Styrofoam. Beneath this quirky union is a wooden shelf displaying two corresponding bottles of "Bourbon de Luxe" and a pair of shot glasses.

The mixed metaphors of *Cheap Art, Cheap Bourbon* make explicit connections between the fantastic deception of the mythical creature, the jackalope, and the implied manipulation of the art market and the promotion of rote representation in the form of the duck picture as "art." By juxtaposing these two images with the bottles of whiskey, Roper suggests that all these things are aesthetically related, that cheap bourbon and cheap art are equally accessible at the lower echelons of consumerism. This "you get what you pay for" message was delivered with a twist when Roper offered an earlier version of the piece for sale at a price of merely \$100. By making the work so readily

available, the artist relegated his own work to the level of the kitsch objects he parodies. Also, the raw construction of *Cheap Art, Cheap Bourbon* challenges the elevated standards of traditional fine art. The viewer concludes that cheap art (a.k.a. bad art) is incestuously related to inferior values, and ultimately contributes to the deterioration of our culture.

Five Photos Containing Lewd and Compromising Photos of Myself also concerns photography. Here Roper establishes a visual pun associated with recent art world issues relative to creative expression and censorship. There is indeed a photograph of the artist, deemed lewd by him, inside each wrapped package. But only the title conveys a prurient interpretation. By obscuring these "compromising" self-portraits, Roper titillates our imaginations, while delivering only an abstraction. The serial arrangement of the bundles is a pristine formal study in black and white, devoid of emotional content and antiseptic in its black plastic wrappings. Thus the viewer, not the artist, is held responsible for any pornographic content.

Ate Pancakes manifests another important theme in Roper's work, namely, the nature of memory. Again, the artist employs his signature technique of binding with twine a photograph and multiple layers of carpet felt. *Ate Pancakes* centers on a photograph of the artist's grandparents sitting on the front stoop of their Nebraska farmhouse. The layers of felt physically support the image and imply that this captured moment is emotionally more substantial than the unadorned two-dimensional snapshot might suggest. The bundle sits on a found table that one imagines Roper retrieved at a country yard sale.

Roper's manipulation of the photograph, like the rough-hewn construction of *Cheap Art, Cheap Bourbon*, refers on one level to his suspicion of high art's preciousness. But the physicality of the treatment also alludes to the corporeal reality of his grandparents' lives, restoring an aura of intimacy to the apparitions that often inhabit family photos. Around the edge of the photo, Roper has inscribed, "Every morning of their life they ate pancakes." This simple sentence serves simultaneously as a

biographical reference, a sociological index and a poignant epitaph. The statement locates the couple in history, on the plains, and in the artist's life. The ritual of eating pancakes every morning fixes them in an earlier time when life was more predictable, and the American dream was still alive. The twine that holds the photo and felt together, the undistinguished piece of furniture, and the wistful words encapsulate time as though to secure the many subtle meanings of memory.

Cameron Shaw's correlations between memory and history are often contained within elegant boxes that both enunciate and obscure their various meanings. In 1992, Shaw began the *Refuge Series*. These carefully crafted four-sided rectangular forms hang at eye level on the wall. With each *Refuge*, the facade that faces the viewer is parallel to the wall and covered with an abstract pattern, so it functions initially as a two-dimensional painting. Only after the viewer approaches the work does he or she realize that it is three-dimensional and that the interior of the form is revelatory.

Refuge #29 is covered with a fine herringbone suiting fabric. Shaw has used this material in several recent works as a metaphor for the repressed and dominating male. The tightly woven threads and sober charcoal color symbolize the prevailing attitude of the puritanical father figure now stereotypically recognizable as a mainstay of American domestic history. The interior, which is visible only when the viewer walks to either side of the work, reveals three tightly rolled pieces of the same fabric at the bottom of the box form. The inside walls are covered with vintage maps of occupied Europe. In the center of the focal map Shaw has placed a cover of the American Legion Weekly magazine that features a cartoon rendering of a cowboy, a male role, like that of the soldier, that is both imposed upon and accepted by men. The box formation of the *Refuge #29* forces an oblique reading of contents. What appears to be an innocuous abstract work becomes a potent allegory of machismo. This duality of meanings suggests that reality itself can be variously interpreted. By association, the poetic elements Shaw assembles here lead the viewer to reconsider the public record. The references to our phallogocentric society are deliberately conjoined with actual artifacts of the World War II era to suggest that wars are de-

Cameron Shaw, Untitled soap box with New York Times, 1992



Craig Roper, Stack of Ducks, 1993



terminated by men.

Shaw's interest in the male persona is particularly evident in *Untitled Self Portrait at 34, 35, 36 Years, 1990, 1991, 1992*. The six framed panels refer specifically to the artist's grandfather and generally to the late nineteenth-century midwestern bourgeois male. Shaw's grandfather, the patriarch of his father's family, was a prosperous Nebraska banker. The portrait reiterated three times in this work was chosen as an icon of masculine assertiveness. The subject's direct, bespectacled gaze, his starched collar and clenched fists all speak to a Victorian reality that contributed to America's industrial prowess, but also established the male syndrome of emotional denial and societal control that has burdened the modern world. Three companion panels are enframed pieces of the same herringbone fabric Shaw uses in *Refuge #29*. We see what is effectively a close-up view of the man's suit, while we recognize the iconic power of the woven material. By titling this work *Self Portrait*, Shaw incriminates himself, accepting the genetic and social inheritance of his sex. But his ability to ascertain the qualities of maleness he considers regressive provides the artist with an escape from the stereotypes and the clarity to assess his own values.

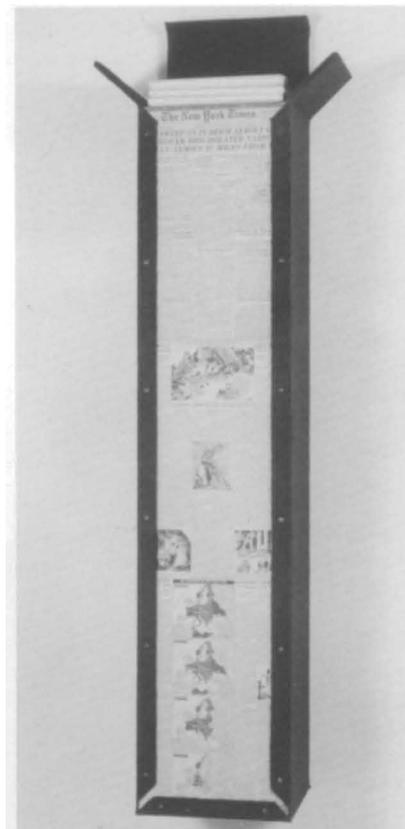
The inverse of the *Refuge Series* is effected in Shaw's untitled boxes. While the *Refuge* works create an interior space, a piece such as that which incorporates a page of the New York Times and its headline, "News of The Week in Review," presents all the elements on the outside of the box. This basically black and white construction includes four pressed and folded sheets of white orthopedic felt stacked horizontally on the top of the box. Both the newspaper page and the felt extend beyond the top of the box, and the flaps that would close the box are splayed open. Shaw's use of orthopedic felt conjures notions of injury and braces. The soft, white fabric also connotes a purity in contrast to the printed page below, as though the clean, folded surfaces are poised to receive the messy stuff of life referred to in the newspaper. The isolation of the page of history, like the isolation of any object that is out of its original context, renders it absurd. Reading this document in 1993, our perceptions are colored by hindsight and we don't necessarily accept what we read as objective. After the Cold War, the Vietnam War,

Watergate and the Gulf War, we know that all of history is largely subjective, and that the political role that newspapers play is integrally related to the determination of our national fate. Shaw invites us to consider the mutability of history, and, by extension, the ambiguity of perception. There is no definitive version of history, and there is no certainty that our own experiences can be verified because memory is the most fickle of our faculties.

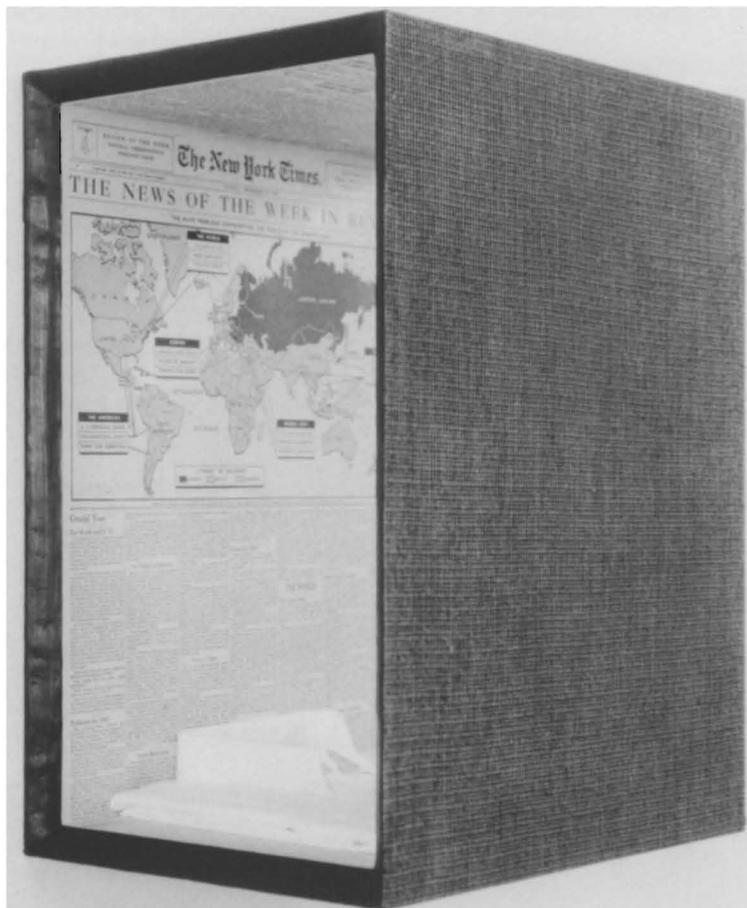
Though it is tempting to attribute Roper's and Shaw's interest in former times to the post-modern penchant for revising history, both artists successfully avoid the pitfall of arbitrarily appropriating art historical events, a trend that leads much contemporary art to be insulated and without universal meaning. Instead, Shaw and Roper each persuade by balancing personal experience with broader statements about American culture in general. Their assemblages reify personal and collective memories, giving tangible form to the most ephemeral and elusive of the human conditions: the past.

Daphne Anderson Deeds
Curator/Assistant Director

Cameron Shaw, *Refuge #28*, 1992



Cameron Shaw, *Untitled horizontal column box with newsprint*, 1990



Cameron Shaw was born in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1956, and received his B.F.A. from Northern Arizona University in 1979. Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at the Richard/Bennett Gallery in Los Angeles, California; the DeCordova and Dana Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts; the Barbara Krakow Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts; and the John Gibson Gallery in New York City. Notable group exhibitions that include Shaw's work are "Book, Box, Word," at the Center of Contemporary Art in North Miami, Florida, in 1992; "Deja Vu," at the Asher/Faure Gallery in Los Angeles, California, in 1992, "Boston Now," at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Massachusetts; and the "Pediatric AIDS Show," at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery in Los Angeles, California, in 1990. Shaw's work is included in collections such as the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, Illinois, and numerous private collections

Craig Roper was born in Lincoln, Nebraska in 1955, and received his B.F.A. from the University of Nebraska in 1980. Roper received the 1980 Vreeland Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts from the UNL Department of Art and Art History and the 1980 Faulkner Recognition Award in the Arts from the University of Nebraska Foundation. In 1991, Roper received the Visual Arts Fellowship grant from the Mid-America Arts Alliance in cooperation with the National Endowment for the Arts. Solo exhibitions of Roper's work have been held at the Richard/Bennett Gallery in Los Angeles, and in 1992, a solo exhibition of his work, organized by the Bess Cutler Gallery in New York, was seen at the Galerie Henn, in Maastricht, Holland. Examples of Craig Roper's work are included in private and corporate art collections, including the Eli Broad Corporate Collection in Los Angeles, California; Guggenheim Associates in New York City; and the collection of Peter & Eileen Norton in Santa Monica, California.

Craig Roper, Cheap Art, Cheap Bourbon #2, 1993



Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of exhibitions by nationally recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth-century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who is contributing to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

The **Sheldon Solo** series is supported by the Nebraska Art Association and the Nebraska Arts Council through a Basic Support Grant. A portion of the museum's general operating funds for this fiscal year has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services, a Federal agency that offers general operating support to the nation's museums.

CRAIG ROPER

1. 16 BUNDLES

1990, sixteen photo bundles in wood box 11 x 25 x 7 in. Courtesy of Barbara Guggenheim & Associates Inc., New York, New York

2. COWS

1991, two photo bundles, dirt, tin box 10 x 26 x 6 in. Courtesy of Lorrin and Deane Wong, Los Angeles, California

3. ONE GROSS-NEW HOMES

1989, twelve photo, felt and tar paper bundles with wood and paint 20 x 22 x 40 in. Courtesy of Kathleen Garfield, Malibu, California

4. CARRION

1992, black plastic and paintings 27 x 20 x 12 in. Courtesy of the artist

5. FIVE BUNDLES CONTAINING LEWD AND COMPROMISING PHOTOS OF MYSELF

1993, five photo, felt and tar paper bundles, black plastic, wood shelf 17 x 60 x 6 in. Courtesy of the artist

6. ATE PANCAKES

1993, photo, felt and tar paper bundle on wood stand 38 x 23 x 16 in. Courtesy of the artist

7. CHEAP ART, CHEAP BOURBON

1993, photographs, Styrofoam, bourbon, glasses, wood shelf 29 x 36 x 8 in. Courtesy of the artist

8. HOW TO HOOK NIGHT

CRAWLERS
1991, photo, plastic, felt 59 x 17 in. Courtesy of the artist

9. STACK OF DUCKS

1993, six photo bundles 30 x 14 x 12 in. Courtesy of the artist

10. ONE DOZEN SUBURBAN AND INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPES

1990, wood, photographs, roofing tar, carpet felt, twine 15 x 31 x 14 in. Courtesy Paul and June Schorr, Lincoln, Nebraska

11. SIX-PACK WATER

1993, six photos, six painting stretchers, wood, plastic, steel 9 x 11 x 10 in. Courtesy of the artist

12. COWBOYS & INDIANS

1993, two photos, felt, and tar paper bundles 53 x 17 x 9 in. Courtesy of the artist

13. REACTOR

1992, mixed media 24 x 40 x 72 in. Courtesy Galerie Henn, Maastricht, Holland

CAMERON SHAW

14. UNTITLED BOX WITH KATZENJAMMER KIDS AND BEESWAX MELONS

1992, beeswax, wood, newsprint 30 1/2 x 19 1/4 x 9 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

15. REFUGE #28

1992, beeswax, wool, newsprint, shirt 23 x 17 1/4 x 13 3/4 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

16. UNTITLED STACK WITH KATZENJAMMER KIDS AND BLUE SHIRT

1992, newsprint, wool, wood, beeswax, cotton, cast iron 54 1/2 x 16 3/4 x 16 3/4 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

17. REFUGE #29

1992, beeswax, wood, wool, newsprint 23 x 17 1/4 x 13 3/4 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

18. UNTITLED BOX WITH NARRAGANSETT TIMES AND WOOL ROLL

1992, beeswax, newsprint, wool, wood 29 x 15 x 6 in. Courtesy Jason and Clara Stevens, Orange, California

19. CORBEL #6

1992, wood, museum board, newsprint 23 x 16 1/2 x 14 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

20. CORBEL #7

1992, wood, museum board, newsprint 23 x 16 1/2 x 14 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

21. UNTITLED SOAP BOX WITH NEW YORK TIMES

1992, beeswax, newsprint, wool, wood, soap 29 3/4 x 19 7/16 x 6 1/8 in. Courtesy MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, Illinois

22. UNTITLED SELF PORTRAIT AT 34, 35, 36 YEARS, 1990, '91, '92 1990, photographs, oak frames 27 x 22 1/2 in. Courtesy Robert Lue, Cambridge, Massachusetts

23. UNTITLED HORIZONTAL COLUMN BOX WITH NEWSPRINT

1990, beeswax, wool, newsprint 26 x 84 x 13 in. Courtesy Rita Shaw, Santa Barbara, California

24. UNTITLED NEW YORK TIMES PANEL AND ORTHOPEDIC FELT

1992, wood, museum board, New York Times, orthopedic felt 22 3/4 x 16 1/4 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

25. UNTITLED NEW YORK TIMES PANEL AND ORTHOPEDIC FELT

1992, wood, museum board, New York Times, orthopedic felt 22 3/4 x 16 1/4 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

26. REFUGE #26

1992, newsprint, beeswax, wood, museum board, cotton 43 x 36 x 14 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

27. UNTITLED COLUMN BOX WITH NEW YORK TIMES AND BLANK NEWSPAPERS

1992, beeswax, wool, newsprint, wood 90 x 25 x 17 in. Courtesy Barbara Krakow Gallery

On the cover

Lower right: 14. Untitled box with Katzenjammer Kids and beeswax melons

Upper Left: 26. Refuge #26

Upper right: 12. Cowboys & Indians

Lower left: 6. Ate Pancakes



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