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There's something soothing about Jon Kessler's ingenious motorized and illuminated assemblages. The placid rhythm of moving parts and the slow throb of light emanate a hypnotic aura of relaxation. Despite the cool technology, they are oddly warm machines.

They are not what you might expect. Thinking of absurdist machinery and kitsch assemblage, we might look back to artists like Duchamp and Tinguely or more recently Haim Steinbach—artists who want to agitate viewers, to force a confrontation with the insidious mechanisms of modern life. But Kessler is more like Joseph Cornell. He is a connoisseur of kitsch and a deftly exacting craftsman; his found elements add up to something other than an intensification of trashiness. His works don't rub our noses in contemporary senselessness. They project a mood of nostalgic reverie and gentle humor, transforming pieces of junk beyond familiarity into dreamy symbols. It's a mood not of distressing fragmentation but of mystical coherence.

In *No Radio*, there is a revolving stainless steel contraption, a circular framework holding trays. After a moment, recognition dawns—it's a restaurant condiment server. But the illusion of a miniature ferns wheel persists, and we respond to the saving grace of poetic metaphor, not to the insulting erosion of spirit by crass materialism.

Kessler's sculpture is modernist in that it doesn't hide any of its inner workings. Motors, pulleys, belts, chains, gears, screws, fixtures, etc. are all available for inspection. But the display of moving parts is also anti-modernistically entertaining—like a view into a Victorian music box. The entertainment motive was more explicit in Kessler's past work, however, which hinted at actual narrative, even creating elaborate little movielike spectacles, in this show, all but one of six pieces emphasized more sparsely formal qualities of light and structure. Nevertheless, the story-telling content, although streamlined and condensed into a more laconic iconography, is not jettisoned in the new work.

With [*Under Venice*](#), for instance, we look through an orderly arrangement of variously translucent glass panels to a photographic image of tropical fish underwater. The complex layering of moving and illuminated lenses hints at a scientifically optical experience, yet there is also the evocative romance of submarine investigation, a looking into watery depths that is spiritual as well as empirical.

The one problematic piece in the show, for me, was the environmental installation [*Taiwan*](#), a work that surrounded the viewer with a complex accumulation of reproduction Chinese furniture and other decorative-arts items, as well as plywood and Styrofoam packing materials. There were innumerable intricately crafted details and wonderfully

poetic juxtapositions of material and image--a gently seesawing full-length mural, a bronze cow with a bobbing head, a small music box tinkling an Oriental tune next to an acupuncturist's model ear--but there seemed a rather overbearing quality of forced ambition in its epic-scale effort to allegorically embrace a whole Chinese cosmos.

At his best, Kessler's seems more a lyrical temperament, as in *Suit of Light*. Here, a man's wool suit jacket is draped over a clear glass cylinder within which a bare light bulb pulses off and on. Behind the glass, there's an old photograph of a convention of cloakmakers. The individual, the collective, the luminous soul--article of clothing, photograph, light bulb: here is a tantalizing, enigmatic, transcendental conjunction of material, image and symbol.