

# High-Tech Chow Mein

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Jon Kessler at Luhring, Augustine & Hodes, 41 East 57th Street.

Imagine a wacky amalgam of Rauschenberg's combines, R. M. Fischer's lamps, Lumia's lightboxes (let out of their boxes), Indonesian shadow play, white noise, and Chinese restaurant schlock. Or a demented mix of Japanese monster-movie insects with Frank Lloyd Wright's (or Robert Irwin's) japaniserie, Judd's shelves, Lord & Taylor's Christmas windows--the ones with the little mechanized figures--and Spielberg's cinematic special effects. Picture a funky combination of dripping Moroccan brass and Southern Gothic driftwood, along with a hard-hat shaped psychedelic brain, a replica of the Rosetta stone, and a translucent mold of "one of the Westchester jockeys we used to enjoy knocking over in high school," carrying a glowing lantern in his fiberglass hand.

Techno-chatchkas aren't usually my cup of tea, but Jon Kessler's latest ones are state-of-the-art. His illuminated kinetic sculpture has gone from tacky assemblage to neo-tech without losing its charm. He takes failed elements of the old Art and Technology stuff from the late '60s and makes them work. His pictorial contraptions previously depended on electrical motors, timers, and magnets. Now four of the pieces in his current show are elaborately programmed on digital computers (by his friend, Jordan Plitteris, a computer wizard), but they've still got all the improvised mechanical gizmos, lightbulbs, and plastic toys exposed at the sides so you can see, voyeuristically, what makes them tick. Because the pieces possess the right combination of skills and gaucheries, the technology doesn't overwhelm the art.

This is highly theatrical sculpture that performs. It transforms objects, often the most ordinary ones, to shadows, pictorial images, transient lighting effects, and back again. Using any means that works to propagate his images, his work offers gratuitous illusion, seductive spectacle. With changing color combinations, subliminal noise, and visions that recur in four- to eight-minute cycles, these sculptures are full of deceptions about what's real and what's simulated. They're furtive and public at the same time. They bombard you with "real time" transformations in order to transport you into the realm of mindless sensation.

This is art that's all about appearances, for the sake of effect. It's full of super-civilized barbarities, and full of deliberate obvious, subtle, and ultimately self-exposing tricks. Like Spielberg's movies, Kessler's art is polished, manipulative and highly contrived. It relies on a flawless sense of lighting and timing as well as form. You might also say that he welds an outdated brand of plastic-fantastic mystical Minimalism to the synthesized sensations and sensationalism that some artists now crave.

Pictorial illusion is hot. So is artifice, the more preposterous the better. Like many other artists and artist-photographers right now, Kessler's work explores manipulative imagery in a world of degenerated forms. Nourished by artificialities and simulations, he too has an appetite for the trite and the debased--plus a craving for a truly synthetic art. Encompassing the trivialized present and the popularized past, reminding us constantly of art (Kim MacConnel lurks in his '50s fabric pattern, Charles Simonds in the miniaturized bit of landscape, Chris Burden in the toys), his atrophied images brim with hysteria as well as kitsch historicism.

Who ever suspected that Performance Art, which came out of sculpture, would be re-absorbed into sculpture like this? Kessler's work has something to do with Video Art too: it's full of images projected on screens, as well as allusions to windows, window shades, and Venetian blinds. Remember that old saw about how painting used to be a window into the three-dimensional world until the early modernists came along and shut it? Kessler's work flirts with the idea of opening it up again, but his work is a window onto unreality, a screen on which to project.

And who would have guessed that this is what functionalism (art as lamp, as shelf, as something to be used) has let out of the bottle? Two pairs of gilded rocks with mini landscapes in their crevices, gliding up and down as counterweights on pulleys, as part of a hanging Chinese screen (The Invention of Solitude); a toaster cover that lights up like a lampshade (Blues and the Abstract Truth); a patterned tablecloth (or a tatami mat) that functions as a scrim. In [The Art of Tea](#), there's a giftshop figurine who raises and lowers a magnifying glass, peering through it with a myopic cyclopean eye. Kessler told me on the phone that he thinks of the figurine as "the documentarian, the man from the Japan Society." [Arthur P. Flnster and the Nemesis of Praxis](#) also includes a comic figure, a rotating "pencil-behind-the-ear, Corbusier-glasses person who complicates things." He described [S.W.A.M.P.](#), the ornate piece with the brain, the driftwood forest, and the explorer-jockey, as being about "deciphering and discovering and lighting the light and finding the path."

Themes of modern mechanization, exploration, and scientific discovery recur in Kessler's work, but his attitude is ambivalent and sardonic. In his sculpture, technology is in the service of ritual, ceremony, degraded tradition. Technology, like formalism, is for him just another variety of exotic kitsch. And as it's the cultures of the Far East that have the most reverence for tradition, there's something especially perverse in Kessler's use of popularized versions of traditional Eastern art. He attributes his fascination with oriental kitsch to "having been in so many Chinese restaurants." He speaks lovingly of "the little votive things in the corners with a beer can on them," and sees the style as another kind of Americana. And he tells a story of being invited to be in a show in Japan. The Japanese curators came to see his piece from last year's Whitney Biennial called [Visions of China](#). According to Kessler, they were disappointed: " 'We already have so many oriental things in Japan, we'd like you to send something more American.' They thought it was just lousy orientalism." What it is may be even more disturbing. Gorgeous and oozing exotic allure, Kessler's art is also riddled with traps. Probe beyond the seductive spectacle and you find currents of cultural shallowness and antagonism toward, as well as

fascination with, rationality and the modern world. It's too hard to tell if he's pointing out, or acting out, these insincerities. If there's a failure, it's a failure of irony.