



Installation view of "Jon Kessler's Gifts" at Salon 94, New York, February 15 to March 28, 2015. Courtesy of the gallery.

JON KESSLER'S GIFTS

Salon 94 - New York

By Taliesin Thomas

Our hyper-connected society seems increasingly dis-connected from the ulterior structures of control that drive the neoliberal economic system. While we enjoy the convenience of advanced technologies, we don't seem to recognize the idiosyncratic power that these objects exert over our lives. Artist Jon Kessler (b. 1957) has a special talent for not only revealing the automated workings of a thing and its 'thingness,' but also for disclosing the covetous motivations dwelling beneath the surface of the actual devices that define culture.

Past installations of Kessler's work have included hundreds of television screens, cameras and interactive feedback at venues such as Deitch Projects in New York. These sprawling Kessler shows tend to reveal the sinister and subversive side of his techno-aesthetic; a recent exhibit titled "Jon Kessler's Gifts" at Salon 94 Freemans in New York, however, presented the polite and poetic aspect of Kessler's versatile repertoire of artistic tricks.

"Jon Kessler's Gifts" displayed twenty-two small kinetic sculptures that the artist created for friends and family to commemorate special occasions over the years. The sensible placement of pieces in this modest alleyway gallery coupled with the gravitas of the expert lighting produced a compelling atmosphere for these intimate works to transmit their charm. While the bobbing and swaying of the mechanical doo-hickey's filled the room with an elegant motorized hum, the shadow play of their movements on the walls was equally captivating. The star of this homage to his loved ones was daughter Juliette, whose birth and several subsequent birthdays are chronicled by Kessler's thoughtful tinkering with assorted media. *Juliette Kessler's 13th Birthday Gift* (2007)

combines a protruding silver finger lodged in a lump of plaster that balances a white fist holding a wire stabilizing severed fingers. The poised equilibrium of this pulley system and its delicate elements illustrated a motley confluence of artistic and philosophical influences such as Beuys on the one hand (physical collage) and Žižek on the other (brazen irreverence) but possessed by Kessler's particular allure. By the time we reach the tiny toy-like work *Sarah Hoover and Tom Sachs Wedding Gift* (2013)—a single plastic figurine on a platform genuflecting before two silver poles with the capital letters T and S—we recognize the truly personal nature of this eclectic menagerie.

While Kessler's art can be counted in the permanent collections of prestigious institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum and The Walker (among others), this playful show demonstrated that his art is provocative and lyrical in the most intelligent sense. The 'sculpturalness' of Kessler's objects is to be experienced *in situ*, not just viewed from a distance. In the case of *Titty Twister* (2014), the likely grand dame of the show, visitors were welcome to turn the erect nipples of this bare-breasted mold to solicit a melodic response from the analogue sound box below her severed torso. The bizarre tune that emanated from her porcelain colored bosom expanded into the space with a peculiar acoustic—that of a wobbling radio signal attempting to find its modulation—reminding us that we are at once experiencing the cheeky creations of an artist who remains one-part mad scientist and one-part imaginative theorist. ■

(February 15 – March 28, 2015)