

Symposium reflection

Trashed: Rejection and Recovery in the History of Art and Architecture – The 33rd Annual Boston University Graduate Student Symposium in the History of Art & Architecture, March 24-25, 2017

KELSEY GUSTIN

This two-day event was generously sponsored by The Boston University Center for the Humanities; the Boston University Department of History of Art & Architecture; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Boston University Graduate Student History of Art & Architecture Association; and the Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery.

As one of the longest running graduate symposia in the country, the 33rd annual Boston University Graduate Symposium in the History of Art & Architecture hosted six graduate scholars who presented papers that explored the processes of rejection and recovery in the history of art, as inspired by the theme “Trashed.” The symposium began on Friday, March 24, at Boston University Art Galleries at the Stone Gallery with a keynote address from Dr. Joanna Grabski, Professor and Chair of Art History and Visual Culture at Denison University. Her talk, “Thinking with Objects: Visibility, Imagination, and the Art of Remaking in Dakar’s Creative Economy,” highlighted the process of *recuperation* by contemporary Senegalese artists, who draw inspiration from the crowded stalls of Dakar’s Colobane Market. Playing clips from her 2012 documentary, *Market Imaginary*, Dr. Grabski showed the scale of secondhand goods offered by the famed market, in which vendors rightfully brag that you can find anything from around the world. Previously discarded by consumer societies in America, Asia, and Europe, Colobane’s recycled merchandise finds new life and meaning in the work of Ndary Lô, Viyé Diba, and Cheikh Ndiaye.

The symposium continued the following day at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston with six presentations divided into morning and afternoon panels. The morning session featured three papers that explored the volatile impermanence of art and architecture as audiences and popular tastes change. Jennifer Gear (University of Michigan) in her paper, “Bring Out Your Dead: Domenico Tintoretto and the Problem of Depicting Plague Corpses in Early Modern Venice,” revealed that the artist Tintoretto intended to portray, but later omitted, plague corpses from the foreground of his painting, *Venice Supplicating to the Virgin for the Cessation of the Plague*. With changing patronage tastes, artists could either opt for an evocative visceral style to induce sympathy and fear or instead sanitize the disease to protect and comfort the viewer. The second presentation, “Channel Heights Defense Housing: Trial and Error in Richard J. Neutra’s Pocket Utopia,” was delivered by Liz Hirsch (The Graduate Center, CUNY). For her study of the architect’s design of the World War II-era housing project, Hirsch argued that Neutra’s purpose-built houses did not adapt readily to changing postwar needs, ultimately leading to their demolition in 1980. Elizabeth Saari Browne (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) concluded the morning panel with her presentation, “Modeling Enlightenment: Reconsidering Clodion’s Bacchic Sculpture.” In her analysis of the eighteenth-century French sculptor, Browne challenged the prevailing literature that has characterized Clodion’s statues as “Neoclassical terracotta confections.” Instead, Browne connected the sculptures and their promotion of touch to an Enlightenment strain of thought that underscored the sensory experience as a means of knowledge production, thus explaining their widespread popularity during this period.

While the morning panel considered the repercussions of rejection, the afternoon session explored the creative and symbolic possibilities of repurposing materials, ideas, and motifs. For his presentation, "Egyptian Stones and Roman Ashes: Alabaster Cinerary Urns in Elite Roman Tombs," Daniel Healey (Princeton University) scrutinized the common Roman practice of reusing Egyptian alabaster vessels as funerary cinerary urns. While Roman marble urns feature elaborative carvings, the Egyptian alabaster antiquities are notable for their lack of ornamentation. By showcasing the beauty of the stone, Roman elites conveyed their cultured tastes by emphasizing the "Egyptian-ness" of the recycled alabaster. In his paper, "A Newer Brutalism: Reconsidering the Art of Rachel Whiteread," Alexander Bigman (Institute of Fine Arts, NYU) reflected on Whiteread's *House* (1993), a concrete cast of a Victorian row home condemned for demolition, and its links to a contentious history of British postwar reconstruction. Bigman brought new perspective to Whiteread's work by connecting her practice to that of the earlier Brutalist generation. While the first paper of the afternoon addressed ancient Egypt, the last paper of the day ended in contemporary Egypt with a presentation from Katherine Hammond (Ohio University). In her paper, "Ruins, Whitewashing and the Reimagined: Alaa Awad's Protest Mural," Hammond examined the 2012 street art that Alaa Awad painted in reaction to the 2011 uprisings and the Port Said Massacre. Drawing on a Neopharaonic style, Awad integrated ancient Egyptian iconography into his mural, *The Funeral Procession*, to connect the recent uprisings and its martyrs to the regal burial practices of the pharaohs. The state has since whitewashed Awad's mural, but its cultural resonance lives on through social media and collective memory.

This year's symposium inspired much interest and discussion among the speakers and attendees, which will no doubt continue in the weeks and months to come. Not only did the presentations consider the implications of "Trashed" as it applied to artists and architects, they also challenged us as scholars to reconsider what has been written out of the pages of art history. Truly, as the adage goes, "one man's trash is another man's treasure," and while rejection can be final, the process of rediscovery presents great possibilities.

Images and captions:



Tessa Hite introduces the symposium at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photo courtesy of Ewa Matczyk.



Panel discussants Kiernan Acquisto and Bryn Schockmel (Boston University) converse with graduate presenters Daniel Healey (Princeton University) and Katherine Hammond (Ohio University) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photo courtesy of Sasha Goldman.