

The Spectacular of Vernacular
October 7, 2011-January 1, 2012

In October 2011 the Montclair Art Museum will present "The Spectacular of Vernacular", organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The exhibition addresses the role of vernacular forms in the work of 26 artists who utilize craft, folklore and roadside kitsch to explore the role of culturally specific iconography in the increasingly global world of art. Drawing inspiration from such sources as local architecture, amateur photographs and state fair banners, their work runs the spectrum from the sleek to the handcrafted. Inspired by artist Mike Kelley's observation that "the mass art of today is the folk art of tomorrow," it explores the role of vernacular forms in some 40 works by more than two dozen contemporary artists, which run the aesthetic gamut: the hand-crafted work of Aaron Spangler juxtaposes with Lari Pittman's carnivalesque day-glo paintings; Marc Swanson's glittering trophy heads with Rachel Harrison's urban relics. Also on view are photographs from Walker Evans, William Eggleston, and Shannon Ebner, who both revel in the signage and other elements of roadside culture. The exhibition will be on view in Montclair from October 7, 2011 – January 1, 2012.

Focusing on pieces made since the 1970s, the exhibition shows how the vernacular, in its very ubiquity—its integration into home life, social rituals, and sense of place—is an ongoing fascination for artists. With artworks that draw from such diverse sources as local architecture, amateur photographs, and handmade domestic items, it's suggestive of a long, meandering road trip through the emblems and eyesores of everyday culture, replete with tourist destinations and outmoded hotels.

The culture of today provides a vast source material of readily accessible and mass-produced goods. This exhibition will look closely at this particular brand of culture known as the vernacular, a term used to describe amateur or regional forms of expression that tend to be more homegrown than high-end. From dime-store plaques and snapshot photography to the objects attending folk rituals, these items often possess a warm familiarity. Yet for the artists who take them on as subjects, these humble forms can be nuanced and loaded symbols, full of hidden messages about who we are and where we live. Every locale has its own singular brand of vernacular—discernible in the ways people dress, decorate their homes (especially around the holidays), and self-identify with behaviors seen as typical of the area. A number of artists here consider those aspects of local culture, such as roadside architecture or historic landmarks, probing the markers of place and region. Some hint at the sprawl of the Western strip, filled with commercial billboards, signs, and shopping malls. Several come from the mid-west and respond to its conditions in their work—its landscape, structures, and weather. Others look to the South for inspiration, while others examine the Northeast's industrial landscape; the Montclair Art Museum's presentation will incorporate works that explore the vernacular of the New Jersey region, including works from Dan Graham's iconic "Homes for America" series. In a world that is increasingly networked, with influences flowing in from an endless stream of sites and sources, this exhibition explores art's ongoing relationship to a tangible, locatable reality. In doing so, it considers the notion

of cultural specificity in contemporary art. Indeed, the issue of what remains particularized, even regionalized, is an open question—and one among many that artists engaging the vernacular seek to address.

Exhibition Catalogue

This exhibition will be accompanied by a concise, illustrated catalogue and will include: an essay by exhibition curator Darsie Alexander exploring artists' interest in the vernacular as a means to address aspects of folk ritual, amateur craft and sense of place in their work; a reprint of John Brinckerhoff Jackson's "Vernacular" from his seminal 1984 reader *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*; and a reflection by artist and curator Andy Sturdevant on the evolution of roadside vernacular, and attendant histories of heartland America where it is so abundant. Also included is a reading list gathered from a cross section of art criticism and cultural studies.