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Styrofoam: From Industrial Invention to Artistic Transformation

Judith Tannenbaum
jtannen@earthlink.net

Amy Pickworth, Editor
Rhode Island School of Design, apickwor@risd.edu

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Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design

styrofoam

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styrofoam: from industrial invention to artistic transformation

Judith Tannenbaum

Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art

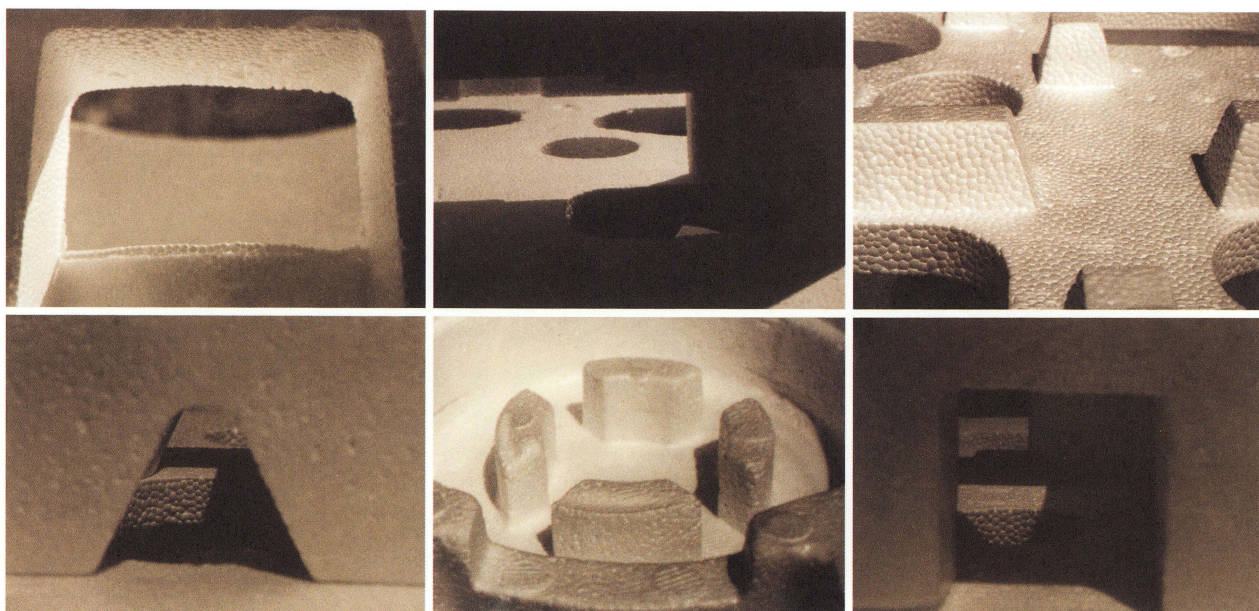
Ubiquitous in our culture, styrofoam is used to insulate buildings, package computers and other consumer products, and produce picnic coolers and containers for fast food and take-out. For decades, artists have employed styrofoam in the making of models and molds for casting. Today, however, more and more artists are exploring it as a primary material or a subject in its own right, using it in new and ingenious ways to create sculpture, paintings, and installations.

Styrofoam is, in fact, a trademarked name applied to extruded polystyrene foam products manufactured by the Dow Chemical Company. Used extensively for building insulation because of its resistance to moisture, Styrofoam™ is identified easily by its distinctive shade of blue. Several companies produce the same product, but in different colors—Dow in blue, Owens Corning in pink, and BASF in green. The Dow Company introduced polystyrene to U.S. markets in 1937; natural plant-based polystyrene was discovered in Germany in 1839, but it was not developed for commercial use there until the 1930s, by I. G. Farben

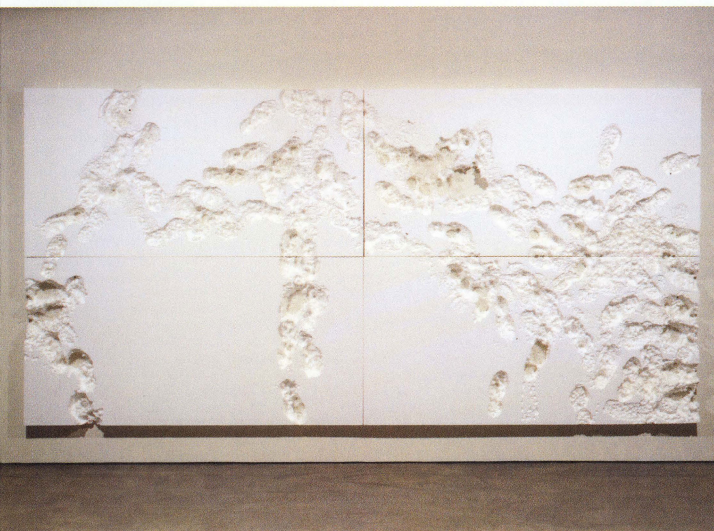
and BASF. Dow makes it clear that, from its perspective, common objects such as coffee cups and various packaging materials, made from expanded polystyrene beads or thin extruded polystyrene sheets, should be referred to as *foam*. However, as far as common American usage is concerned, the word *styrofoam* has come to mean any brand or form of polystyrene foam.¹

During the past few years, I took note whenever I encountered an interesting artwork made of styrofoam. It wasn't until the 2007 Armory Show in New York, however, and the experience of seeing Folkert de Jong's *Death March*—three wildly expressionistic full-scale figures of carved styrofoam and adhesives—that I felt compelled to focus on the topic. Why would artists choose to work with this particular material, and how do their investigations relate to larger environmental issues and socio-political concerns?

Taking advantage of styrofoam's lightness and cheapness, as well as the ease with which it can be shaped, today's artists carve into it, mold it, cast from it, and assemble it into entirely new forms and images.



B. Wurtz, *Untitled*, 1986. Sepia-toned silver gelatin prints



Rudolf Stingel, *Untitled*, 2000. Styrofoam, four elements: each 48 x 96 x 4 inches; overall 96 x 192 x 4 inches. Collection of Anstiss and Ron Krueck. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. *Not in exhibition*



Carl Andre, *Compound*, 1965. Styrofoam beams: each 9 x 21 x 108 inches; overall 27 x 129 x 129 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. © Carl Andre/licensed by VAGA, New York. *Not in exhibition*

A number of them re-use pre-existing elements that they find unexpectedly in the course of their daily activities, whereas others start with large industrial sheets. The ways in which they adapt or transform the material, whether purchased or found, may or may not contrast with its original intended function.

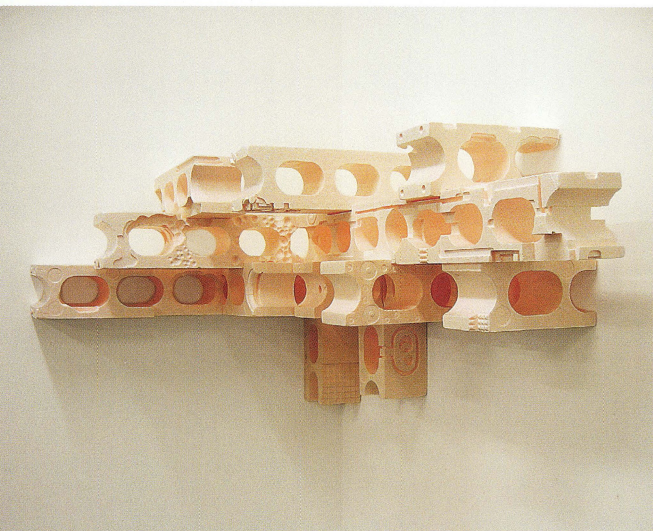
Starting out with a short-list of artists with whose styrofoam work I was already familiar—including Tom Friedman, Rudolf Stingel, Shirley Tse, and Richard Tuttle—the list expanded rapidly once word-of-mouth kicked in. Clearly, there are many artists using this material, and many more than I had initially anticipated. My intent here is not to be encyclopedic, but rather to present a relatively small but diverse selection of artists who have experimented with styrofoam, and in the process have expanded the definitions of what art can be. The artists in *Styrofoam* span several generations, and their work varies considerably in style, form, and content.

Carl Andre is perhaps the first artist to work with styrofoam as a primary material, rather than as the means to an end, as demonstrated by several works from 1965, such as *Compound*, which he made by assembling large styrofoam beams to create an open square. This was in keeping with Andre's minimalist inclination to work directly on the floor with prefabricated industrial elements (railroad ties, bricks, metal plates, etc.), arranging them in simple geometric

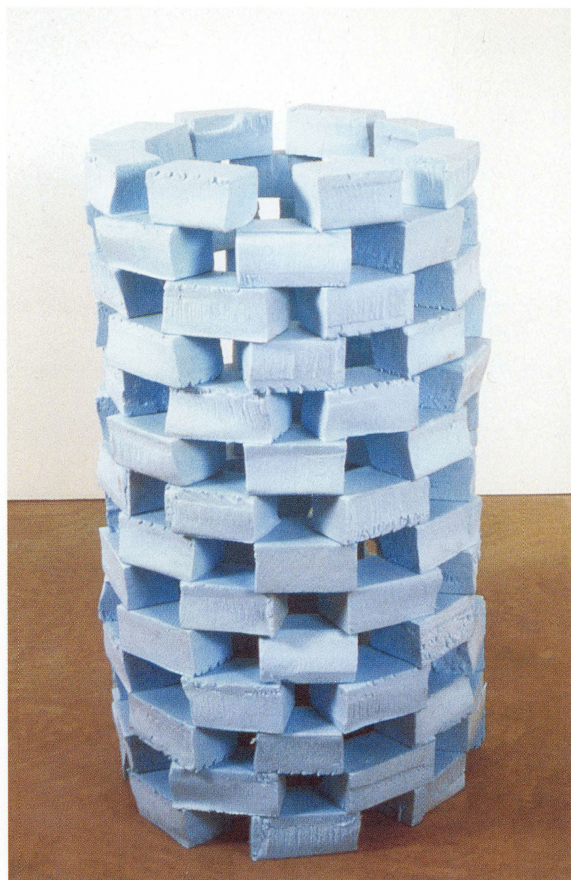
configurations. Sculptor Lynda Benglis also began experimenting with polyurethane foam, a related material, in the late 1960s, creating large floor pieces and very ambitious cantilevered wall installations that seemed to defy gravity.

In the fall of 1969, tutors for the undergraduate sculpture curriculum at St. Martin's School of Art in London instituted a radical program that became known as "The Locked Room," in which styrofoam figured prominently.² On the first day of the course, each student received a two-foot-by-two-foot block of the material, which had been chosen to explore the issue of volume because it is inexpensive, light, and easy to manipulate. The students were locked in a studio together under the teachers' surveillance. They were not allowed to speak, and they received no critical feedback; the material itself, rather than the teachers' direction, became their starting point.³ The exercise, as a whole, aimed to eliminate the influences of traditional studio practice and art history and to liberate the students, enabling them to rely on their own ideas and abilities by, ironically, imprisoning them.

The earliest work in this exhibition is a group of close-up, sepia-toned photographs of styrofoam packaging, taken in 1986 by **B. Wurtz**. Wurtz is known for wonderfully off-hand assemblage sculpture inspired by a wide range of found materials, including plastic



Shirley Tse, *Do Cinderblocks Dream of Being Styrofoam?*, 2003



Tony Feher, *Blue Tower*, 1997

bags, socks, and tin cans. Here, molded packaging is transformed into mysterious architectural plazas or interiors. Ancient mastabas, pyramids, and Stonehenge-like monoliths bear the unmistakable beaded surface of expanded polystyrene. Wurtz used styrofoam as early as 1970, and in 1979 he made two Super 8 films, titled *My Styrofoam* and *I Took It*, in which the material served as props.

Wurtz was initially discouraged from using styrofoam because he was told it was unstable and would disintegrate rapidly, which now we know is not at all true.⁴ Styrofoam carries a generally negative connotation. It is neither biodegradable—it can take thousands of years to decompose in nature, making it a major source of debris that can be harmful to birds and marine life—nor is it cost-effective to recycle. Efforts to limit or control its use in various U.S. cities are ongoing.⁵ However, the issue is more complex: because styrofoam’s use as insulation reduces energy requirements to heat and cool buildings, it also has a beneficial impact on the environment.

Other artists who have been drawn to cast-off or found styrofoam elements are Shirley Tse, Steve Keister, Tony Feher, and Richard Tuttle. Because polystyrene is not easy to dispose of, the artists’ re-use of everyday objects made of this material becomes an interesting twist on recycling. They invent new uses that continue styrofoam’s existence in a positive way.

The pervasiveness of plastics has dominated **Shirley Tse**’s work for the past decade. She is attracted to packaging materials in general and polystyrene in particular “for its implications of transience, mobility, mutation, and multiplicity.” She also says its lightness “allows me to make large-scale work that I can physically handle. I don’t need to enlist the help of the opposite sex so much.” Her witty wall sculpture *Do Cinderblocks Dream of Being Styrofoam?*, which mimics the title of Philip K. Dick’s science-fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (on which the film *Blade Runner* is based), features bright pink blocks that the artist found in Japan. She was amused by how the normally heavy gray cinderblock had been converted into a featherweight, pastel-colored form, and added hand-carved patterns “so the imprint from factory and my own carvings become seamlessly intertwined.”

Tony Feher accidentally stumbled upon the styrofoam “bricks” that compose *Blue Tower*. Artist Joe Scanlon had used them to support wood slabs in an



Steve Keister, *Tezcatlipoca*, 2002. Photo by Erik Gould

exhibition at D'Amelio Terras Gallery, and after the show was over, he had bundled them up as trash. Feher, who had the next exhibition in the space, “was shocked that anyone would toss out such beauty,” underscoring the idea that one person’s trash may indeed be another’s treasure. After asking if he could have them, Feher proceeded to assemble the blue bricks into an architectural form, and included this new sculpture in his gallery show. Feher’s work relies on serendipity as well as his acute appreciation for the visual qualities of seemingly banal materials—including Coke bottles, marbles, tinfoil-lined potato-chip bags, and styrofoam packaging.

Steve Keister’s wall reliefs, inspired by his longstanding fascination with pre-Columbian art, are cast directly from styrofoam packing materials that he collects from the street. It was in the early 1990s that Keister first noticed a visual connection between the positive and negative forms characteristic of styrofoam packaging and the Mesoamerican relief sculpture he had been studying on annual trips to Mexico. He exploits what he refers to as “patterns of struts and voids” inside the styrofoam to create his own distinctive sculptures, which merge the everyday material culture of our time with the rich visual vocabulary and history of a unique culture from the past. The application of acrylic color to the cast aquaresin forms intensifies the formal resonance between the original styrofoam shapes and pre-Columbian skulls, glyphs, and animal imagery. Although the styrofoam does not survive Keister’s

casting process, the original packaging forms are clearly recognizable in the end product.

Since the 1960s, **Richard Tuttle** has produced an influential body of drawings, prints, artist’s books, paintings, and sculptural objects composed of humble, everyday materials such as wire, cloth, string, pins, cardboard, plywood, bubble wrap, and styrofoam. *Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam* is a series of sixteen cut-and-painted wall pieces. Some of the shapes, made from styrofoam panels Tuttle found in the attic of an old adobe farmhouse in New Mexico, suggest pottery shards and arrowheads. In the introduction to the related artist book he produced two years later, he said,

I chose [s]tyrofoam, because its beaded presence lends itself to curving-in. I still remember the first time I cut and rounded the edges, seeing various



Richard Tuttle, *Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam #5* and *Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam #7*, 1988.
© 2007 Richard Tuttle

beads scatter across the surface like light, sticking now and then to the wet paint. It's not to celebrate this material that I use it. It is one of the worst materials used by man. Nature in man must find a method to deal with "Nature." The material is nature. Perhaps, then, I am the environment.⁶

In the *Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam* book, images of the styrofoam artworks are paired with a series of sixteen Polaroid photos Tuttle took of the farmhouse where he found the material, directly connecting the final artworks to the site of their genesis. Tuttle worked on the book just before and after the birth of his daughter, and in it he links the conception of art with the conception of human life.

The other five artists in the exhibition work primarily with new, rather than second-hand, styrofoam. For a series of installations dating from 1993 to 1996 that features his classic palette of black, white, and primary colors, **Sol LeWitt** broke up large sheets of styrofoam, then mounted the irregular shapes on painted walls. The space left between the pieces reads like grout or mortar on a stone wall.

Similar to instructions for his highly influential wall drawings, LeWitt provided basic rules for what the artwork should be, in this case simply "painted black styrofoam on white wall" and "painted white styrofoam on black wall." The results, however, depend on how the individuals who execute the artist's work apply them. They can make the spacing between the shapes narrow or somewhat wider (although the goal is to keep it reasonably consistent), and the way the pieces are arranged on the wall is totally up to them. Usually the styrofoam snaps cleanly, but the size of the shapes varies, and chance determines the particular contour of the separate components. According to LeWitt's daughter, Sofia, the artist stopped using styrofoam out of concern that it is harmful to the environment and not easily disposed of.

Bruce Pearson also uses sheet styrofoam, but he creates large, vibrant paintings in which the polystyrene support is completely covered over and not readily identifiable. Pearson had been making relief paintings for a number of years, building up surfaces with plaster and cardboard, when a set-designer friend suggested he might try styrofoam—



Sol LeWitt, *Black Styrofoam on White Wall and White Styrofoam on Black Wall*, 1993. © 2008 The LeWitt Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Installation at Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, 1993



Bruce Pearson, *Encyclopedia I (Clues Scattered from Charred Remains a Father's Plea False Names)*, 2003. © Bruce Pearson. Photo by Zindman/Fremont

frequently used for building theater sets—instead. Working with a hot wire as thin as pencil lead, Pearson cuts the layered styrofoam into a myriad of tesserae-like shapes to create astonishingly eye-popping compositions. Pearson found that this method provided greater stability and flexibility to refine the surfaces of his paintings. In the compositions, which may appear at first to be abstract, phrases and sentences are woven skillfully into all-over, oscillating patterns. Quirky in content and physically distorted in form, these words, taken from various mass-media sources, also serve as titles for the paintings.

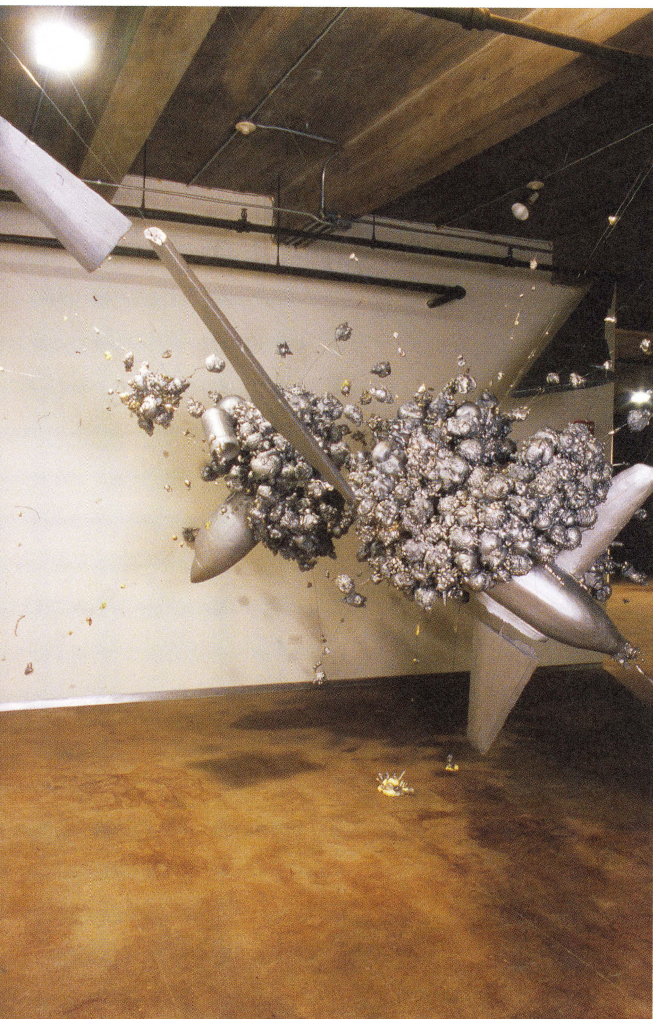
Tom Friedman's witty untitled blue styrofoam sculpture is one of a number of cubes and boxes he has produced in recent years. Friedman is well known for using everyday materials as varied as spaghetti, construction paper, toothpaste, soap, pencils, Play-Doh, bubble gum, and different forms of styrofoam, including the omnipresent stackable cups. This piece exemplifies Friedman's playful investigations of scale, balance, fragility, and simplicity, countered by his capacity for amazing craftsmanship. He decided to work with blue styrofoam after about a decade of using it to

pack his artwork, making the material that previously protected the artwork the form and content itself. Here, a larger-than-life-sized carved bee hovers miraculously over a large cube which is surrounded by grains of styrofoam "sugar" that have been shaved from its corners, softening its form. Friedman is "always interested in modern materials that reflect the cutting-edge of our world, invention, the future." The artist's choice of styrofoam and other materials transforms his subject matter—from self-portraiture to minimalist geometry—with great poignancy and humor, bringing together the realms of everyday life and alternative realities.

Heide Fasnacht used styrofoam to make the body, wings, tail, and various fragments of her *Exploding Airplane*, which hangs from the ceiling and is tethered to the walls of the gallery. She says that "this material allowed for fast, intimate handwork, not unlike carving marble, only friendlier." Because the sculpture is very large and needs to be suspended, weight was also an important factor in choosing styrofoam. The explosion is made with urethane foam, a related material chosen in part because the way foam bursts out of the can is similar to the



Tom Friedman, *Untitled*, 2005



Heide Fasnacht, *Exploding Airplane*, 2000. Installation at Bill Maynes Gallery, New York, 2000

explosive event she wanted to depict. Fasnacht's focus on the environment in which we live ranges from monumental and horrific events such as a plane crash or an imploding building (also realized in styrofoam) to the everyday occurrence of a sneeze. The sneeze may be infinitely more common, but it is similarly explosive, and can have widespread and sometimes catastrophic ramifications.

Folkert de Jong also utilizes polystyrene and liquid plastics to create representational sculptures, but his figurative tableaux refer to the history of Western painting and sculpture as well as to the current state of the world. *The Piper* (from *Death March: My Blood, My Oil, My Ass*) recalls for me James Ensor's monumental canvas *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (J. Paul Getty Museum). Similarly, a recent show of de Jong's work at the James Cohan Gallery focused

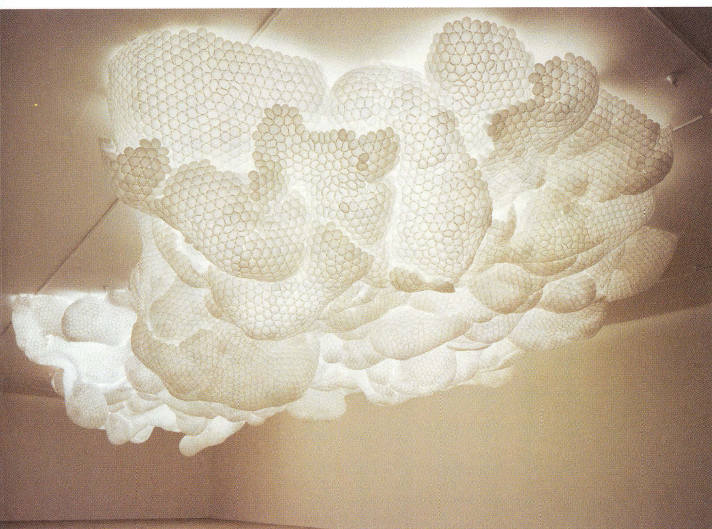
entirely on Picasso's *Les Saltimbanques*, turning that master's Rose Period paintings of harlequins into darker, three-dimensional scenarios of political power and human behavior. *Death March* is composed of three life-size figures, all dressed in kilts: Benjamin Franklin—with outstretched beams for arms, suggesting a crucifix—leads the procession, followed by two incarnations of Abraham Lincoln, as both a piper and a drummer. The subtext seems to suggest the current states of politics and economics and the demise of the American Dream as embodied by these two giants from U.S. history. The “natural” pinks and blues of the styrofoam remain largely intact, accented by expressionistic strokes of orange, red, blue, and green.

De Jong is very aware of the history of styrofoam and its moral implications and contradictions:

I like to call it an anti-material. It is manufactured in such an economical way that it uses tiny little raw material to become very voluptuous and massive.... It reflects mass consumption, and market economy in the extreme.... I carefully choose these materials for two contradicting reasons: For its immoral content and because of its tantalizing sweetness, human body-related colours, attractive texture and its very specific gravity and the possibilities they offer to use them in a sculptural way... the meaning of the materials start to emerge above the technical possibilities and start to show its most politically incorrect



Folkert de Jong, *The Piper*, 2007. © Folkert de Jong



Tara Donovan, *Untitled*, 2003. Styrofoam cups and glue. Photo courtesy of the artist and PaceWildenstein, New York. © Tara Donovan, courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York. Installation at Ace Gallery. *Not in exhibition*



Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2000–01. Bronze and paint, 7 x 25 x 47 1/4 inches. © Robert Gober, courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. Photo by Liz Deschenes. *Not in exhibition*

side. That is my starting point and it becomes for me a unique artistic medium to reflect on the subjects of dark human drama and complex social and political realities in a most efficient way.⁷

Internationally, many other artists, both well established and emerging, have worked with or continue to work with styrofoam. Among the more prominent are Rudolf Stingel, Gabriel Orozco, Sarah Sze, Tara Donovan, Rachel Harrison, Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg, and Regina Silveira. Up-and-comers include Huma Bhabha, Alessandro Ceresoli, Alexis Granwell, Norm Paris, Andrea Cohen, Michael Salter, Karin Waisman, and Yuh-Shioh Wong. A number of young industrial and furniture designers are currently testing the functional limits of styrofoam as they move away from luxury and conspicuous consumption and toward less expensive materials and even trash. Paul Cocksedge's lampshades, made by heating foam coffee cups; Max Lamb's carved chairs; Kwangho Lee's full-size sofa, sculpted with hot wires from a block of styrofoam; and the architect team Aranda/Lasch's proposal to build a grotto—complete with running fountains—out of styrofoam “boulders” are among the exciting examples.

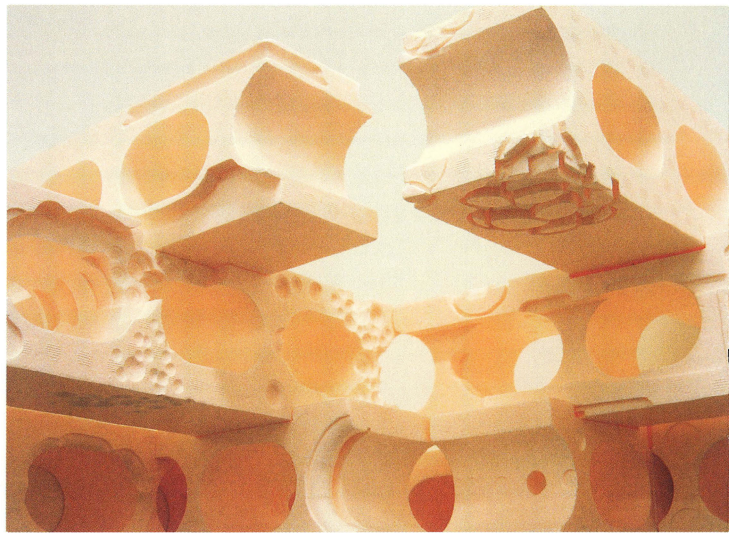
Bronze sculptures made from a styrofoam slab figured prominently in Robert Gober's exhibition for the U.S. Pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale. These

hyper-realistic but enigmatic pieces were cast directly from a piece of styrofoam debris that had washed up along a stretch of Long Island shoreline, where the artist had been photographing other ordinary items that make seemingly improbable subjects for art. In the past, Gober had transformed such banal objects as sinks, drains, and a bag of kitty litter into profound icons of our time with his intense focus and use of unexpected materials. He was drawn to the styrofoam rubble because of “its clear minimal geometric form” and also because he “was interested in styrofoam as a social material,”⁸ alluding to its widespread everyday use as well as the environmental issues it carries. Most germane to the concept of this exhibition is how Gober transforms a cast-off piece of a light, inexpensive, and distinctly 20th-century functional material into bronze, a weighty material of status that has been used to cast sculpture since the civilizations of ancient China, Greece, and the Near East.

In contrast, the artists represented in *Styrofoam* take this lowly material and turn it into something with singular artistic value while maintaining its distinct characteristics. Running the gamut from great humor and wit to more sober visions of upheaval and disaster, their works open our eyes to the richness of possibilities this mundane material embodies. And, in the process, they raise our consciousness about the world around us as well.

- 1 See www.dow.com; Mary Bellis, "The Invention of Polystyrene and Styrofoam," <http://inventors.about.com>; and Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "Styrofoam," www.wikipedia.org.
- 2 Hester Westley, "The Year of the Locked Room," *TATE ETC.* (Tate online, www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/), Issue 9, Spring 2007.
- 3 According to Gareth Jones, one of the St. Martin's tutors who designed the course and is now a professor of Foundation Studies at RISD, paper was provided for two-dimensional work during the second week, and string was the material of choice for the third week, when the class dealt with line. Conversation with the author, January 28, 2008.
- 4 Unless otherwise indicated, quotes by the artists and other references to how and why they work with styrofoam are drawn from email and phone conversations with the author in December 2007 and January 2008 in response to the question, *Why do you work with styrofoam, or why have you worked with it in the past?*
- 5 The use of generic styrofoam food-service packaging items has been banned, for example, in Berkeley, CA; Portland, OR; Suffolk County, NY; and more recently, San Francisco. The California legislature is currently considering a statewide ban on expanded polystyrene take-out food packaging. McDonald's restaurants phased it out a decade ago.
- 6 Tuttle, Richard. *Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam*, artist's book (edition of 200). New York: Blum Helman Gallery, Santa Fe: Gallery Casa Sin Nombre; 1990.
- 7 Ana Finel Honigman, "Folkert de Jong in Conversation," Saatchi Gallery, May 17, 2007, www.jamescohan.com/files/613450bo.pdf.
- 8 Robert Gober, as quoted by Amei Wallach, "Robert Gober and America's Allusive Entry in the Venice Biennale," *New York Times*, June 3, 2001. At the Biennale, the meticulously painted bronze slabs served to support a butter churn and a toilet plunger and were also featured with a simple fir plank in two minimalist cross formations. Subsequently, they have appeared as tomblike platforms for other objects, including a glass compote, driftwood, and a package of disposable diapers in an overtly church-like installation at Matthew Marks Gallery in 2005.

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 Rhode Island School of Design



Shirley Tse, *Do Cinderblocks Dream of Being Styrofoam?* (detail), 2003



Heide Fasnacht, *Exploding Airplane* (detail), 2000

exhibition checklist

Dimensions in inches; height precedes width precedes depth, unless otherwise indicated

Heide Fasnacht

American, b. 1951

Exploding Airplane, 2000

Painted styrofoam, urethane foam
Dimensions variable

Art and photos courtesy of
Kent Gallery, New York, and
Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston

Tony Feher

American, b. 1956

Blue Tower, 1997

Styrofoam
42 3/4 x 24 diam.

Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen;
photo courtesy of the artist
and D'Amelio Terras, New York

Tom Friedman

American, b. 1965

Untitled, 2005

Styrofoam, wire
43 x 40 x 40

Courtesy of Gagolian Gallery

Folkert de Jong

Dutch, b. 1972

The Piper, 2007

Polystyrene foam, liquid
plastic, pigments, adhesive
Figure: 74 x 34 x 31; rocks:
12 x 24 x 23, 13 x 45 x 17

Collection of Lisa and Stuart Ginsberg;
photo courtesy of James Cohan Gallery,
New York

Steve Keister

American, b. 1949

Untitled Glyph, 2000

Acrylic on aquaresin
10 x 12 x 5

Cartouche, 2002

Acrylic on aquaresin
22 x 12 x 2 3/4

Tezcatlipoca, 2002

Acrylic on aquaresin
9 3/4 x 12 x 3 1/4

Waterlily Jaguar, 2002

Acrylic on aquaresin
18 x 20 x 4 1/2

Courtesy of the artist and
Feature Inc., New York

Sol LeWitt

American, 1928–2007

Black Styrofoam on White Wall, 1993

Latex and styrofoam
Approx. 11 x 12 feet

White Styrofoam on Black Wall, 1993

Latex and styrofoam
Approx. 8 x 10 feet

Courtesy of the Estate of Sol LeWitt

Bruce Pearson

American, b. 1952

Who's to Say That a Shoe Is Not a Piece of Sculpture, 2000

Oil and acrylic on styrofoam
60 x 48 x 6

Art and photo courtesy of Ronald
Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Encyclopedia I (Clues Scattered from Charred Remains a Father's Plea False Names), 2003

Oil and acrylic on styrofoam
89 1/4 x 71 1/2 x 4 1/2

Private collection; art and photo courtesy
of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Shirley Tse

American, b. Hong Kong, 1968

Do Cinderblocks Dream of Being Styrofoam?, 2003

Polystyrene
20 x 41 x 27

Art and photos courtesy of the artist
and Murray Guy, New York

Richard Tuttle

American, b. 1941

Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam #5, 1988

Mixed media on styrofoam
21 3/4 x 15 1/4 x 2

Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam #7, 1988

Mixed media on styrofoam
21 3/4 x 16 x 2

Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam, 1990

Artist book: handmade papers
and enclosures (ed. 4/200)
Closed: 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 1 3/4

Art and photos courtesy of
Sperone Westwater, New York

B. Wurtz

American, b. 1948

Untitled, 1986

Six sepia-toned silver gelatin prints

Image 4 1/4 x 6 3/4, frame 10 1/2 x 14
Image 3 3/4 x 4 3/4, frame 10 1/2 x 13
Image 3 3/4 x 4 3/4, frame 12 x 14 3/4
Image 4 3/4 x 6 3/4, frame 11 3/4 x 13 1/4
Image 2 1/2 x 3, frame 8 3/4 x 10 1/2
Image 2 1/2 x 3, frame 8 1/4 x 10 1/4

Art and photos courtesy of the artist
and Feature Inc., New York



styrofoam

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