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Finding art all around

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As a preface, I am not an artist. I am, however, an art appreciator. Yes, to some extent, this means I'll be that person museum-hopping and giving impromptu tours and opinions to anyone brave enough to accompany me (usually my hapless, science-steeped boyfriend). But that is not the limit of my artistic appreciation; I look for the artistry, the aesthetic and symbolic beauty, in every moment as I move through my surroundings. I fully believe that one can find this artistry in anything and everything, if one looks close enough. Perhaps this means I am a contemplative observer of our visual culture—or just a sight junkie.

Either way, I am not alone. I share this scrutiny and/or addiction with artists that use found objects in their work. One such artist, Tad Gloeckler, is UW-Madison's artist in residence this semester. During his time here, he is teaching an interdisciplinary course and will be giving numerous talks and presentations, including one this Friday, Feb. 25, entitled "Rethinking the Everyday," in which he will discuss found art's main idea— seeing mundane objects in a new way, looking for the underlying symbolism in each. However, even if you cannot make it to his talk, or its accompanying, reservation-only workshop on Saturday, I do recommend you ponder this for a day, or even longer. Look around you, at your dorm room or apartment, your classroom, your favorite library or study area. Think about each object that defines that space—its aesthetics, then its meaning to you or the people who might use it, the possibility that lies underneath how it looks. Maybe it's a worn stuffed animal you got from a family member years ago, or a candy wrapper from your Valentine. Through our subjectivity, these objects, usually already deemed aesthetically pleasing by the people who designed and manufactured them, gain a new tenor.

For me, this doesn't stop with tangible objects, though the work of found objects artists might. I hear this interpretative shift constantly in music. The musicians may have written a song for one purpose, but through a song's tones I hear instead the voices of the people closest to me, the percussion of the early spring rain on my window, or the resonance of my own feelings and sentimentality. Indeed, those feelings themselves may be like found objects, such as the unexpected rush of pride felt by seeing thousands of people gathering in Madison's Capitol Square, the center of my hometown, to demonstrate peacefully for something in which they believe. Even the melancholy stirred by the loss of a family member might be such an "object." These "objects" are not just physical things that constitute our visual culture. They are sounds, thoughts, emotions, and sensations that constitute our very selves. If art is considered the communicative outcrop of human experience, then none of these things is outside the realm of art. Yet, they surround us everyday. Does this make art meaningless through ubiquity, or does it endow art with universality, wresting it from an elitist, lofty concept and placing it into the hands of all those who listen to their emotions?

My own metaphysical journeys aside, found art has been around for some time (i.e. Dada's ready-made works like Duchamp's Fountain) and hasn't always enjoyed the presence it has today. It challenges the parameters of art and the art historical canon, and for this, it has garnered criticism since its inception. The debate between found art's critics and its supporters may indeed never be settled. Thus, as with all art, I encourage you to experience it yourself, and let your own subjective reaction be the judge.

Tad Gloeckler's "Rethinking the Everyday" will be hosted in the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art lecture hall at 6:30-7:30 p.m. on Feb. 25.