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Jessica Jackson Hutchins' *Couch For a Long Time* (2009) in the 2010 Whitney Biennial



Installation view of "Kitchen Table Allegory" at Derek Eller Gallery. Left to right: *Fairy Wing Over Men's Pants* (2010), *Bouquets* (2010) and *Indefinite Break (Tiger Woods)* (2010)



Jessica Jackson Hutchins' *Kitchen Table Allegory* (2010) [foreground] and *X-Flowers with Yellow Bowl* (2010)

MINOR MIRACLES by Ben Davis

The 2010 Whitney Biennial has produced at least one new star -- **Jessica Jackson Hutchins** (b. 1971), an artist based in Portland, Ore. Whether they loved it or hated it, Hutchins' *Couch for a Long Time* -- a couch, papered with newspaper clippings about Barack Obama, with two rather pathetic ceramic vessels standing in for human figures atop it -- was the one work that all the critics mentioned in their reviews of that exhibition. Perhaps this is because *Couch for a Long Time* nailed together the two strands that run throughout the 2010 Biennial: a sort of distracted leftist sentiment, on the one hand, and an inward-looking formalism, on the other. Hutchins' couch is also, in my opinion, a pleasantly weird work to look at.

New fans of the artist have been lucky enough to have two opportunities to sample her recent work in New York during the last month. At Chelsea's Derek Eller, the artist is presenting "Kitchen Table Allegory," her fourth solo show at the gallery, while on the Lower East Side, "Over Come Over" is at Laurel Gitlen/Small A Projects at Broome and Orchard streets. Both shows feature Hutchins' signature mixed-media sculptures and works on paper. Her sculptural work incorporates found furniture, often broken, unsightly, and painted in various slapdash ways, and these objects are frequently combined with ceramic or papier-mâché forms: big inert blobs -- "guttural upchucks," the artist has called them -- which vaguely evoke idling human figures.

For a recent series of works on paper, Hutchins used an actual tabletop to make giant woodblock prints. Derek Eller has on view the paint-smearred table, now transformed into a sculpture titled *Kitchen Table Allegory* and featuring in its center a large, irregular, empty ceramic bowl. Prints made with the tabletop, each in different colors, feature a pattern derived from the pits and grooves of the well-used table surface, and are also spray-painted with marks, and festooned with a variety of found objects. *X-Flower with Yellow Bowl*, for instance, features an X pattern of plastic flowers, sloppily glued to it -- emphasizing it as a picture plane -- as well as a small ceramic bowl fixed to the lower right, emphasizing its correspondence with the horizontal table surface.

Hutchins' under-produced, "unmonumental" work shares some of the "so wrong it's right" esthetic of **Rachel Harrison's** sculpture. But the junk-sale feel, the deliberately awkward combinations of objects, the half-buried but knowing anthropomorphic references, the "flat-bed picture" plane, the scraps of newspaper collage, the sly puns -- all these qualities suggest a more primal predecessor: **Robert Rauschenberg**. Rauschenberg is pretty much an Old Master by now, so the echo explains why Hutchins' exhibitions have an almost classical feeling to them, despite the general messiness. Her gawky art may fit right in line with what Hal Foster recently argued was the characteristic avant-garde spirit of '00s art, "precariousness" -- but it nevertheless feels quite settled.

Still, the comparison with Rauschenberg also helps isolate what is unique and novel about Hutchins' creative temperament.



Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Black and White Print
 2010
 Derek Eller Gallery



Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Elbows
 2010
 Derek Eller Gallery



Installation view of "Over Come Over"
 at Laurel Gitlen/Small A Projects.
 Foreground: *Figure with Red Bowl*
 (2010), with *Untitled* (2010)



Rauschenberg's reference point was the public sphere, via media-culture, consumer junk and some macho wrestling with art history (with a healthy undercurrent of gay sex thrown in there). Hutchins' subject matter, on the other hand, is defiantly domestic; if there is a theme of her work, it is domesticity. "My art deals with the experience of being me," she **told** *Modern Painters*. "Motherhood and being an artist are the experiences that have mattered to me more than anything."

This manifests itself everywhere, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Her media -- papier-mâché, ceramics, the scraps of clothing and fabric she embeds in her pieces -- have traditional craft associations, and thus refer to the home. In fact, her use of ceramics coincides with leaving New York City for Portland to start a family, while the found furniture is scavenged from her house (*Couch for a Long Time* was even "the couch from her childhood living room," she **says**). The leitmotif of the current shows is the kitchen table, and one of the table-prints at Derek Eller has affixed to it a pair of underpants and a paperback novel, making you think that the overall series, with its suggestions of different configurations of objects passing over the same surface, is about the disorderly routines of the household.

True, some Rauschenbergian play with pop culture makes an appearance. *Indefinite Break (Tiger Woods)* is a squat, cracked brown-and-white ceramic piece that resembles an abstracted torso. But aside from the title (and the fact that the vessel that forms the head is, you know, empty), it's a challenge to locate any real reference to the disgraced golfer in the work. It is more casual comment than commentary, a chatty, casual reference that evokes supermarket gossip magazines. A series of collage and ceramic works at Laurel Gitlen explore the abstracted shape of a *Disgraced Skater*, or so the title would have us know -- more tabloid chatter. Even the newspaper clippings in *Couch for a Long Time* seem to indicate political news as passively consumed. Indeed, that work is about as close to an exact visual metaphor for "armchair commentary" as you can get.

The theme of many of Hutchins' works would seem to be domestic bliss: *Wedding Section* (2010), a ceramic work of two fused figures, or *Couple* (2010), featuring two large, fused ceramic blobs atop a well-worn couch. One of the table-prints, *Bouquets*, has as ornament a photo of a beaming mother gripping a smiling, burbling, tow-headed baby. At Laurel Gitlen, *Last Unicorn* -- a mountainous, waist-height white plaster piece, wrapped in floral-print fabric, crowned with a glazed ceramic vessel -- is said to be based on a drawing of a unicorn done by Hutchins' daughter. It's worth remembering that family has been her theme for a while: At her 2008 show at Derek Eller, Hutchins presented, alongside sculpture, *Sun Valley Road Trip*, an unedited 40-minute video focusing on her daughter working on her sticker book in the back of a car, while her husband (former Pavement front man Stephen Malkmus) drives.

But does any of this add up to something so concrete as a "theme"? In fact, the works are rather oblique. They don't exactly rush to meet you with their meaning, any more than they try to seduce you with their beauty. Hutchins would seem to be following two opposed impulses simultaneously. All of her work manifests a tremendous sense of "thing-ness"; if not exactly "abject" in the overused and theoretically imprecise way that the term is deployed in the art world, the sculptures confront you with a lot of raw, pathetic matter, globs of glue, broken chair caning, bulbous projections of plaster and clay. On the other hand, they are almost always anthropomorphizing -- cups standing in for hands, paired vessels suggesting relations between people and so on. Hutchins art waffles between the everydayness of stuff, and some kind of narrative, allegory, or whatever.

Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Leaning Figure
 2010
 Laurel Gitlen/Small A Projects



Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Sweater Arms
 2010
 Laurel Gitlen/Small A Projects



Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Frontal
 2010
 Derek Eller Gallery



Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Indefinite Break (Tiger Woods)
 2010
 Derek Eller Gallery

Illuminating in this regard is a small picture book that the artist recently put together with Portland State University poet Thomas Fisher, available at Laurel Gitlen/Small A Projects. It pairs pictures of Hutchins' recent sculptures with various bits of epigrammatic poetry from Fisher (next to an image of *Kitchen Table Allegory*: "predations' plunder gathers booties' bodies; in jaws maw even the past is gathered. . ."). Each of these pairings, in turn, is introduced with a quote from a fashionable thinker: Maurice Blanchot ("power links, un-power detaches"), Walter Benjamin ("For the thing possessed, representation is secondary"), and so on. (Anne Carson and Terry Southern are in there somewhere, too.)

Such nuggets, by now thoroughly colonized by the more imperious realms of academia, would seem unbearably unsuitable to Hutchins' kitchen-sink post-minimalism. The citations gain a great deal of poignancy, however, from the artist's introduction to the book, where she explains the collaboration with Fisher, and the significance of the texts for her: "The writers quoted in these next pages I digested second hand through Tom in the mid-'90s (oh the '90s!) and they instigated an esthetic/personal crisis that was seminal in the discovery of my work. The difficulty they assign to expression came to determine much of my daily life and chemical dependencies. It became impossible to move with any ethical certainty, and then just impossible to move." Such sentiments will be very familiar to anyone who has ever been caught in the no-way-out cul-de-sac of High Theory, where all positive communication, every experience of beauty or suggestion of historical progress, is deemed to be a proto-totalitarian act of violence by default (oh the '90s, indeed!).

A sense of a healthy working through of this impasse forms the context for Hutchins' recent work. "There is real struggle in these texts to push through an almost claustrophobic impenetrability," she writes of Fisher's labyrinthine poems. "But to the struggle is owed the increased pleasure of the moments of clarity, the amplified beauty, humor and humanity. I have tried to embed the same values in my work, so that they might inspire the same effort and the same payoff." Hutchins, in other words, seems to have found a way to live with the theoretical difficulties of communication without either retreating from them, or becoming hung up on them. Specifically, she has found her own personal safe passage across the theoretical scorched earth of postmodernism -- or at least a table where she can work in peace -- via an embrace of the pleasures of an art that is firmly rooted in her private side.

Jessica Jackson Hutchins' art derives its pleasure from the fact that it seems at home in, but not tendentiously obsessed with, its impenetrability. It is only half-invested in wrestling its emotional matter into shape for public consumption. Her works refer to a certain buried world of quotidian, private family experience, but by their nature don't say much about it, leaving it to remain, precisely, private, below the radar. This is a minor pleasure and not a major one, and you could interpret it as a little self-involved, at least potentially. But, if it is taken in the right way, there is something idyllic about it -- her work radiates a feeling of achieved tranquility amid the messiness of life.

Jessica Jackson Hutchins, "Kitchen Table Allegory," Feb. 19-Mar. 27, 2010, at Derek Eller Gallery, 615 West 27th Street, New York, N.Y., and "Come On Over," Feb. 21-Mar. 28, 2010, at Laurel Gitlen/Small A Projects, 261 Broome Street, New York, N.Y.

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Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Wedding Section
2010
Derek Eller Gallery



Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Couple
2010
Derek Eller Gallery



Jessica Jackson Hutchins
Bouquets (detail)
2010
Derek Eller Gallery



Jessica Jackson Hutchins

Last Unicorn

2010

Laurel Gitlen/Small A Projects



Flipping through Jessica Jackson
Hutchins' collaboration with Thomas
Fisher