

ARTFORUM

Bill Jenkins and Chadwick Rantanen

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An observatory for barely unpacked product and its packaging, this complex, interweaving installation of Chadwick Rantanen's machines and Bill Jenkins's illuminations begged for extended description; the exhibition's subtle mechanical weirdness and play of light created a viewing situation that demanded methodical observation. Like much Conceptual assemblage, the show tugged at language while skirting easy characterization. Attempts to translate the installation into words create labored, angular poetry.

Hanging above a table sloping inward and split down its middle, a contraption made of black plastic, reflective Mylar, and clear plastic stretched over an irregular wooden armature angled streaks of sunlight from Michael Thibault's skylight onto sundry cheap mechanical toys. Plastic globes split at their equatorial seams whirred and spun continuously, their colored LED lights blinking. Some had familiar blue oceans and harlequins of colored countries, while on others, continents were demarcated by splatters of silver against ink-black seas. The miniature globes were scattered amid a sextet of mechanized birds of different species (from red robin to brown sparrow) that lay on their backs and sides and warbled unearthly calls whenever a motion detector was triggered. Closer examination revealed that the battery bays of both globes

and birds had been exposed—little disk-shaped plastic protrusions drew attention to Rantanen's handmade battery adapters, which enabled the C-powered toys to run on AAA batteries. A single wall sconce lying next to the objects on the table reprised the reference to illumination.

In an adjacent room, a lineup of four additional wireless LED wall sconces, their battery bays similarly exposed and packed with adapters, rested on top of their boxes on the floor, bubble wrap folded next to them. The lamps, which projected concentric circles of light against the wall (the result of markings on their bulbs), conveyed a subtle mysticism, even as the mechanics of the optical illusion were apparent. It was easy to stare too long at the light and have your eyes start playing tricks. In addition to its electric glow, this room contained a ramshackle light show of its own. A giant black plastic platform hung from the ceiling twenty feet above, shifting light down to a trio of semitranslucent plastic construction sheets suspended like "skylights" or an upside-down staircase. Or that's what we saw—inside was a rather complicated apparatus. One interior system of ductwork took the illumination from the skylight and gallery's fluorescent bulbs, and channeled it to three receptors on the wall. The lighting of the middle area was from the skylight, and the left and right areas were lit by the fluorescent bulbs. Hanging from the structure's corner along the wall, two fleshy balloons (repurposed children's costumes) equipped with fans powered by two orange battery packs slowly inflated and deflated. Resting on their boxes on the floor in front of the heaving blob were a couple of digital cameras with adapter modifications. When one leaned over for a closer look, their modest digital screens sprang to life, the devices taking a snapshot as the motion sensor was triggered.

There were no other sources of illumination, and the two rooms felt somber, as if bathed in the half-light of an old church. This softness and the hard-edged, mass-produced industrial forms were in tension. Asking why and how these things came together would have invited only the strangest possible scenarios, all of which involved investing these cheap objects with some special force—as if they were imbued with properties far surpassing any qualities commonly ascribed to them.

Humble objects animated with stored energy that enabled them to mechanically move, sing, and luminesce, in an atmosphere suffused with ethereal light: The arrangement drew out the uncanny liveliness of machines, allowing the banality of their manufacture to be subsumed within the mysterious tableau.

—Andrew Berardini



View of "Bill Jenkins and Chadwick Rantanen," 2015.