

JONATHAN SELIGER

ARTUS 2010-11

Angles Gallery | Culver City CA

Judging by Jonathan Seliger's deluxe totes exhibited in Los Angeles last October, surely the economy must be improving. In one of the main galleries, four life-sized bronze and enamel shopping bags, two with tin-plated copper straps, were displayed on plinths. Decked out in signature company colors, each article bore the imprint of a well-known fashion outlet. The effect was like a



window display at Barneys or Saks Fifth Avenue, except that here the items are as expensive as what they nominally contain, if not more so.

It's certainly not easy to tell the difference, which is why people tend to squirrel away bags from expensive clothes stores. Carrying around your groceries in these classy numbers is one of the pluses of vicarious living, according to which the frills and frippery of fashion are all you need to pass through the pearly gates of consumer heaven. But there's always the danger that the redacted items might be confused with contraband, which is in fact what happened on this occasion. Seliger's sculptures found themselves detained by Japanese customs officials, who mistook them for counterfeit merchandise, delaying the show by several months.

But before you run over to the library shelves and drag out your Baudrillard or Umberto Eco books, it's worth



pointing out that Seliger's work has less to do with old postmodernist theories about the genuine and the fake, the copy and the original, and more to do with standard checkout-line quandaries like paper or plastic, debit or credit. That is to say, Seliger's sculptures don't buy into Neo-Platonic claptrap about the payoff between shadow and substance, but concentrate instead on the everyday rituals and sentiments associated with consumerism run amuck.

For example, *Biggie's Socks* (2009), a gorgeous, rich-brown Gucci carry bag, plays something blingy, one of Biggie Smalls's raps, off against the well-known luxury brand. The implied quotation from "One More Chance" (1994), "black and ugly as ever/ however, I stay Gucci down to the socks," picks up on one of the abiding contradictions of this rapper's fall into commercial grace. Likewise, by a trip of the tongue, *Hansom* (2008), an orange Hermès bag, transports a humble hansom cab, as seen in the iconic logo, into the word "handsome," thus turning the Greek messenger for the gods and god of eloquence on his elegant, swellegant head.

But it's only with *Both Sides Now* (2009), a partially MirraChromed gold Burberry tote, graced by its equestrian knight logo, that Seliger starts to get down and boogie. The title refers to a Joni Mitchell song from 1968, which includes such memorable lines as "ice cream castles in the air," "Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels," and "It's life's illusions I recall/ I really don't know life at all." The principal anthem—along with "The Circle Game" (1972)—of the baby-boomer generation, songs like these manage to capture the civilization and discontents of old-school, warrior-style consumerism perfectly. True to the Latin word *prorsum*, meaning "ever forward," which graces the knight's standard, Burberry's early explorer "gabardine combines" (the company outfitted both Amundsen's and Shackleton's expeditions to the South Pole) and WWI-inspired "trench coats" resonate well with Mitchell's wrenching line, "dreams have lost some grandeur coming true."

What you might not have noticed on the day was the item modeled after the brown paper bags provided by Trader Joe's, king of the current locavore trend, in the back office, unseen except by those who inquired after it. Called *Seasonal* (2010), the sculpture is adorned with pop icons referencing, apropos Jasper Johns, the changing seasons, along with a gratuitous "Thank you." Yet it would have made more sense to display the tote up front, along with the ritzier ones. Without the inclusion of this "fifth column," the show risked falling under its own spell.

-Paul Foss