

## VIENNA

### Specific Objects

**LEWIS STEIN**  
**"WORKS SINCE 1971"**  
**VIN VIN**  
**23 OCT – 12 DEC 2020**

The tenets of art-making are often reduced to the elementary. A simple gesture can be loaded with metaphor. Take an On Kawara "Today" series painting for instance. Each (mostly) small rectangle canvas speaks volumes about history and time. That information drives the object, the memory vessel to major world events, hermetically sealed for future historians. To read their dates is akin to reading his diary.

A hundred years ago, who would've thought that a porcelain urinal would be the most influential work of art in the twentieth century? Or a black square would be the apotheosis of painting? Such is the genealogy of conceptual ideas in the Duchampian version of primary significance, to be perpetually updated, guided, twisted, and tweaked.

It's that very notion of an image and its analogies that drive the work of New York-based artist Lewis Stein. He's been showing intermittently since the 1960s and has re-emerged in recent years staying true to his readymade and conceptualist toolbox. In the exhibition, "Works Since 1971" (organised by New York-based independent curator Alex Bacon), the title suggests consistent adherence to a peculiar decades-old formalism. Stein is a strange bird of the lexicon, converging Minimalist tropes with Spartan objects, with occasional photographic work, light sculptures, and dissociative text drawings. Here he's made new works dated 2020 and some earlier – yet their genesis links to the 1960s when he had many gallery exhibitions and showed at the '69 Whitney Annual.

At Vin Vin, meat cleaver sculptures adorn the room. An anodised metal garbage can lid, and all, (*Untitled*, 1971) is as pristine as a Koons vitrine sculpture. This piece and a new-looking jute floor mat (*Untitled*, 1981) allow the eye to wander off the wall. So much blunt force in these knives is subdued and supplanted by Stein's formalist precision. He goes all the way to recharge the parameters of this most rudimentary tool. With a good sense for colour, he paints them cogently, like they're another kind of canvas delineated by two interlocking geometric forms. Curator Bacon has lucidly presented this wily artist with the elegance of an Ellsworth Kelly hang. There are no gimmicks in the presentation – it is clean as a whistle. The meat cleavers are painted in bright pastel colours, uniformly hung at a slight angle radiating off the clean white walls of the gallery. A butcher wouldn't recognise them. Each weighty angular blade with bluntly solid handles can cut through bone, yet conversely, the colour-coding gives them a lightness of touch. Repetition is their forte, and they must be



*Untitled*, 1981, Door mat, 3 x 35 x 61 cm

taken together as a group to grasp their subtle interplay of geometry and colour.

You may be tempted to look for scraps of fat-laden beef in the trashcan. Instead, the works' innocuous showroom presence claims its own sculptural volume for the space. Meanwhile the nearby floor mat grounds the three-dimensional pairing of the cleavers and can. Both hard and lightweight, machine industrial and soft, earthen and coarse.

THANK YOU FOR LOOKING AT THIS DRAWING reads the framed pencil work on another wall (*Polite Drawing*, 1995). In the end you see that the whole of Stein's scheme is an elucidation of geometric arrangement, object specificity, line, banality, and acute irony. The install tantalises you in just the right way. The feel for the temperament of these desolate works are really there. The pieces themselves have been drained of their usefulness in order to become pure self-contained signifier. Physical. Demure. Ascetic. Stein knows that old conceptualist dogs can indeed be recycled with new tricks. He knows the terrain well. Where idiosyncratic Minimalism is concerned,

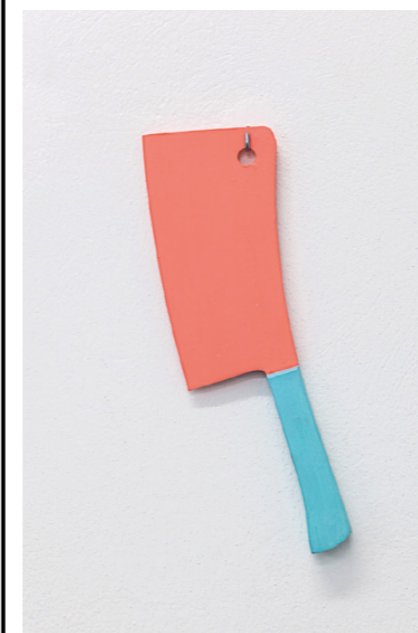
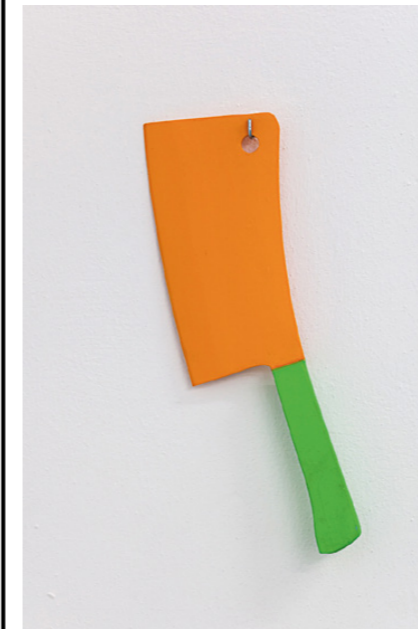
Photos: Flavio Palasciano, courtesy of the artist and VIN VIN, Vienna

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he makes the cut with far more charm than the twee combines of, say, a Richard Tuttle. And Stein's axe to grind seems more resonant with the nascent paradigmatic demolition of 2020 than his past. Shapes accumulate ad infinitum, even as unseen hands are lopping off the old

structures. Within the limits that all transvaluation connotes, the objects of his labours are blunt offerings that make the most out of the least. It's all in the matter of how you see things when the world has been turned upside down.

**Max Henry**



*Untitled*, 2020

Cleavers, acrylic paint, each 39 x 13 x 2.5 cm (from a series of 8)

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