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LARRY MANTELLO

JOSÉ FREIRE FINE ART

As you grow older, Christmas begins to give you the same vague feeling of disappointment that you get the first time you run into your favorite celebrity in the bathroom. There's no more Santa, holidays aren't holy, and for anyone who has suffered through some brand of academic Marxism, you can't even enjoy the yuletide extravaganza of consumerism without feeling like you're perpetuating class oppression. Blissfully unaffected by all of this, Larry Mantello makes art that never grew up: his sculptural assemblages of mall-style commodities, many of which are thematized according to holidays and vacation spots, convey all the heartfelt exuberance of Christmas in the suburbs before Frosty the Snowman melted.



Larry Mantello, *Sugar Post Push*, 1993, mixed media, dimensions variable

What does any kid want for Xmas? Not just stuff, but lots of stuff. Excess was Mantello's modus operandi as he filled the gallery to bursting with sights, sounds, and sometimes smells: crepe paper, Pez, yoyos, fuchsia tchatchkes and char-treuse trinkets, helium balloons (the kind that come in heart shapes and silvery colors, with Garfields delivering cutesy messages of love and hope), wedding cakes, birthday cakes, air-fresheners, pinatas, keychains with furry little creatures. Dulcet disco sounds emanating from a boom-box--the Trammps' "Disco Inferno," the BeeGees' "Saturday Night Fever"--in a work called *Pleasure Chess*, 1993, rounded

out this horror vacui. (Mantello's titles often brilliantly mimic the weirdly saccharine, euphemistic, bad-pun-ridden names of bottom-shelf thingamajigs: *Heart-On*, *Sum Sense*, *Forever Felt*, etc.). In *Pleasure Chess*, a disco ball casts slow circles of colored light around the room, while cascades of gizmos populate a little island of sand on the floor and hang from the ceiling on cheap plastic chains. "Hi-Fashion Press-On Nails FOR YOUNG GLAMOUR GIRLS," *Big League Chew*, *Chinese Mushroom Candy* (whatever the heck that is), a rawhide dog bone, Elvis bubblegum cards, an "OFFICIAL GUAC BALL" ("Remove your GUAC BALL from its poly bag and inflate with your face until tight and round. . . ." Play until you get "GUAC'D"), fake grapes, lights made out of beer cans, etc.

What distinguishes Mantello from other artists who deal expressly with the commodity is that his work is not patently critical. Or rather, to whatever extent Mantello's art is critical, commodity culture is not its object. In *Ltd.*, 1993, a wall covered with a big fake rainbow and a field of daisies supports two shelves, which are separated by a big, red, inflatable heart that says "I Love You This Much." Four cakes, depicting a bride and groom, cheerleaders, some Smurf-esque creatures, and a doctor and nurse, sit on the shelves, while various thingamabobs hang from them. All in all, *Ltd.* looks like a parody of Haim Steinbach's shelf displays, which is telling: whereas, broadly speaking, Steinbach uses his art to critique the commodity fetish, Mantello uses the commodity to critique its critics. If there has to be a choice between art and the commodity, Mantello comes down wholeheartedly on the side of the latter; in his world, the commodity is a beautiful, pleasurable thing, and Christmas has yet to be GUAC'D.

-Keith Seward