

# Los Angeles Times

## ART REVIEW

### The Trappings of Pleasure

### Larry Mantello Piles Gewgaws Into Exuberant Constructions

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Larry Mantello's "Pleasure Treasure" is the most refreshing and invigorating exhibition this critic has seen in a Los Angeles gallery this season. With insightful wit and a skillfully light touch, the young, L.A.-based artist has pressed a claim fraught with the danger of easy dismissal as trivial or emptily self-indulgent--and he's made it work.

"Pleasure Treasure," on view at Santa Monica's Food House through Sunday, is a visually overloaded environment built from balloons, souvenirs, birthday cakes, greeting cards, posters, T-shirts, plastic cigarette lighters, automobile air-fresheners, mugs, joke buttons, tattoo transfers, pipe-cleaner bumblebees--all the sorts of novelty items familiar from the airport gift shop or the car-wash waiting room.

An apotheosis of cheerfully beckoning trash, the installation is composed from scores of collages, assemblages, mobiles and wall-mounted shelves of stuff, all suffused with the piped-in sounds of relentlessly perky dance-rhythms of '70s disco-music ("Oooo, love to love ya, baby") and the whirling, multicolored spots of light provided by a mirrored disco-ball.

Mantello has completely transformed the gallery ambience, beginning with walls covered by photo-murals of a sandy tropical beach, an emerald-green golf course and other leisure-time pleasure spots. In one corner a dense jungle-of-junk grows skyward from a meandering mound of sand, like some fever-dream of "Gilligan's Island."

Helium-filled foil balloons hang in space. An electric fan mounted high in the rafters blows a gentle breeze through dyed ostrich-feathers. Countless clusters of souvenirs and knickknacks are suspended from the ceiling.

Mantello was born in 1964, the year Pop art became a global phenomenon, so Pop is less a considered influence on his art than merely a given--the ground-zero from which his sensibility has developed. There's an ease to Mantello's way with the ordinary artifacts of popular culture, which is quite different from the concise, distanced, sharply considered sculpture of such older artists as Haim Steinbach or Jeff Koons, whose commodity-fetish art came to maturity in the 1980s.

Their interests in the graphically arresting aesthetic of store display and in a kind of "proletariat objet d'art" are certainly precedents for the younger artist's work. But so are the dreamier, more languid collage-environments of Alexis Smith, which have concerned themselves with a bittersweet poetic reverie, constructed through pop relationships.



**“Pleasure Treasure” at Santa Monica’s Food House: Larry Mantello’s first solo exhibition is a cheerful fun house of trash.**

As the title "Pleasure Treasure" might suggest, the aesthetically debased and discredited commercial gew-gaws with which Mantello works are here offered up without a trace of disdain or mocking irony. Instead, they've been piled together in exuberant constructions whose playfulness is infectious. However cheesy or odd, these are objects originally made to entice a consumer with promises of pleasure. Through artistic intervention, Mantello has guaranteed that that is what they deliver.

Given the voluminous sensory overload, the feeling is of a culture in dizzy free-fall. Yet, whatever queasiness that feeling might engender, it is not met by Mantello with a wagging finger of dismay over consumerist manipulation of the masses, or other such commonly expressed scoldings for the failures of contemporary life.

Instead, the artist takes a far more volatile, hazardous and potentially liberating position. Pay attention to pleasure, his "Pleasure Treasure" insists, while gaily seducing you into its gently mercurial web. With the ostensibly empty hedonism of '70s disco-culture as his eccentric (but keenly effective) launching pad, Mantello fabricates a redemptive essay on the value of pleasure as a political engine, finally performing the cultural magic of transforming a sow's ear into a silk purse.

What makes this assertion powerful is its sharp distinction from most issue-oriented political art, which is prominently displayed today. Typically, a position is staked out in advance, the art concisely illustrates the premise and everything is neatly sewn up. The woebegone spectator is left to join the ranks, or simply go away.

Nothing much is really at stake in such work, except alignment with institutionalized group-identity. By stark contrast, pleasure has consequences. Certainly it always has; but in the age of AIDS, pleasure's repercussions are ignored only at one's mortal peril.

Pleasure knows the advantage of shared communion, while insisting on individual action and responsibility. Because it has consequences, pleasure offers itself as a model for the examined life.

Some members of a slightly older generation of artists, such as Lari Pittman, as well as some contemporaries of Mantello, such as the young painter Monica Majoli, are also engaged in asserting pleasure's power. At a time when hectoring and grave condescension are more likely to be encountered as political expression, these and other artists' rigorous, resonant appeals to both the satisfactions and the terrors of sensual experience stand like welcome beacons in the darkness.

By chance, examples of Mantello's work can also be seen in two concurrent group exhibitions. At Christopher Grimes Gallery, there are three hanging sculptures made from Styrofoam balls and pipe cleaners, which the artist calls "Spoolies." And at TRI, the entrance hall is the site of a festive assemblage cascading over a pedestal, complete with balloons, which makes you feel like you've walked in on a party.

The show at Food House, which is Mantello's first solo exhibition, sends those compelling individual works over the top. It's hard to say where this art can go from here. But now that the hollow, mean-spirited party of the 1980s is definitively over, this art exults, let a new, more powerful party begin. Love to love ya, baby.

♦*Food House, 2220 Colorado Ave., Building 4, Room 402, Santa Monica, (310) 449-1030, through Sunday; TRI, 1140 S. Hayworth, (213) 936-8255, through April 26, open Saturday, Sunday and Monday; Christopher Grimes Gallery, 916 Colorado Ave., (310) 587-3373, through May 15, closed Sunday and Monday.*