

HYPERALLERGIC

Something New Under the Sun

by John Yau June 5, 2016



Bahama Flight (2015), mixed media, 3 elements, 31 x 14 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches, 36 x 14 1/2 x 8 inches, 30 x 14 1/2 x 11 inches

Richard Van Buren studied ceramics at Mexico City College. Later, he moved to San Francisco, where he studied at San Francisco State (1961–64). One of his teachers was the idiosyncratic artist Roy De Forest, who populated his canvases with dogs, and he was friends with Ron Nagle, who had an exhibition of his exquisite ceramics at Matthew Marks in the fall of 2015. While I have no idea if Van Buren and Nagle are still friends or not, something that Dave Hickey wrote about Nagle came to mind at while walking around the exhibition, *Richard Van Buren: Monet's Swamp*, at Garth Greenan (May 19–June 18, 2006). Cited on the Matthew Marks website, this is what Hickey wrote about Nagle in 1998:

If Fabergé had lived in California, loved hot rods and surfboards, and had been blessed with an impudent art-historical wit, on his best day he couldn't compete with Nagle.

Van Buren, who lives in Perry, Maine, by the ocean, works in polyester resin. Living by the ocean has clearly been an inspiration—from its atmospheric light to the detritus one inevitably finds washed on the shore, to the bright iridescent coloration of certain seashells. While he was studying in San Francisco, he moved away from ceramics, but has always remained fascinated by it. This is how he described his relationship to ceramics to me in an interview (*Brooklyn Rail*, November 2011):

Ceramics was always stuff that was pretty interesting. I felt close to it, even though that's not literally what I did—that whole firing business didn't interest me.

I have to think that polyester resin is Van Buren's answer to ceramic. As a malleable, translucent substance that could be colored in different ways, it gave him something that clay didn't provide—a way to explore his preoccupation with color and light. Moreover, in contrast to clay, polyester resin didn't have a history when it came to art. Van Buren wanted to make something that didn't look like anything else and he has succeeded to a remarkable degree. In fact, I can't think of any art that prepares you for these objects, which might be why Van Buren's work has never quite gotten the attention it deserves. There is nothing to measure his work against. It defines as well as occupies its own territory.

Van Buren's interest in materials has led him to use Thermoplastic, as well as to incorporate actual seashells, glitter, ostrich feathers, metallic paint, costume jewelry, dry pigment, wallpaper paste, and many other unlikely materials into the resin, which holds these things like a glass paperweight full of flowers. The result is a body of polychrome sculptures that doesn't reference earlier art or seem to rely upon a particular process, such as pouring or casting. One of the singularities of Van Buren's sculptural objects is that they look like they were made by nature.

The three wall-mounted, translucent objects in "Bahama Flight" (2015) share the same palette and materials. All of them consist of a vertical cylindrical form with a shard-like form extending from both the top and the bottom. The various things and color suspended in the translucent form invite close inspection. I never get the sense that there is an ideal place to stand and look at Van Buren's work. Should I stand here, or should I stand here, or here? I have the feeling that I haven't seen everything the objects have to offer. When I am looking at it closely, the entire shape becomes vague. The object is like an unexplainable artifact. Is it something tossed up by the sea? Is it the aftermath of some horrible event? There is something molten about many of Van Buren's forms. Was the heat that caused these folded and pointed shapes made by humans or by nature?

Van Buren's sculptures become a springboard for speculation as well as a reminder of the perils of contemporary life. They can seem beautiful one moment, fascinating the next, and then suddenly morph in our imagination, becoming the result of a terrible disaster. At the same time—and this is where Fabergé comes in—the objects are unapologetically extravagant. This excessiveness is counterbalanced by the resin's sleek skin, its amber-like ability to hold all sorts of beads, glitter, shells and feathers in permanent suspension. It is not that the artist has stopped time; it is that he has slowed it down so that we might ponder the beauty of its passing, the changing light and shifts in color, as we pore over his work—a string of beads becomes an undulating line in an alternative universe, while pockets of glitter suggest a burst of light that is forever stilled.

In some sense, Van Buren's sculptures challenges our ability to read them, at least by art historical conventions. They open up so many dimensions, so many possible readings, while inviting viewers to look at them with the kind of attention that borders on the hallucinatory. By creating a body of work that stands outside the narrative of progress that remains a repressive force in contemporary art, even after the death of art history, Van Buren reminds us that you can still take the road not traveled, that not everything has been done.