

HYPERALLERGIC

Stoic Beauty

by John Yau October 23, 2016



Four Green Tables (one to be used in my new home, one to be sold by a gallery and used as a table in the purchaser's home, one to be acquired by an Institution to be conserved in original condition, one to be donated anonymously to a thrift store), 2016, enamel on eastern maple, 27 1/2 x 30 x 18 inches (image courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York)

At one point, while looking at Roy McMakin's four identical green tables, I had the sudden urge to wipe the dust off one of them, except there wasn't any dust.

Some of the objects are conjoined, like Siamese twins, or nested inside each other, like memories. Others are grouped together — four identical green tables, each twenty-seven inches high, or two white chairs, one proportionately smaller than the other. At one point, while looking at the green tables, I had the sudden urge to wipe the dust off one of them, except there wasn't any dust.

The title of the four green tables offers one view into Roy McMakin's thinking: "Four Green Tables (one to be used in my new home, one to be sold by a gallery and used as a table in the purchaser's home, one to be acquired by an Institution to be conserved in original condition, one to be donated anonymously to a thrift store)" (2016). In other words, the collector buys four tables in order to get one. And so the tight, flawless green skin of enamel paint encasing the table, making it seem both impermeable and vulnerable, then becomes a challenge: Will you use it or mark it off-limits, like the period furniture roped off in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York?

Another reading is this: The four low green tables represent childhood (the past), present (their everyday use by artist and collector), future (museum collection) and loss (thrift store). Legacy and loss are inseparable: we keep one thing but lose another.

McMakin's thoughtful installation, *Roy McMakin: A Table* (September 29–November 12, 2016), is the inaugural show at the new, street level space of Garth Greenan. Initially, I thought there were too many pieces in the exhibition until I realized that the artist wanted viewers to thread their way through the space, to always be conscious of what else might be near them. The other reason McMakin put the sculptures closer together than might be expected is because he wanted to collapse the border between exhibition and warehouse, and between moving into a new space — which the gallery has literally done — and packing up and moving out.

Near the front entrance to the gallery's exhibition space, the artist has placed "Untitled (a table that looks like a sculpture)" (2016), which includes a low platform underneath and a large bowl sitting on the tabletop, all of which are painted blue. The platform makes the table art rather than furniture, "a sculpture," as the title points out. The bowl could be used to put your keys and other stuff you have gathered in your pockets during the day. Nearby, McMakin has placed "Entry Table" (2016), which incorporates a low, round table, a found object that was probably once placed in a foyer, near the front door of a house. There is nothing distinguished about it, which seems to be the artist's point. In an interview in *The New York Times* (September 17, 2014), in response to a question from Rima Suqui, McMakin made a telling point:

I have always seen furniture as incredibly loaded, meaningful objects. Kids, I think, are love-seeking beings. Since that wasn't coming from my father, I imprinted on furniture. We never went to museums or did anything cultural, so I was going around my house trying to categorize the more meaningful piece of furniture versus the less meaningful piece of furniture. I was doing this as a really young person, I think by the time I was 10.

On top of the found table McMakin has placed a duplicate painted in white enamel, with his version placed upside-down on the top of the other. The pairing becomes a weird three-dimensional mirror, as the four legs extending from a solid central block take on the identity of a sculpture mounted on a round white base supported by a wooden pedestal (the found table). While one can be content with this formal reading, it seems to me there is more going on. By placing his flawless copy on top of the found table, McMakin seals off what was once functional, makes it temporarily inaccessible and, in a fundamental way, alienating. Do you want to split them apart? What history does each evoke? Is the white table a ghost rising from the brown, used table? Might we not ask: what horrible events has each room in our lives witnessed? McMakin's pristine surfaces achieve a level of perfection that is difficult to preserve. They come across as cool and impassive, but they aren't that at all.

In "Shelving Unit with Drop Leaf Table" (2016), McMakin inserts a found drop leaf table into a tightly fitting niche in the back of a white enamel shelving unit, forming a complete rectangular unit, so that the pair becomes a minimalist sculpture, blurring the distinction between function and non-function (or art). With his readymades, Marcel Duchamp moved a functional object (a urinal or a bottle rack) into the realm of art. McMakin goes one step further by co-opting a functional object (a shelving unit) to preserve the drop leaf table inside its boundaries, raising the question: Do you separate them so that they can be used, or not? Together the shelving unit and table make a third thing, which is both art and not-art. In his blurring of distinctions and his use of furniture, McMakin shares something with the faux, non-functional furniture of Richard Artschwager, who also made real furniture for a living.

McMakin attended the University of California at San Diego, where he must have encountered the painter and film critic Manny Farber. I mention this because the still lifes that Farber painted are tabletop views influenced by his favorite films. Both men recognize that things — however bland they might be — are imprinted by use and memory. They can stir up a particular set of associations. By placing the drop leaf table within the shelving unit, effectively making part of something larger but also empty, McMakin invites viewers to store their own memories and feelings there. Or its emptiness might remind them of that moment when they packed up to move away from one place (or set of memories) to another.

The immaculate surfaces of McMakin's generic tables and chairs might bring to mind another artist who lived near San Diego, John McLaughlin. Both are austere classicists. The difference is in the feeling. The perfection and refinement that McMakin attains is paradoxical, as his work hints at feelings of isolation, abandonment, and loss, all stoically endured. I am reminded of a simple fact: one can never fully comprehend the despair of another human being. To see what McMakin has done with this recognition, and how he has lovingly opened up that understanding to anyone who cares to see it, is the beauty of his work.