

VISUAL ARTS



Photo by Hansa Bergwall

Red hat or red herring? Ordinary Wal-Mart bargains become art at the Everson Museum of Art.

What to shop for at "Aftermarket"

— "AllMyLifeForSale.com"
The project that made Freyer famous. He sold everything he owned on eBay and documented the process.

— "Surplus"
Clothing too cruddy for the thrift market, piled high at the Everson.

— "Walm-Art"
A museum store stocked by Freyer with items bought at Wal-Mart.

— Ready-made sculptures in the lobby and sculpture garden.



File photo

The Everson Museum.

A friend dropped me off in a Wal-Mart parking lot on a Saturday afternoon so humid it felt like breathing warm cotton swabs. Wal-Mart's aisles are usually full of flip-flops (\$1.94), fishing rods (\$39.94) and faux-flowers (\$3). It seemed a strange place to look for art.

But, this month the Everson Museum opened a show, *Aftermarket*, by artist John D. Freyer. The show consists of three galleries. One gallery is a museum shop that sells objects that the artist bought from a local Wal-Mart, but everything costs twice as much at the Everson.

After hearing about this idea, I was confused. What could possibly be so impressive about stuff from Wal-Mart that it would replace paintings at the Everson? And what dolt would pay \$3.98 for flip-flops, \$79.88 for fishing rods and \$6 for Wal-Mart faux-flowers? I went to Wal-Mart to ask shoppers what they thought.

I walked up to a woman as she rummaged through bath towels. After introducing myself and telling her about the show she stopped me.

"I don't have time," she interrupted.

In the cosmetics aisle, I found a woman who looked like she was in her 60s and introduced myself again. "I'm too old to get involved in that," she said.

In the camping goods section. The parking lot. Same story. Shaking heads, polite refusals and suspicious looks. Exhausted, I sat down at the bus stop next to Wal-Mart's big glass sliding doors and turned to Charlene Williams, 61, of the South Side. She was shopping for notebooks and crayons for her grandson, happy to talk and curious about "the artist." What's he trying to prove?" she asked. "Wal-Mart is a bunch of junk."

Exactly. Freyer's show is more about "proving" what can be art than it is about

the pieces. Ever since Marcel Duchamp coined the term "ready-made art" after displaying a urinal at a gallery in 1917, many viewers have found that aesthetic flustering and abrasive. Yet the ready-made art tradition lives on.

Williams once went all the way to Atlanta to see an exhibit that depicted the horror of lynchings. She likes art. But she is skeptical about this show.

"I can't see the point of that," she said, "Some art you just can't understand."

The bench at the bus stop seemed to be the only place that shoppers would stop and chat. I stayed. A bus came. Went. About 15 minutes later Clement G. Slattery, 54, sat down next to me. He lived in South Carolina for many years and was ready to talk.

"I'd go to see if there was anyone stupid enough to buy them," he said, referring to Wal-Mart objects hiked in price by Freyer.

Slattery came to Syracuse after losing a manufacturing job in packaging. So we talked about what packaging was all about. He thought a classy thing like a gallery could make people open wallets.

"The flashier the package, the more likely people will pay more for it," said Slattery, "It all goes back to touching those buttons in the brain."

Right. The exhibit isn't about objects at all; it is about people's relationship to money.

Imagine two women in an elevator have the same handbag.

"Oh, did you buy that at Wal-Mart?" asks the first woman, who paid \$9.88 for the bag.

"It's a Wal-Mart bag but I bought it at the Everson Museum," says the second woman, who paid \$19.76 to one up her peer.

I asked another woman, smoking on the other end of the bench, what she thought.

"I can't talk to you," she said. "I work here. You shouldn't even be here. I'm pretending not to notice."

The show also shines a light on a controversial discount seller. Wal-Mart has come under criticism in recent years for alleged unfair labor practices and for bankrupting small businesses across the country through underpricing. As a result the corporation is touchy about public relations. Freyer, the artist, is not unaware of the contro-

versy and plans to give the profit from the exhibit to the Ithaca based Wal-Mart Living Wage Campaign, which advocates decent wages for employees.

The longer I sat on that bench in front of Wal-Mart, the more Freyer's Wal-Mart art became clear, as if I were looking through a \$40 dollar pair of wide angle binoculars. The art I like most is a respite from the world of money. But if money becomes the subject of art, Freyer might show our relationship to greenbacks better than paintings of dollar bills ever could.

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Can I Get a Price Check on that?

Everson exhibit features "art" found at Wal-Mart

by HANSA BERGWALL

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