

# M + B

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### Review: 'Image Object' Looks at the Relationship Between the Virtual and the Physical

By Ken Johnson  
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When contemporary art ventures into the public realm, outside the protective walls of galleries and museums, the question arises, "Who is this for?" Its potential audience is no longer viewers who are already interested; now it includes passers-by of many dispositions, not all of whom have the time or the inclination to reflect on the aesthetics and knotty ideas that artworks may put in their paths.

Few of the works in "Image Object," a show of conceptually complicated and visually unprepossessing sculptures at City Hall Park in Manhattan, are likely to stop busy pedestrians in their tracks. But for those who aren't rushed and are given to philosophical rumination, they can be rewarding to ponder. Weather permitting, this beautiful little park is an excellent place for that.

A Public Art Fund production organized by the fund's associate curator, Andria Hickey, the exhibition presents sculptures by seven artists who have all exhibited internationally. It's meant to address a particular condition of modern life: On the one hand, technologically mediated



"New Age Demanded" by Jon Rafman.  
Credit Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

imagery constantly impinges on us from every direction; on the other, images are perpetually being turned into real things, like fancy cars and tall buildings. The exhibition's introductory text panel explains, "As images are rendered into objects, and objects are circulated as images, the boundaries between the physical and the virtual are blurred, challenging us to rethink how we see the world around us."

The two-way relationship between image and object is most clearly illustrated in works by Jon Rafman and Alice Channer. Mr. Rafman's piece, "New Age Demanded," features two blobby shapes in white marble vaguely resembling sculptures by Henry Moore. Mr. Rafman made them by distorting a digital photograph of a Greco-Roman bust and rendering the resulting images in stone, using computerized machinery.

Ms. Channer went through a similar sequence of converting object to image and image to object to create "Rockfall," a set of sculptures mimicking jagged rocks. She began by taking photographs of small chunks of concrete rubble, which she then digitally altered. Those images were turned into three-dimensional molds by computerized machines, and the final works, much larger than the original objects, were cast in concrete, aluminum and Cor-Ten steel.

Like Mr. Rafman's works, Ms. Channer's sculptures are both objects and images. So what's the difference between an image and an object? For the purposes at hand, an object is a unique, physical thing. An image is a nonmaterial pattern that can be physically incarnated or reproduced in multiple ways. Most artworks, it can be argued, are fusions of imagery and objecthood.

Because images are constrained only by the limits of imagination — unlike objects, which must obey the laws of physics — they often idealize what they represent, asserting social and political meanings. Works by Hank Willis Thomas and Amanda Ross-Ho exemplify this.

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Mr. Thomas is known for Pop-Conceptual works about black identity and racism. His contribution here, "Liberty," features the cast-bronze arm of an athlete spinning a basketball on his index finger. Resembling a fragment of an ancient Greek sculpture, it's mounted on a truncated pyramid, and the whole assemblage is coated in candy-purple auto body paint.

According to the exhibition label, Mr. Thomas took the image from a 1986 photograph of a Harlem Globetrotter with the Statue of Liberty in the background. Considering that a few black athletes are among the most celebrated people in the world, while many black people feel that they are still struggling for equality and liberation, Mr. Thomas's ostensibly triumphal sculpture exudes an unsettling ambiguity.

Ms. Ross-Ho's monumental sculpture "The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things (Facial Recognition)" has a female mannequin head, much larger than life, flanked by a cube and a sphere; all three elements are painted gray and elevated on a big oblong pedestal.

Ms. Ross-Ho took the image from an old instructional book on photography. Her rendering of it plays with implied feminist skepticism about the fantasy of the perfect woman. A glowing green neon rectangle framing the mannequin's face adds a tangential complication by referring to facial recognition software, which invites another question: Can machines "see" the way humans do? Doesn't seeing require consciousness? But that's a line of inquiry for another exhibition.

Ideological skepticism also animates Timur Si-Qin's "Monument to Exaptation," three tall, sleek panels with the word "Peace" spelled in neat white letters on each panel's sides under a round symbol resembling a yin-yang sign. The panels look as if they were produced for corporate advertising.

The titular word "exaptation" is crucial. It refers to an evolutionary trait that comes to serve a different purpose from its original function. Mr. Si-Qin's sculpture alludes to how the once-radical style of Minimalist abstraction is often co-opted to create deceptive images of moral universality for capitalist enterprises.

As for the remaining works, Lothar Hempel's suffers from obviousness, and Artie Vierkant's from obscurity. Raised on a tall pole, Mr. Hempel's piece "Frozen" is an enlarged cutout of a 1970s photograph of a woman skateboarding, which he lifted from the web. Attached to it is a glowing, revolving rainbow-colored pinwheel, the familiar cursor on Apple computers signifying "Wait." The assemblage comments simplistically on the Internet's bewildering compression of time, memory and history.

Mr. Vierkant's sculpture is an abstract construction of geometric metal planes partly painted in hard-edged sections of color. One of a series of works called "Image Objects" (the source of the exhibition's title), it's the product of a self-cannibalizing process by which Mr. Vierkant turns digital images of his finished works into new pieces.

That procedure and its import aren't readily evident in the present sculpture. Nevertheless, determined philosophical viewers might extract from it illuminating ideas about creative thinking in today's increasingly digitized and mechanized world.