

# WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

Wayne Zebzda at Show N Tell, San Francisco, April 21 - May 20, 1989.

Reviewed by Glen Helfand

Every aspect of American life is becoming tougher and uglier. The chasm between the haves and have-nots is ever widening. Correspondingly, most artistic concerns seem indifferent to real life issues. On a recent urban bus ride, I found myself in the ludicrous position of trying to read an essay by an *au courant* French art theorist while I overheard drunken ex-cons slurringly boast about stabbing their cell mates, teenage mothers mistreating their obviously unwanted children, and runaways proudly gossiping about friends with AIDS. Compared to these horrible actualities, the whole prospect of art seems downright inane. Sure, these issues are occasionally addressed in grisly documentary photo shows at gloomy, politically correct galleries, but these exhibitions are frequently artificial, as the viewer still doesn't interact with or experience an alternative "lifestyle."

Wayne Zebzda,  
*Cancrusher (Gold Coins)*,  
1989, mixed media.



This split between aesthetics and the horrors of everyday life also applies to artistic production. Out of economic necessity, most artists work in cheap studios located in seedy parts of town and exhibit their art in pristine, moneyed white cubes. This dichotomy, however, is rarely acknowledged in the work, especially since the artist's studio is now complexly linked to the gentrification of those decayed neighborhoods. Seen from a broader, mediated level, the myth of the starving artist has been totally reworked into one of alluring celebrity and glamour.

Functioning almost as a bracing relief from the insularity of the art world, sculptor

Wayne Zebzda's recent work at Show N Tell sets artiness on a collision course with the reality of hard-drinkin', poverty-stricken street culture. The interrelated pieces reflect that the artist lives and works in a studio in the heart of San Francisco's skid row. With this show, he brings the down-and-out lifestyle to the hip, educated habitués of an inherently upscale gallery setting. The result is a highly engaging slap of reality.

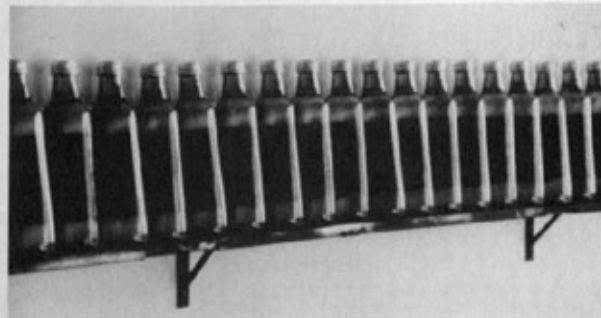
In his presentation, Zebzda makes the world of the homeless seem almost attractive. The show is made up of approximately fifteen pieces that form a microcosm of a skid row community that could easily be called "Wino Village." Zebzda makes use of "indigenous objects" that relate to that lifestyle; transforming bottles of *Night Train* and *Thunderbird*, beer cans, rusty scrap metal and other industrial materials into tools, cookware, clothing and functional contraptions. *G & Q Port*, for example, finds a new use as a painting medium.

Oddly enough, there is something pleasingly industrious in Zebzda's use of refuse materials that is similar to making huts out of palm trees and coconuts on a desert island -- only this version is far less picturesque. In the center of the room is *Cancrusher*, a cylindrical metal weight, suspended from a rope and pulley, that can be used to smash beer cans into glittery gold disks. The piece turns recycling into a satisfying ritual that is both an act of self-sufficiency and environmental responsibility. At the show's opening reception, the large crowd of people who had easily been seduced into consuming a large quantity of alcohol, gleefully swung from the ropes as they crushed their cans of beer. As though Zebzda had perversely taken control of the crowd, this rowdy activity quickly accelerated beer consumption.

While there is an engaging quality to this body of work, there are unmistakable references to the undesirable aspects of this lifestyle. The humorous, interactive pieces misleadingly attract the viewer and then raise the burdensome, uncomfortable issues surrounding homelessness. A visual pun, *Begging Machine* is an ingenious, streamlined way to appeal for change, but its mechanical quality is highly dehumanizing. The continuous thrust of a tin can turns the beggar into a machine entrenched in an end-

less process of solicitation. Similarly, *For a Naked Man*, an updated, industrialized version of the classic barrel-as-garment for the penniless, is an ingenious and funny work of sculpture, but it's also an uncomfortable and shameful article of clothing.

The most provocative work in the show however, is the most basic. *99 Bottles on the Wall on the Wall* is precisely that: a weathered metal shelf lined with ninety-nine bottles of Thunderbird. The labels are turned away from us, giving the piece a surprisingly elegant visual appeal. Zebzda audaciously places little taster cups nearby so viewers can sample this sticky-sweet beverage.



This gesture is a mocking smack-in-the-face of the wine snob; though at least twenty-eight of the bottles had been consumed during the course of the show. On a more profound level, this is also a controlled confrontation of cultures: we have now ingested the same liquid that provides solace to many homeless individu-

als. The experience becomes even more provocative in the advent of recent campaigns to control the sales of fortified wines in order to clean up the streets.

From an artistic standpoint, *99 Bottles* also brings up a number of issues and references. The piece resembles the work of artists like Haim Steinbach, whose use of shelved appropriated products explores issues of art and consumption, but here the bottles manage to remain utilitarian, like an air raid shelter for a serious drinker. But perhaps more pointedly, the piece tears a hole in the romantic notion of artists as drinkers, specifically Tom Marioni's assertion that "Drinking beer with friends is the highest form of art." Zebzda points out the true artlessness of the activity, as well as the economic realities: Marioni's artistic liquor cabinet is lined with bottles of the "gourmet" *Anchor Steam* beer while Zebzda's is stocked with the street-priced *Thunderbird* and *Miller Genuine Draft*.

As a whole, this show pushes art into a realistic realm where the artist, the downtrodden drunk, and the art-going public are all subject to the same realities of alcoholism and the possibility of slipping into an abyss of poverty. Though it may leave you with a sobering hangover, Zebzda's work is as enticing and satisfying as a good, cold beer.

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