



**Bathtub or mattress, it's all art to Jessica Stockholder**

By Lori Waxman

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"Assist 1," is part of "Jessica Stockholder: Door Hinges" and "Assisted: Curated by Jessica Stockholder" running through Jan. 16 at Kavi Gupta Gallery.  
(Evan Jenkins)

Everything Jessica Stockholder touches turns to art.

Over the past three decades this has included worn-out couches, an urban intersection, refrigerator doors, a scissors lift, fresh oranges and lemons, a compact car, a mattress, a streetlight, a bathtub, a full-size freezer chest, half-a-dozen wooden dressers and a city park.

Does Stockholder, who was born in Seattle in 1959 and has since 2012 chaired the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, have a contemporary version of the Midas touch? Her prolificness in recent years suggests this might be more than just a rhetorical question. It sometimes seems that Stockholder turns out an impressive new installation every month. Recently she floated a cumulonimbus of clear plastic bins at the EXPO Chicago art fair, dangled a pie slice of shopping baskets above diners at chic restaurant mk, exploded the lobby of the Smart Museum of Art and filled Kavi Gupta Gallery's Elizabeth Street warehouse with a dozen new sculptures and an installation so

massive it stretched around a corner, through the ceiling, into the upstairs and right outside. And that's just what she's done in Chicago this autumn.

Gold is so passe, after all. Surely King Midas, if he were presently alive and not just the stuff of Greek myth, would ask Dionysus for the power to transform consumer goods, tools and infrastructure into something more exuberant, more bizarre, less functional and way more valuable. That would be worth more than gold these days. It is to Stockholder and her fans, myself among them.

Most of us spend enough time doing with our cars and tubs and fridges exactly what it is we're supposed to do with them, without it ever occurring to us that they might be good for other purposes. A silver Smart car, for instance, transports up to two people and a trunkful of groceries around town with minimal environmental impact. Parked in Kavi Gupta, encircled with heavy-duty yellow webbing, some felt and a ratchet clamp, it also serves as a sturdy pedestal for a sculptural quartet of joined metal: curvy red, corrugated gray, mesh blue and perforated dusty rose. Without the car, the sculpture would fall down. With the sculpture, the car can't drive. Win-win?

The situation of an upright piano and a heavy metal desk, which hold up equally precarious painted and patterned constructions nearby, differ in that they remain playable and workable, in addition to taking on the new supporting role that Stockholder has invented for them. She calls them "Assists" — not the car et al., but the flamboyant sculptures and their straps — which is funny, because it ought to be the other way around. It's smart, too, because being this way round makes it clear that it's those eminently functional heavy objects that are being assisted here, in pursuit of a greater existence: as a base for an artwork.

"Assist 3," clipped to the piano, does double duty, itself acting as a shelf for the cut-up Styrofoam cup that a bored musician must have left behind. Except it isn't: "Cup" is a painted and cast bronze made by Tony Tasset in 2013. There's a sustained interest here in the things that hold art up and away from terra firma. They're one way to recognize "Cup" as art, when it otherwise looks so much like a disposable drinking container. On the gallery's second level, Stockholder has curated a bang-up group show of artists whose work she admires, much of which depends on some kind of prop: Michael Queensland's caged breakfast cereals ranged on plastic ventilated storage shelving, Kay Rosen's tautological text typed on the wall, Polly Apfelbaum's shimmery graffitied fabrics lying limp on the floor, Anthony Caro's elegant mashup of shiny steel teetering over the edge of a column. Interspersed among them are five smallish pieces by Stockholder that seem like a postmodern riff on Brancusi's shifty game of base, pedestal and sculpture, only instead of marble and limestone she uses cut-up furniture, Styrofoam and a baffling assortment of rainbow ice trays, funnels, rope, hair dryer parts and other less easily identified hardware-store purchases.

How does it all work together? A Stockholder sculpture or installation can be surprisingly unfathomable in its logic. Bonkers, actually. Why this thing and not that? Why here and not there? Why stop, why continue? There's a good deal of pleasure to be had in this

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bewilderment. In fact, Stockholder shines when she overdoes it. The few understated sculptures at Kavi Gupta — a stool-and-driveway-mirror combo, some jazzy metal shapes — fall flat.

No risk of that at the Smart, where "Rose's Inclination" climbs partway up the lobby's arched ceiling, putters to a stop, then pours back down, across the floor, up the windows and out into the courtyard, where it stains the mulch red and the pavement yellow. The grass remains untouched, maybe because it's already colorful enough. In the center, a jumbo dream catcher made of branches strung with neon electrical cords incorporates visitors' reveries.

Mine included: Are the dozen mismatched light fixtures protruding from the lobby's luridly sunset interior wall somehow connected to the dozen more that stick out from high up the luridly sunset entry wall at Kavi Gupta? Because they sure look alike. And Stockholder seems immune to physics and geography when she's wielding paint rollers, hot carpeting, Menards sale items and a truckload of chutzpah. What's a distance of 9 miles, 48 minutes on the CTA and one river when you're Jessica Stockholder? It's art.