



frieze

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Walking into Katarina Burin's solo exhibition, 'Pre-arranged Comfort', was like entering a design showroom. Home furnishings surrounded by large geometric swaths of colour welcomed the visitor, but the environment soon revealed itself to be constructed of two-dimensional objects and lightweight materials. An intricate model of a Slovakian mountain chalet near the entrance served as a reference point for sets, drawings and wall pieces around the gallery. Eastern European allusions, Modernist architecture and design, and the historical figure of Fran P. Hosken came together in an installation that blended the personal and the generic, the original and the reproduction.

Burin was born in Slovakia and emigrated as a child to Canada, then eventually the US, an experience that has influenced her subject matter. Her 2012 exhibition at Ratio 3 revolved around a fictitious Czech Modernist architect named Petra Andrejova-Molnar, drawing attention to the lack of women in the field during that period. While, for that show, Burin fabricated a specific narrative around Andrejova-Molnar, this new body of work was more ambiguous and open-ended.

Hosken, whose archive is at Harvard University, Massachusetts, where Burin is a lecturer, was born in Austria in 1920 and relocated to the US in 1938. One of the first women to receive a degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, she became a

feminist, journalist, social activist and architectural photographer, as well as a furniture and jewellery designer. In four small, black and white photos reprinted from negatives in Harvard's archive (*Hosken Documentation Photographs - Jewelry*, 2014), Hosken stands on the porch of a shingled house, fashionable and imposing in a draped ankle-length black coat and heels. Marketing images of Hosken's design work served as the model for nesting tables constructed by Burin (*Hosken- 4 Small Stacking Tables*, 2014). Lacquered tables nearby shared a similar aesthetic but were, in fact, period originals. With this furniture, Burin questioned the distinction between collectibles and reproductions. Her 2014 tables are just as visually appealing as the 1950s furniture, although Hosken's official stamp imbues the earlier tables with a sense of history that is not insignificant.

Juxtaposed with materials relating to Hosken were references to Slovakia. In the front area of the gallery, a round carved-wooden emblem (*Exterior Sign- Vysoke Tatry*, 2014) hung next to a graphite drawing of a compact mid-century modern country home (*Studio Efficiency for the Country Side*, 2012). Cut-out shapes of a flower, snowflakes and a mountain appeared alongside the words Vysoke Tatry ('High Mountains') to create an advertising logo for an idyllic resort town or tourist business. Further into the exhibition, a full-

scale domestic scene by a fireplace suggested a mountain getaway (*Slovakian Mountain Chalet*, 2014) and, in the back room, a looming magnified image of fur and a sign reading *Zijeme* lent a tactility to the tableau (*Zijeme Steel Exterior Sign*, 2014). *Zijeme*, which translates loosely as 'we live', operated here as a trite sentiment meant to conjure warm feelings. These and other objects in the exhibition were reminiscent of items one might see in a trendy chain store such as Urban Outfitters, their meanings unsure, yet nevertheless coveted. This amalgamation of falsely personal items acted as a critique of the motives behind Modernist design -from its original utopian aspirations to its present-day commercial role.

Drawn from the Letraset lexicon and clip art, life-size objects in the gallery both evoked a specific moment in the history of architecture and design, and connected to the artist's investigation of the generic. A black and white tree (*Letraset Pine Tree for the Chalet*, 2014) and the outlines of people leaning against the wall (*Letraset Man to Scale and Letraset Woman to Scale*, both 2014), were printed on MDF and were identical to much smaller Letraset icons in *PA-Molnar. Second project for studio efficiency for the G.C.A. In the countryside, 1938-39* (2012), an architectural rendering at the beginning of the exhibition. By bringing these from the page into the gallery, Burin drew attention to a movement toward standardization in the design world begun in 1959, the year Letraset was founded.

Without resorting to didacticism, Burin has been advocating for the acknowledgement of women in the development of design for several years and, by weaving together elements of fact and fiction, this installation seems to suggest that her own rewriting of history is perhaps more accurate than the factual record itself. The danger of historical documentation, as Walter Benjamin warned, is the inherent subjectivity of a view of the past that is promoted by the ruling class but relies on the anonymous work of their contemporaries. By mining Hosken's archive and mixing it with her own markers of the mid-century Modernist era, Burin generated a new and perhaps more genuine depiction of history.

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