

Art in America

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TERRY O'SHEA AT CARDWELL JIMMERSON

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer



Terry O'Shea: Untitled, 1968
Cast resin, 2 ½ inches long;
at Cardwell Jimmerson

When Terry O'Shea won the prestigious New Talent Award bestowed by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1966, no one from the institution followed up on the prize's attendant stipulation that the promising young artist donate a work to the museum's collection. So four years later, on May 28, 1970, O'Shea took matters into his own hands, surreptitiously lobbing one of his pristinely polished, transparent resin wedge sculptures into the La Brea tar pits adjacent to the museum. The sculpture sank into the pit's viscous blackness, disappearing from view but also securing itself in the museum's grounds for the foreseeable future. Ricocheting off similarly elusive conceptual strategies in the air at the time (such as Robert Barry's release of gases into the atmosphere for his better-known "Inert Gas Series" of the prior year), O'Shea's devious and

provocative gesture fascinates with the irresistibility of a riddle: If a museum unwittingly receives a work and fails to notice, is the work part of its collection? What exactly are the bounds of a museum collection, that historicizing enterprise, and how can a thing enter it?

A piece consisting of a notarized letter signed by two witnesses to O'Shea's 1970 act, alongside a photo of the sculpture in question, appeared just inside the entrance of "Actual Size", an excellent presentation of O'Shea's resin works from between 1968 and 1978 curated by his friend and fellow artist Doug Edge. Such critical irreverence ran as an undercurrent through the rest of the posthumous exhibition (O'Shea died in 2002). Six striated capsules only a couple inches long and composed of brightly colored layers of resin allude to the transformative potential of mind-altering drugs while also calling for art to be consumed on a deep, internal level, ingested and absorbed through the body. Or perhaps, addressing history and futurity as he did that night at the tar pits, O'Shea's compact pellets also function as miniature time capsules, attesting to the process of their incremental material accretion.

Accumulated strata likewise make up his beautiful series of thick translucent slabs of resin. Seen from the above, lying flat on their pedestals, the slabs look like amber-tinted solids with various stains and quasi-fungal blooms of pigment suspended in their depths. But viewed from the side, they fracture prismatically into an orderly stack of vibrant turquoise, peach, tangerine, violet and green. Hefty wall-mounted panels of opaque black resin engulf curling shards of colored plastic in another series that more explicitly evokes the oozing sludge of the La Brea Tar Pits, which we now know contains some very good art in addition to fossilized woolly mammoth remains. There is a slick, synthetic archeology at work throughout O'Shea's plastics. It serves as a vital link between the employment of postwar materials like resin by Finish Fetish and Light and Space artists and the contemporaneous attempts to dematerialize the art object through Land art, institutional critique and Conceptual art.