

ABOVE:
Bacchanal, 2006
C-print in two parts
30 3/4 x 39 inches each

OVER:
Trap House, 2007
Banker's Boxes, fluorescent lights, wood,
wiring, and spraypaint
60 x 60 x 65 inches

FRONT:
*Ring Flash Portrait with
\$6 Champagne-wrapping
Gold Teeth*, 2006
C-print
30 7/8 x 25 inches



COLBY BIRD

CAPITALIZATION

With the flight of industrial manufacturing from Detroit in the 1980s, a novel form of corporatism arose in its stead: the highly structured production and street level distribution of crack cocaine. A steady migration of labor from the rural South had turned the city into the cradle of Fordist capitalism in postwar America. Yet the high rate of employment that had lured large numbers northward to the manufacturing capital—sustained by automobile giants Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors—and the rising middle class that resulted was largely collapsing by the late 1970s. Decentralization, the oil crisis, foreign competition, and the assault of finance capitalism were largely destabilizing the very model of industrialization itself, and in Detroit it was soon to be amended by a complex subeconomy that would apply the basic tenets of corporate business to the illicit drug trade.

In the economic nadir of this one-time engine of American capitalism, crack-cocaine cartels began to be run along the lines of Fortune 500 companies, stepping into a socioeconomic void created by disinvestment by employing hundreds of people within a complex system of bureaucratic reporting and promotional structure, franchising, and diversification. The corporate drug trade was thus perhaps the inevitable if nefarious side of free-market competition and the spurious Thatcherism of private enterprise, itself resulting in the role of finance capital and corporate raiding in the demise of industrialized labor.

Yet what is perhaps most fascinating about this corporatist phenomenon is the symbolic economy it entrained, largely revolving around the consumption of markers of privilege, wealth and prestige. The accumulation of vast amounts of illegal liquid capital in otherwise blighted inner city neighborhoods was readily, and perhaps necessarily applied to a consumed form of self-realization tied to the very limits of criminal capital. This near-necessity of vast consumption mirrored forms of luxury associated with finance capitalism by default (in having large amounts of capital that needed to be moved and thus conspicuously spent on the costliest goods). Such is the burden of liquidity and the limits of illegal capital, of holding vast amounts of cash that cannot be readily laundered and thus not easily moved beyond individualized forms of hyper-consumption, and with it, a resulting over-inflated iconography. There is perhaps no better indication of this trope than the appropriated mythology of Donald Trump in the 1980s, his name largely a metonym for millionaire decadence despite his relatively middle-brow version of luxury.

Simultaneously, a curious form of perceived authenticity arises from the same inner city neighborhoods decimated by the structural effects of disinvestment: urban or hip-hop culture. This is in turn appropriated by middle-class America, a social class largely afflicted by the same economic pattern of deindustrialization, as a distinct form of iconography—as a type of *symbolic* capital. The result is a dialectical game of appropriated iconography, hyper-consumption and symbolic coding.

It is this confounding mixture of individualized capitalist aspiration, ersatz opulence, perceived authenticity, and the obsession with consumptive iconography that gives the work of Colby Bird its distinct resonance. His sculptural material is often the literal object matter that circulates to facilitate the street-hustle variety of liberalism; while his photography-based work looks to the seemingly detached iconography that circulates under the category of middle-class desire known as 'urban culture'—though in fact a series of coded though malleable signs.

João Ribas

What underscores Bird's work is an acute sense of just how this iconography functions as a collective set of references and social goals, reflecting the symbolic side of economic rationalism. In what amounts to a genealogy of middle-class aspiration, his work both reflects and celebrates the odd instances where capital doesn't function quite so consistently as we might think: in the symbolic economy intrinsic to the drug trade as well as the art object, where cultural and social capital intersects with small business ideology and authenticity is played out through a kind of consumptive theatricality.

Perhaps the clearest instance of the former is seen in the 'banker's boxes' of *Trap House*, 2007, the ideology of private enterprise woven through the capitalization of cocaine, a 'trap house' being where the drug is cut and packaged. Bird's logic is to link two forms of aspiration towards an ever-declining version of the American dream, materially embodied in mass-produced boxes. The sculptural logic of the work thus follows the same necessity that gave rise to the prepackaged form of individual enterprise the material represents in the first place: tools that can supposedly facilitate the accumulation of wealth while also reflecting the desire for this wealth itself. *Trap House* thus becomes about the earnestness of individual enterprise and the pathological consumption of normative social goals.

To this logic, as is often the case in his work, Bird adds the language of minimalist sculpture as yet another form of over-inflated iconography, linking its own codified forms to the symbolic economy of drug culture, frat-parties and middle-brow appurtenances. The implicit theatricality of minimalism, and as well its inherent masculinity, finds a mirror precisely in the scenography of party culture, in the rhetorical staging of decadence or significance for seemingly no other purpose. The eccentric monumentality of *Waterford*, 2006-2007, points to nothing beyond the idea of opulence itself, in the equivalence of the eponymous crystal to the vanity fixtures and stereo speaker. Bird seems to hint that this might be nature of the art object itself as it strives for some form of authenticity akin to that longed for in individualized consumption. Bird's discrete sculptural objects function through material reference rather than quotation, cobbled as they are from the actual impedimenta of middle-class desire for forms of luxury beyond necessity.

Yet Bird is also a deft mimic of the *representations* of such commodified desire. His photographic practice is nearly self-effacing in its stylization. The images appear ambiguously generic in their duplication, through specific technical and aesthetic conventions, of a set of perceived tropes that over-determine their meaning: the overt connotations of ring flash and gold teeth (*Ring Flash Portrait with \$6 Champagne-wrapping Gold Teeth*, 2006); the dramaturgy of photographic tableaux or even what appear to be found, and thus 'authentic', images of generic decadence (*Bacchanal*, 2006).

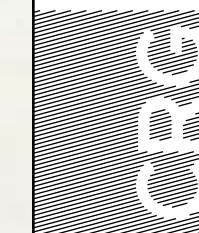
Woven through these photographs is a similar sense of cultural marking that defines his sculptural work. Both aspects of Bird's practice evince how consumptive iconography acts within a symbolic economy in which distinctions of wealth and status become the basis for social judgment—and perhaps even the last vestige of class antagonism in the neoliberal utopia of a free market.



28, 2006
Fluorescent lights, electrical wiring,
dropped office ceiling, gold spraypaint
108 x 108 x 144 inches

OVER:
Theatre, 2007
C-print
49 x 36 inches

Waterford, 2006-2007
Wood Laminate Shelving, Vanity Lights, Wine
Glasses, Vase, Aiwa Bookshelf Speaker, Wiring
45 x 48 x 48 inches



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