

HYPERALLERGIC

Three Artists Blur the Line Between Art and Play

Sarah Rose Sharp

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RaRoCo's yard party at Simone DeSousa (all photos by author for Hyperallergic)

DETROIT — It's an art world convention for conceptual art to be disruptive, or at least leave the viewer feeling unsettled, somewhat uncomfortable. An entirely separate, but no less pervasive, convention places a great deal of importance on the role of the solo show in the career of an artist. Currently on display at Simone DeSousa Gallery, [RaRoCo](#) is an amalgam of the first names of the three participating artists — [Rachel Reynolds Z](#), [Robert Zahorsky](#), and [Corrie Baldauf](#) — and it outright rejects both of these basic precepts.

Instead, the artists decided to have a yard party.

"Taking time to celebrate is important," reads the gallery guide accompanying the display of individual and collaborative works that populate the main gallery, the secondary and newly-minted [EDITION](#) space, and the sidewalk courtyard connecting the two. "The value of this may reveal itself in the process of doing the work to schedule and prepare for a yard party or festival."

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It was, indeed, a festival atmosphere at the opening, with many of the same fixtures as seasonal Midwestern gatherings no doubt taking place in backyards across the metropolitan area: chilled beverages, a delightfully smooth rocking glider, children at play, kitschy lawn ornaments, and a beanbag-tossing game that is known vernacularly as either “Bags” or, more crassly (and hilariously), “Cornhole .”



RaRoCo, “Trying to Achieve Balance between Work & Play” (2016), two cornhole boards, paint, beanbags, buckets

This is arguably one of the most rigorously prepared yard parties the region has ever known. In addition to their individual practices, the artists’ collaborative efforts have been ongoing for the better part of a year, focused most famously on the mass creation of the show’s central mascot: the potato. RaRoCo created dozens upon dozens of relief-cast potatoes, experimenting endlessly with different substrates and finishes. The final works range from bags of gold-leafed potatoes for individual sale in the EDITION space to a shelf of “Awareness Potatoes,” set upright on flat, severed bottoms, each bearing a matching

ribbon celebrating its individual and unnamed tuberous cause (although a black ribbon with white polka dots was a repeating motif of the show, accompanied by the statement, "Support the Arts!"). Further collaborative works include potatoes mounted trophy-style onto wooden backing boards, a potato mounted to a cut-out of Idaho (titled "Homeland"), and potatoes gathered into an uncomfortable klatsch at the bottom of a crushed shopping cart, topped with an American flag. Like the yard party, the potato is a highly egalitarian object — one to which most people have access. Much like the RaRoCo yard party, all can potentially feel welcomed by a potato.



RaRoCo, "Awareness Potatoes" (2016), lik-wood, polyoptic, enamel, acrylic, laquer, ribbon



RaRoCo, "Cart" (detail view), in the foreground, Robert Zahorsky's "Take it Easy" (installation view) in the background

But the fun does not stop at potatoes. The artist Zahorsky's most significant individual contribution to the show is "Take it Easy," a glider whose materials include American steel tubing and Swiss bearings. The piece is highly engineered for an immensely smooth ride, and in Baldauf's words, "It is about creating something that is meant to handle you [the viewer]." "You're My Favorite," a custom pillow, takes a seat on the glider's bench.

Another collaborative piece, "See Yourself as Enlightened," which positions a trio of neon halos at different heights, leads to both intentional and inadvertent interactions with gallery visitors. Dominating the back wall of the gallery is a rendering of the "Spirit of Detroit" statue — one of the city's most iconic public works, installed in 1955, depicting a giant bronze-cast figure holding a small gilt-bronze family in one hand, and a gilt-bronze sphere (meant to symbolize God) in the other. The image is rendered in acrylic paint on a flat wooden surface with its face cut-out — a common attraction of boardwalk-style amusement parks and fairs, the technical term for which is a "comic foreground." Comedy predictably ensued, with visitors invariably enticed to pose with their face inside the "Spirit of Detroit" replica.



RaRoCo, "See Yourself Enlightened" (2016), neon, mirror



RaRoCo, "Spirit of Detroit, One Size Fits All" (2016), acrylic, wood, ribbon

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“I was extremely skeptical about having the ‘Spirit of Detroit’ in our show, because I don’t feel like I am the ‘spirit of Detroit,’ nor do I want to take on that role,” said Baldauf. However, Reynolds’s enthusiasm, as the born-and-bred metro Detroiter of the bunch, carried the idea. It is a disarmingly funny piece, but one with a bit of bite; after decades of disinterest and neglect, it has suddenly become highly fashionable to affiliate oneself with the spirit of city.

Art that invites the viewer to take a seat, pose for a picture, or toss a few beanbags also raises questions of where the art stops and the party begins. Much like any place that hosts a yard party, some things are fair game, and others are off-limits. The potatoes, despite their enticing enamel veneers, seem to be only for looking. Much debate ensued among party guests concerning the yard decorations — whether they were art or ambiance; for example, the three plastic blow-mold geese, each wearing a T-shirt labeled Ra, Ro, and Co, respectively, and standing guard over a shiny, yellow potato apiece. The beanbags — fashioned from American flag fabric — are clearly for tossing (and at the opening, dominated for the better part of an hour by an extremely competitive 10-year-old gallery patron), but the cornhole boards for the piece “Trying to Achieve Balance between Work & Play” exhort players to sink the beanbag in the first “O” of the rather ominous statement, “You Reap What You Sow.”

Pulling away from the crowd, I found myself outside the courtyard, now on the street, where Baldauf’s truck was pulled up and a tailgate party was in progress, with grapefruit La Croix chilling in a container made from the same drainage pipe as one of the potato displays. Was I still at the show? Were we dealing with art, or simply refreshments? Despite the unusual trappings and the welcoming atmosphere, I suspected that RaRoCo had in fact succeeded at presenting some ideas that were a little bit disruptive, after all.



'RaRoCo' at Simone DeSousa Gallery, installation view / View of 'RaRoCo' from Simone DeSousa Gallery's exterior