The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art is proud to present *life in general* (Brook, Rose, Cooper, and Shepherd Le Van) and their installation North American Legacies. To make art, and aspire to exhibiting it in a public forum requires relinquishing one's work to various constitutes—curator, collector, critic, museum educator, museum visitor. Each of these aspects explores different avenues of interpreting the intended and implied meaning of artworks, and what value they might have as cultural artifacts. In North American Legacies, *life in general* opens the museum arena up to a fresh dialogue of the artist/object/viewer relationship, as if constructing a three act play with inanimate objects as the props for the characters to emote around.

Like any play, a first response to experiencing North American Legacies might be strictly a visual interpretation and the questions—what is this object and what does it mean in relationship to what is going on in the gallery space? However the second response solicits a more curious intellectual line of questioning—why are these pieces broken and reassembled, what is the meaning of waffle iron covered in clay and Native American iconography, or why are these pieces displayed on shelves that look like a storage room? Thus, the artists query our constructs of interpretation and the collective processes that bring artworks to bear in any public forum.

Through the installation of these artifacts in the context of storage room, *life in general* provokes further. A discussion arises about what happens when an object (any object) is elevated into the category of the museum collectible. Part of this act within the *life in general* play is about value systems in art presentation.

life in general also takes the narrative of ancient and modern into a myriad of directions. The viewer is taken, by the artist, the curator, the educator, into a space where they can assume the roles of archeologist, connoisseur, artist, sociologist, and critic. Each of these areas interface with the making and presentation of art and represents concentric models of humanity and communication. Thus, *life in general* exceeds the boundaries of form to entertain us with our own notations about art as a modest mode for seeing things. With this work we can participate in the making of history, what is written and how that constructs who we are.

Cydney Payton
Director/Curator

front cover Mickey Mouse Piggy Bank with Totungue Storage Jar
Hohokum Jar and Mimbres Snake Bowl Pattern, A.D. 900-1890

NORTH AMERICAN LEGACIES

life in general
(Brook, Rose, Cooper and Shepherd Le Van)

Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art
March 17 to May 21, 2000

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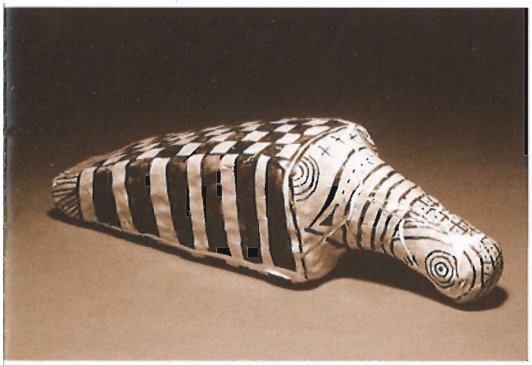
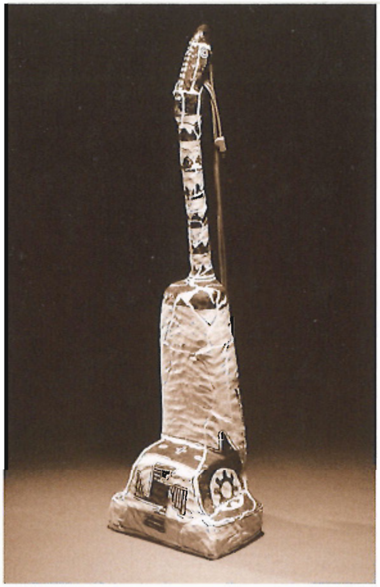
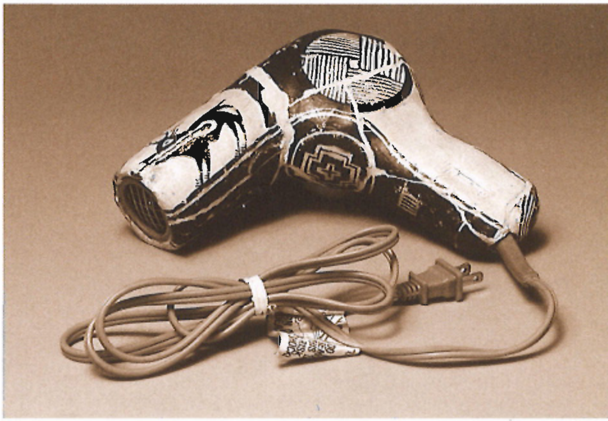






top left to right Black and Decker Dust Buster with Cebolleta-Tularosa Bird Effigy Jar Pattern, A.D. 1100-1225

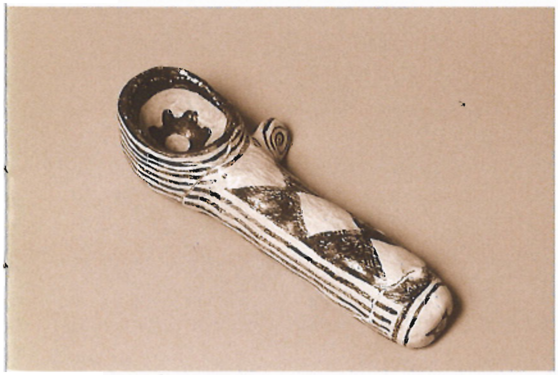
Hoover Floor-o-matic with Zia Dough Bowl, Hohokam Effigy Censor and Mimbres Bowl Patterns, A.D. 1951, 900-1100

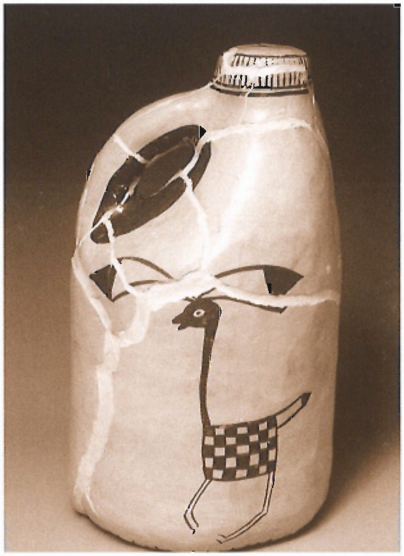
Conair High Energy 1250 Blow Drier with Zuni Jar Pattern, A.D. 1500

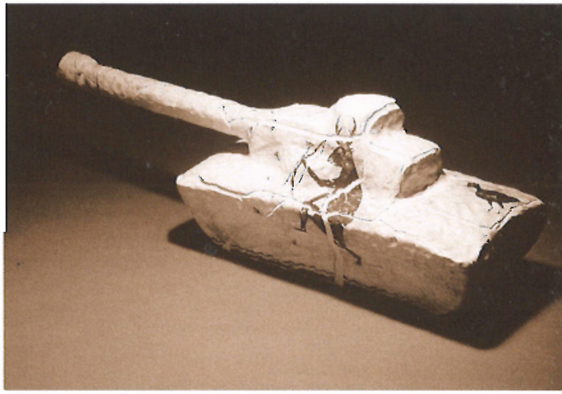
bottom left to right Ice Cream Scoop with Anasazi Dipper Pattern, A.D. 1200

Clorox Germicidal Bleach, 1 Gallon Jug with Mimbres Deer Bowl Pattern, A.D. 900

Desert Stormer Tank with Mimbres Quail Hunting Bowl Pattern, A.D. 1000-1150







Only when a quality fits into a living script does that quality even exist within an object. The gain and loss of features, even in objects that seem to undergo no change whatsoever, is one essential part of the life of things. — *Philip Fisher, Making and Effacing Art*

We live in a world of objects whose meaning derives in part from the context in which we experience them. A vacuum cleaner, say, might signify to its owner an onerous but necessary task, the affluence to buy an expensive brand, or a contested and unresolved division of labor in the household. Along with the function for which it was designed, it is embedded in a home and the life lived in that home. In another context, though, its main feature might be its association with someone who has died, found among her household effects and needing to be dispersed. At the estate sale, its value and attachment to a particular person's life begin to unravel, and it enters the great modern-day ocean of stuff: the mass-produced, short-lived, but still useful objects that circulate throughout our prosperous land.

If, however, a marauding civilization were to conquer ours and gather up the contents of houses and stores, the vacuum cleaner would become one of the things that stand for us at this moment in history. Collected along with other representational objects, it would be studied by alien historians and archaeologists, scrutinized and analyzed alongside war memorials, paintings, and the contents of medicine cabinets. Eventually, it might find its way to a museum, to be displayed as part of an exhibit on twentieth century life.

Museums are such an intrinsic part of modern life that we seldom question their presence or meaning. We have collectively designated them as the guardians of the best of any era or culture (the very best of which we label art), and rely on them both to salvage the past and to preserve the present. A code of values, expectations, and behaviors is associated with museums, and it frames our experience of the objects we encounter there; because they are there, we implicitly understand them to be important, either esthetically or historically. We expect museums to be different places than homes or stores, and—Duchamp notwithstanding—harbor an assumption that certain things belong there and others don't.

In North American Legacies we are drawn into the gallery by the familiarity of the objects, displayed on shelves like those in a storeroom. They look like the kinds of artifacts we expect to see in such a context: "primitive", collected with some purpose, and bearing helpful explanatory labels. As we draw closer, though, they become simultaneously more familiar and more strange. They turn out to be, not offering bowls and water jars, but crockpots, Dust Busters, and infant carseats. These everyday objects of our industrialized consumer culture are presented for our scrutiny as if they were, in fact, from a lost civilization. Clothed in a cracked and mended layer of clay, they have lost their sleek functionality or eye-catching familiarity and become comical, a bit clumsy, but also poignant. Further dislocation arises from the carefully painted surfaces, whose iconography is drawn from the pottery of the native people who once lived in this landscape. A superficial look at these images connects them immediately to native cultures, but closer inspection reveals that the drawing may also correspond to the object's function: a 5-gallon water jug decorated like an olla, for instance, or an electric curling iron with lightning patterns.

These objects are both lost and found. They are lost—unhooked—from their function and the scripts in which they played a part, however humble and unnoticed. (And perhaps that is partly the point, that so many aspects of our modern lives, particularly those that at the most basic levels of survival, are taken for granted.) Simultaneously they have been "found": reframed as a "legacy", with something to say to detached observers. They have left behind utility, motion, gravity and wear, to inhabit a context that is purely visual and intellectual. Their stillness, their arrangement at heights different from where they once resided, the gloves required for their handling—all speak of objects that have been rescued from time to live out eternity as material symbols of people who have disappeared. The idea that these objects would represent our lives, dreams, and values is both amusing and disquieting.

The collective *life in general* has assigned mundanely familiar objects and activities to a context we associate with the past, with art, and with the exotic. In doing so, they ask us to hold two kinds of familiarity in our minds at once: the museum, detached and lofty, and the chaotic, unnoticed world of our everyday lives. But the juxtaposition also shows us the strangeness of the frames we place around life. If our "everyday" could cross over, meet, and talk with the everyday world of people who lived a thousand years ago, could it hold its own in the conversation? To see these objects, once so blandly perfect, modeled and mended by hand, is to feel the distance between the care given to ordinary activities in subsistence cultures and the careless abundance of our saturated, comfortable lives. If we were detached enough from them, would these emblems of our daily lives acquire the mystery and potency that a Mimbres bowl seems to possess, or does the difficulty of imagining such a leap speak of the loss that accompanies increased wealth, security, and ease of production?

By dressing ordinary things in the evocative clothes of ancient artifacts, *life in general*—a collective that is also a family—asks us to contemplate the kind of attention we pay to the objects and activities that surround us. Beyond that, they call into question the hierarchies and oppositions that pervade our thinking: public and private, ordinary and special, art and life. Here in the context of that ultimate art environment, the museum, *life in general* saws a hole through the platform that elevates art above other categories of human endeavor, and invites us to drop through.

Mary Barringer