

Museums and galleries are not neutral environments; the art world continuously codifies its own procedures, reinforcing its insularity as working methods, materials, and institutional habits harden through process and repetition. Aaron T Stephan finds the art world to be as interesting as the works of art that typically make it onto walls or pedestals in museums and galleries. Because of his close observation of and response to the procedures of the art world, Stephan's sculptural practice participates in a conceptual tradition of institutional critique that extends to the 1960s. Although institutional critique is characterized by artists' ambivalence—sometimes hostility—towards museums and institutions, Stephan's work holds little of his predecessors' acidic bite. Instead, his poking and prodding of the museum is animated by humor, as though by encouraging us to laugh in the museum, he can also coax us to think about it as a beloved, if deeply flawed, place of discovery and even wonder.

*To Borrow, Cut, Copy, and Steal* is Stephan's selective history of the art museum, with subtle winks to the specific history of the Portland Museum of Art. His materials of columns, pedestals, and outsized brushstrokes exaggerate the "hidden in plain sight" elements of the art museum—evoking not just the basic foodstuffs of the art world but also hinting at its many personalities. Other works in the show suggest forbidden territory of the art world: talking about class and taste. In his series of calls to phone-sex workers, for instance, Stephan continuously steered the conversations to art. The workers candidly revealed their likes and dislikes, in some cases talking about their feelings of insecurity in museums. Merging their voices with his sculptural practice, Stephan offers us an extended meditation on the nature of art as an elaborate, oft-hidden ritual, inviting viewers in by breaking down the relationship between behind-the-scenes and the scene itself.

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