

Out There *By Jeff Weinstein*

Shopdropping: Artist buys \$7.84 bag, left, laboriously copies it, above, places copy on the sales rack.

Shopaholics, is this the last good buy?

I mean, imagine the pressure of walking past a Victoria's Secret in a mall when you're on the way to buy your children some socks.

— actress Tilda Swinton in *BlackBook* magazine, on playing an American mom in "Thumbsucker."

Nothing on the surface has changed. Magazine stands are piled with the usual bibles of desire, but at

the moment, the topic of shopping is not exactly uppermost in America's mind.

What on earth do you mean, you say, on your way to yet another label jungle to hunt and gather the cropped blazer you know is lying in store. Sure, it's one thing for match.com to find a mate that fits, but how much more useful if a Web site could set you up with just the right outfit.

More likely that response

would have been yours last year, not this.

We know things are less obsessive, shoppingwise, when gas prices move us to carpool to the mall. For socks, not secrets. Material makeover shows and TV shopping channels continue as if nothing is different, but they seem out of focus. Compulsive or even jolly consumers are no longer media figures of fun.

And then there's Zoë Sheehan Saldaña. She's a New York-

based artist who does something she and others call "shop-dropping," which is a kind of reverse shoplifting. Wittier names for this activity, used by those who leave books and homemade CDs in various places for others to pick up, are drop-lifting or, my favorite, shopgifting.

Sheehan Saldaña buys charming blouses, hats and pants from Wal-Mart, sews exact copies painstakingly by hand, removes the boughten labels and attaches them, and then surreptitiously places her handiwork back into the racks (how does she find a free hanger?) — where some lucky devil will hit a jackpot that, if successful, never identifies itself.

Others, of course, constructed the clothing clones that surround the artwork imitation — or at least fashioned individual parts of them. But the chances are quite good that these productive agents aren't artists. In fact, it is entirely possible that they aren't even adults.

Why does Sheehan Saldaña shopgift? Probably to illuminate and possibly to undermine the conventional shopping process, as well as to question the nature of the mass-produced.

I wonder what she wears, and where she really shops.

And she has made me won-

der too why shopping has taken a slide.

The answer may lie in the fact that consumer confidence is hard to measure when stores are sitting in eight feet of water. When grabbing bread and milk — no cheerful salespeople around to take your money — is called looting. When all the lovely things you have saved for so hard, the prom dresses and family-picture frames and three-piece sofas, are, like everything else you treasure, gone.

Yes, these items will be bought again, and the merchants are ready. But inescapable images of loss are anti-ads. Like it or not, buying things has become, in our sympathetic imaginations, either a form of hoarding or necessary replacement.

Sure, the optimistic buy-me phoenix will rise again — it always does. Yet for the time being we may think twice, with somewhat less than ordinary pleasure, before we drop everything to shop for the beautiful things we want.

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