

ART REVIEW

Clothes Bought Off the Rack And Secretly Put Back On

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

OVER the summer, the New York artist Zoë Sheehan Saldaña took part in a new artistic phenomenon known as “shop-dropping,” or “reverse shoplifting.” The results are on display at Real Art Ways in Hartford.

The project began when the 32-year-old artist, whose studio is in Brooklyn, N.Y., bought two outfits (pants, top and a hat or accessory) from a local Wal-Mart. She reproduced the items, in similar-looking material, bought from a fabric shop. She then returned to the store and put the copies -- with price tags, bar codes and all identification markers from the originals -- on the racks where she had found the originals. She did not seek a refund, and, in fact, kept the store-bought items.

On display at Real Art Ways are the originals alongside photographs of the reproductions; the photographs were taken in her studio before she returned her version of the items to the store.

When I first heard about this project, I wondered: Why would anybody want to create handmade reproductions of generic clothing mass produced in China? What is more, why would the artist want to risk sneaking the items back into a store and putting them on display for sale? Was she, by stealth, trying to bring couture to the masses? Or was her project a comment on lost manufacturing jobs in the United States? Or maybe even a comment on the art scene’s ascendant commercialism?

Any and all of these interpretations could be larded onto the work, but none are quite right. The trick, it dawned on me, was not to heed what this project seems to say so much as look at what it does: Ms. Sheehan Saldaña, in an era of mass production and hyper-conformism, had found a way to assert her individuality and creativity using the infrastructure that serves to suppress it. Her project was intrinsically subversive. (On the Internet, there is a nationwide network of young, gung-ho proponents of reverse shoplifting just like Ms. Sheehan Saldaña.)

Meanwhile, I wondered about Wal-Mart, and what executives there thought of the project, or if they even knew about it. I telephoned the Wal-Mart store in Hartford, and found the manager and staff unaware of the project. For comment, I was referred to corporate headquarters in Little Rock, Ark., where Jacquie Young, a spokeswoman for the company, did not return repeated calls.

Richard A. Maloney, director of trade practices, at the Department of Consumer Protection in Connecticut, was also unaware of the project. He said he believed that the project did not violate health or safety laws, but that it could possibly violate trademark and copyright laws.

“There is an applicable Connecticut Unfair Trade Practices implication here insofar as this is a misrepresentation of the



The items bought at Wal-Mart are on the left in each photograph and Zoë Sheehan Saldaña’s “reverse-shoplifted” items are on the right.



original, a fake,” Mr. Maloney said in an e-mail message.

Back at Real Art Ways, what is missing from the display is readily available material specifically on the shop-dropping project, its genesis and aims, because to get a handle on what is going on here you really need information about the artist and her process. A simple wall text might at least have helped orient visitors. I spoke with the artist and had access to news-media materials at the gallery.

Your first impression, viewed cold, is that this is an exhibition about shopping, or the ascendancy of the commercial in the contemporary art world these days. Think, for instance, of the recent proliferation of art fairs, those temporary art malls where sensory overload competes with sensory deprivation because everything sort of looks the same. But once you move in a little closer and look carefully at the objects, you realize that shopping is just one link in a larger conceptual chain.

Conceptual artists favor ideas over a

finished object or image. Ms. Sheehan Saldaña is a card-carrying member of this clan, so to some extent it does not matter what the show looks like. But then again, it is hard not to escape the feeling that the Wal-Mart items themselves are not much to look at: cheap jeans, a floral-patterned hat, a summer bag, a blouse and a green camp shirt, among other things. So what? Even the photographs, hanging next to them, are sort of bland.

But, happily, the idea is sort of original, and definitely witty and clever, while pushing boundaries of artistic freedom and expression. In an era of rampant conservatism and consumerism, artists like Ms. Sheehan Saldaña can be counted on to give voice to our growing collective disaffection.

“Zoë Sheehan Saldaña” is at Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor Street, Hartford, through Oct 16; (860)232-1006 or www.realart-ways.com.