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Review: Alina Tenser at Soloway Gallery

BY JULIET HELMKE | APRIL 25, 2017



Installation view of Alina Tenser's "Passing Buttons"
(Soloway Gallery)

Two giant buttons dominate the compact Brooklyn gallery Soloway in Alina Tenser's "Passing Buttons." They're propped up at the entrance to the gallery like guitars waiting to be played, with each thread-hole lined with a ring of felted wool.

And, indeed, they are waiting to be activated, as are the other objects dotting the space—a large clear plastic pocket with smaller Ziploc enclosures hanging from the ceiling; a short, blonde-wood stand with two long, thin items bagged in blue coverings; the micro-suede pouches that hang like theater curtains, one fawn-colored, dangling flush with the wall, and one in deep blue suspended from a wooden apparatus overhead.

Tenser performs with her objects on Sunday afternoons throughout the run of the show, freeing the giant wooden circles from their stands and rolling them around the room. Their felted linings are dislodged and placed temporarily on a shallow shelf, then snapped to the wall, then smushed into the Ziploc bags of her plastic sheet. The outsized buttons rest temporarily everywhere: one against a wall with a doorstop holding it in place, the other inside the blue pouch that has been rolled down and affixed to the floor with snaps, enclosed by fabric from either side. Then one might be back in its stand, before being moved again. Once vacant, the stands sit in dime-sized holes in the wall—a holding-space for the holders themselves. In this universe, everything has its place—though its order is outside of our own world system. These buttons are too big to be useful. Instead, as Tenser rolls them through the transparent tube, or tucks them between folds of fabric, we see, writ large, metaphors for the tiny penetrations that routinely abet us in joining two things to make one. Our rituals are put on view: the daily sacrament of covering ourselves, making a whole out of body and cloth, of sealing ourselves to the world every morning and then disrupting the connection at the end of the day.

After the performance these objects are irrevocably colored by Tenser’s interaction with them. Now that we understand their use, everything seems somehow halved. The spaces between hanging material anticipate being filled, each part of a snap awaits the satisfying click

of its mate, two sides of a Ziploc wanting to fuse—they are all wanting. So are the buttons, untethered to any material and too big to be of use.

The colloquialism “button up” means to close an opening, to shut a passage, to silence. To unbutton is to reveal—be it truths or bodies. But passing buttons is the in-between. It’s saying enough but not too much. It’s a space that is neither open nor closed. Or the congress of two bodies joining. The second the tiny fastener passes from one set of fingertips through a small slit to the other hand, when each have tenuous hold, is where Tenser’s work lives: In that brief moment of communing—the making of the whole, not yet a single entity and not two separate things.