

BORTOLAMI

Nicolás Guagnini

Bibelots

FEBRUARY 23 - MARCH 25, 2017

Bortolami is pleased to announce *Bibelots*, Nicolás Guagnini's second exhibition at the gallery. For this show of paintings, the artist has developed a new body of work continuing his investigation into the material, economic and aesthetic aspects of the ceramic craft. Guagnini commissioned a mold of a canvas and proceeded to experiment with a variety of glazes and finishes. Conceived as a complementary pictorial counterpoint to his sculptural work, the *Bibelots* allow the artist to close his productive circle eliminating downtime and non-monetizable labor and testing.

Typically, glazes are sampled on what are called "test tiles," in craft jargon. By replacing the tiles with finely detailed faux canvases in an ironic and critical act of *trompe l'oeil*, Guagnini effectively broadens his field of inquiry into both pictorial experimentation and the conditions of the production of standardized and customized objects in the pre-technological fashion of ceramics, and during the productive regime of semicapitalism. Many of the *Bibelots* are purely instructional, meaning the artist simply directed the ceramics studio via phone or text message conveying what was to be done, evoking László Moholy-Nagy's *Telephone Paintings*, 1923. In addition to the molded canvases and variety of glazes, the *Bibelots* include a third and final element: silver, gold, and white decals, a technique typically used for English Royal China that requires an extra luster firing. The decals are a reproduction of a graffiti scrawled by the theorist, filmmaker, activist, and cultural critic Guy Debord on an embankment of the Seine River in Paris in the 1950s. The writing proposed to 'never work': "*NE TRAVAILLEZ JAMAIS.*"

The phrase itself went on to become one of the most iconic slogans of May '68. "*Ne travaillez jamais*" is celebrated and oft-repeated, yet has proved difficult to place into effective circulation, despite (or perhaps, because of) its strange familiarity. Ironically, the Situationist International (SI) critique of labor no longer functions, as the whole of the SI can be said to have been reified into a cultural totem, the business of Art History departments, and footnotes in exhibition catalogues — a defined unit of value in the knowledge economy.

Guagnini's *Bibelots* are situated at the intersection between painting and Conceptual art, as demarcated by On Kawara's date paintings, Marcel Broodthaers' *Poemes Industriels* (plastic vacuum formed signs), Daniel Buren's attempt at a zero degree of painting, and Allan McCollum's *Plaster Surrogates*. While those practices effectively present another refusal to work (hinging on de-skilling), in the contemporary context of a "new materiality" or the middlebrow demand for "authentic" ecological tourism and organic coffee as possible responses to terminal technological alienation, the differential value of the uniqueness of each glazing, the accidents provoked by the kiln, or the random combination of chemicals and crystals, should read as both a critical departure and a response to these practices grounded in 1960s radicality. The pictorial surfaces are luscious, seductive, individuated, and unique, while the support remains constant.

The Situationist project of the "*abolition du travail aliéné*" (abolition of alienated work) was aimed at terminating capitalist labor in favor of new forms of activity that could be seen either as the negation of work or as its transformation — a transformation to such a point that the distinction between work and non-work would become almost inconsequential. As it turns out years later, however, our contemporary labor conditions can be described as the result of a temporal economy in which *travaillez toujours* (always work) might as well be the motto. Thus, the uniqueness of a moment, or the customization of a molded *bibelot*, is the most desirable product.

Two additional elements have been commissioned by the artist to complete the presentation of the Bibelots. A text by curator and critic Jenny Jaskey will be printed 5000 times on 11 x 17 in. paper sheets covering the entire floor of the front gallery, and will be further activated by the rain, slush, snow, and dirt tracked in by visitors. To further the entropy of the discursive element, blue salt ice melt will be added as necessary. As the text becomes illegible and the paper reduced to a dirty pulp, new clean copies will be added for visitors to take away and read. On March 23rd, 24th and 25th, the three final days of the exhibition, from 2 to 6 PM, a new performance by Madeline Hollander entitled *Competition* will be presented. Hollander describes *Competition* as:

...a durational performance piece that draws inspiration from a series of traditional physical competitions and warm-up routines that take place “backstage” within the world of professional ballet. These competitions set up systems for measuring physical thresholds, technical fatigue, maximum turning quantities, balancing lengths, and maximum jump-heights (...) Over the course of the performance the gallery floor will become increasingly covered by paper/salt/sludge and force the choreography to adjust accordingly. When the dancers are not participating in a competition in the main gallery space, they will be warming up in the front gallery space and visible to those passing by.

In the rear gallery space, Guagnini will present an arrangement of ceramic sculptures and glass vases with flowers. In a dialectical relationship to the discourse of labor evidenced by the Bibelots, Guagnini produces a limited number of sculptures yearly, requiring intensive hand labor by the artist himself. Composed of feet, ears, noses, and penises—figurative elements that physically break from statuary of the antiquity over time—these subversive body part accumulations continue the artist’s reflection on the fraught complexities of masculinity. *Ballot*, a large sculpture executed in rage during the election and immediately after its disastrous result, will serve as a centerpiece to the distorted, deformed, and disembodied members in the gallery.

The glass vases on display are by the Czech glass studio Beranek, dating from the 1950s and ’60s and acquired by the artist over time. Though Nazi occupation shut down the operation in the 1940s, and the studio was forcibly socialized during the subsequent communist period, they managed to continue their distinctive designs. Guagnini’s interest in Beranek craft is part of what he terms “horizontal appropriation,” as opposed to “vertical appropriation” (For example, Marcel Duchamp’s intervention involving the Mona Lisa in his *L.H.O.O.Q.* or the Pictures Generation artists appropriating advertising or low culture). Guagnini posits that choosing to execute work using a craft medium opens the possibility of appropriating examples of other “applied arts” disciplines.

Nicolás Guagnini (b. in 1966 in Buenos Aires, Argentina) and has lived and worked in New York since 1998. Recent solo exhibitions include *Union Gaucha Productions*, Artists Space, New York; *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Galerie Max Mayer, Düsseldorf; *Heads*, Lars Freidrich Gallery, Berlin; *Nicolás Guagnini: Seven*, Miguel Abreu Gallery and Balice Hertling & Lewis, New York. Recent group exhibitions include *Sinister Feminism: A.I.R. Gallery’s 12th Biennial Exhibition*, curated by Piper Marshall, New York; *Bread and Roses*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; *Dancing Museum*, Museum of Modern Art, Sao Paulo; *Descartes’ Daughter*, Swiss Institute, New York; *A Drawing Show Curated by Dan Graham*, Micheline Swajcer, Antwerp; and *Notations: The Cage Effect Today*, Hunter College Art Gallery, New York.

For more information and images, please contact annic@bortolamigallery.com.