

Leslie | Fritz

Caitlin Keogh

Modes

November 2012 - January 13th, 2013

The exhibition title, *Modes*, is taken from a store in Brussels, on Rue Blaes, situated on one corner of the Jeu de Balle flea market. The store specializes in antique clothing and textiles. These things are sold at the flea market, in heaps on the ground or crammed into wardrobe racks, unsorted and for a lower price. But the objects at Modes are only there if they have passed a high bar for quality and distinctiveness, everything is neatly arranged and the variety is thorough.

The room of the shop is small, and feels smaller still because of the ingenious use of space. A track snakes along the ceiling with 19th century dresses hanging from it, the petticoats and hems grazing your hair. Shelves go the height of the room. Boxes of small fabric pieces, mending samples, and unfinished sewing projects are on a narrow wall between the sales counter and the men's shirts. These include doilies, quilted lap blankets, embroidered cuffs, cross-stitched alphabets, and sun-faded remnants of elaborate floral prints.

An example of someone's delicate patchwork is for sale for maybe 6 Euros. I don't know what you would want it for. Was it cut out of a dress shirt and put out for sale, or did a tailor make this tiny object to display their mending skills? An unfinished intricate cross-stitch made out of thread leftovers, I count at least 22 colors, about 7" x 13", was 12 Euros. The more expensive things in the boxes are larger, maybe 60 Euros for a pink satin baby blanket with lace trim.

I went to Modes every couple weeks while I lived in Brussels last year. I would stop at the Jeu de Balle for a quick look, but the crowds, likelihood of bargaining if I saw something I wanted, and chilly weather, sent me to Modes pretty quickly. Modes would have a brief crush of shoppers at the high point of the flea market, but otherwise it would just be myself, one of two quiet and knowledgeable women who worked there, and maybe one other customer. Once a businessman looking for dress shoes came in. He said he would continue to come back until they had the right thing in his size. I saw a woman there repeatedly, she was maybe 50, strikingly beautiful, hair in a black bouffant, and she would try on black dress after black dress. A couple from Japan came in and bought six garbage bags of stuff to take to back to their own store to resell. Sometimes a tourist would wander in from the flea market and, still high from the adrenaline of bargaining, try to get a lower price for something. Modes did not negotiate prices, and other shoppers would speak up on behalf of the shopkeeper and insist that *this* was not the flea market.

I would take a box down from the wall and spend 30 minutes removing all the contents slowly, inspecting everything, and then replacing it. Then move onto the next box. Things didn't change too fast in this section of the store so I could reasonably expect to see something again and again. I didn't buy much. They weren't pushy. I would be there for three hours sometimes and leave with lace cuffs or an old cardboard glove box, something I really needed to copy from directly, and that didn't cost too much. In the year of regular visiting I think I came away with that box, the cuffs, the multi-colored cross-stitch, a swatch of elaborately printed fabric, some plaid linen tea towels, a pair of very nice hand made high heels, a wool sweater vest, and a half dozen cotton and linen night shirts to send as gifts to friends in New York.

Just behind the window display was a rack with bags, scarves, and tassels hanging from it. I really regret not buying a tassel. They were extremely elaborate, handmade from silk and wool cord, and attached to long satiny ropes. These labor intensive objects, quite old, were taken from estates where all the art and furniture had already been removed to go to the more typical antique store. Maybe the drapes would be taken too, but not

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these weird things for tying them back. These objects really epitomized what felt so special about Modes; it collected all the beautiful in-between things from the estates, not just the vintage high-end designer clothes and the wall tapestries, but also the handmade work shirts and night gowns, the lace tablecloths, the accessories and their strange packaging, and these fringy pineapple-things that would have spent most of their long existence hidden against the wall behind folds of expensive damask.

The things I was searching through at Modes were visually and technically amazing. It was so intimate and beautiful and quiet, all of these tactile, pliable, and colorful scraps, but maybe, importantly, also seemingly unmediated. This isn't completely possible since I was a stranger in a foreign place and a pale shade of 'different' was cast over the whole place. The confused but totally persistent sense of distance in time was also there as part of the attraction. But the objects themselves seemed unmediated from the hands that produced them. There was no distance in terms of design, production, completion, and use. There was just the technique... the ability to make something, or the residue of practice. Just practice. Building something by repetition. It was all so encouraging. It made me feel so optimistic.

I only have a few things from Modes to actually look at now that I'm back in New York and I want to keep making these fabric scrap paintings based on this experience of going to this store and looking at these things. I didn't know what to look at to get started. I didn't take any pictures at Modes. I looked on Ebay for a while, searching for "unfinished Bargello" or "Art Nouveau lace" or "cross-stitch sample". But I can't just waste my money on things I haven't seen up close. Ebay is good because I wouldn't know where anything came from and I like that, but it was all too expensive and shabby. I bought a lot of old needlepoint books instead. They have lots of ideas and variations, so they serve to jog my memory and get visually over-stimulated, but also to learn a new thing and practice it, and in the end make something that looks unusual and is relatively functionless.

~ Caitlin Keogh

Caitlin Keogh graduated from Bard with an MFA in 2011. She received her BFA from Cooper Union in 2006. Additionally, she studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure Des Beaux-Arts De Paris in 2004. Recent museum exhibitions include a solo presentation at MoMA PS1, New York, and group presentations at Mu.Zee, Ostende, Belgium, as well as Kunsthalle Zurich, Switzerland. She has exhibited widely in group exhibitions including MOT International, Brussels, Belgium; Renwick, New York; White Columns, New York; 179 Canal, New York; and Tiny Creatures, Los Angeles, California.

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