

CHRIS



CHICAGO WORKS

15

Cover: *Ice Bag (Polar Bear)*, 2016. Glass, plastic bag, and cut vinyl; 15 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 6 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Evan Jenkins.
Inside cover: *Token (Fat Chair)*, 2015. Acrylic paint on cast bronze, acrylic paint on steel, wire, key rings, painted wood, ball chains, and hardware; 52 x 6 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Robert Chase-Heishman.

BRADLEY



A walk through Chris Bradley's studio reveals a number of everyday objects lying around, including pretzel sticks, key chains, and stacked paint cans. But then a clue—a bag of ice that never melts or a pizza box with the impression of a greasy face—suggests that something is amiss. These unexpected juxtapositions are the first wink, a friendly acknowledgement that all is not as it seems. They are the viewer's invitation to the artist's game of looking.



Left: *Stack (Pretzel Rods) with Nightstand*, 2016. Cast bronze, poplar, cherry, paint, and epoxy resin; 70 x 18 x 22 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman and Emily Kay Henson.

Right: *Stack (Banana Peels) with Nightstand (detail)*, 2016. Wood, steel, and paint; 62 x 15 x 12 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Evan Jenkins.

A phrase commonly used to describe Bradley's sculpture is *trompe l'oeil*, or trick of the eye, which traditionally applies to two-dimensional images drawn or painted to appear three-dimensional. In the context of Bradley's sculptural work, however, it means his sculptures look convincingly like the objects they represent. His artistic method has a trickster impulse that involves meticulously altering his materials, so that wood takes on the qualities of metal or bronze the properties of food.

We can approach these works from many angles within the context of modern art history. The MCA's collection, for example, is flush with pop art by artists who share Bradley's interest in mundane and commercial objects. But while pop art offers simultaneous references to celebrity and ennui, Bradley's work is less a mirror of the workaday or consumerist world and more akin to a glitch in the matrix, that strange detail that barely registers in the corner of your eye, alerting you that the world you perceive is merely a slippery surface.

His work owes a debt to surrealism, as well, specifically the idea that objects can shift and transform. In fact, Salvador Dalí's self-described process the *paranoiac critical method* involved staring at an object until it began to transform in front of him, leading to ambiguous paintings that feature one image that indicates two separate representations, such as *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach* (1938). And transitory objects abound in his film work, including body hair that disappears from one character and appears on another in the 1928 film *Un Chien Andalou* (directed by Luis Buñuel) and a shadow in Walt Disney's *Destino* (1945) that morphs into a dress. Another instance of transformation occurs in surrealist André Breton's book *Mad Love*, in which he described asking his friend, artist Alberto Giacometti, to make him a glass slipper ashtray. The request is forgotten, however, and the object is never made. One day, while Breton and Giacometti are walking through a flea market, Breton buys a roughly heven wooden spoon. Only when he arrives back home does he notice that

the wooden spoon is in the perfect shape of a slipper. The slipper then takes on the material properties of glass, begins to move, and finally becomes one of the very kitchen spoons Cinderella herself might have used before her magical transformation. Like a pumpkin becoming a carriage, Breton claims, "It was clearly changing right under my eyes."¹

Bradley's sculptures do this, too, charged with what Breton would call "associative and interpretive qualities," which go unnoticed until they are activated by the viewer's desire.² Once we look closely at Bradley's objects, we can follow their shifting materiality into an altered world of perception, made possible by the artist's skill and intimate knowledge of the materials he works with and represents. But while we marvel at his careful attention, fine craftsmanship, and expertise, Bradley's sculptures are undermining many of our assumptions that the world is as it appears.



Freezer Door (Abstract Ice), 2016. Wire glass, wood, ink-jet print, and paint; three parts, each: 56 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 2 in. overall: 56 1/2 x 63 1/2 x 2 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Evan Jenkins.

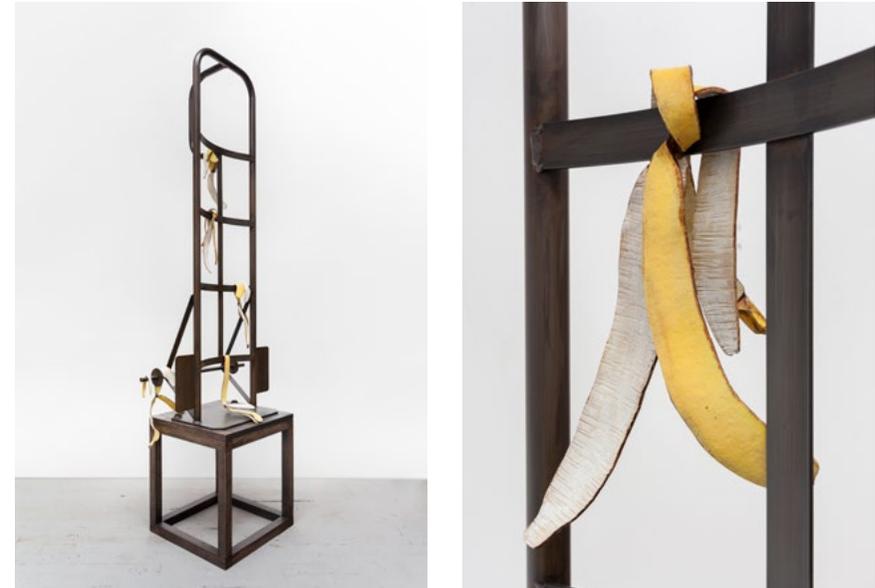
Psychoanalytic theory also takes up the malleability of objects. D. W. Winnicott refers to this as the third area, neither external, objective reality nor strictly internal subjectivity. It is, rather, that strange space where the two come together. This phenomenon is said to occur first in early human development with transitional objects (a blanket or teddy bear, for example) that become associated with early acts of physical gratification, such as eating, and develop into the infant's projections or imaginations about reality. Winnicott even speculates that this in-between zone is not made up of just unfocused, intermittent moments, but is, in fact, where we spend most of our lives, while reading, driving, working, day dreaming, and floating between and during our daily activities. He also theorizes that this space plants the seed for the creative. What begin as comforting fantasies in early life, then, become the very spaces that enable cultural production.

I like to think of Bradley's objects this way, as if I have awoken from a reverie so suddenly that real objects sit side by side with the residue of my dreams, fantastical and at times jarringly irrational. The oddity of

1 André Breton, *Mad Love* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 33. Originally published as *L'Amour Fou*, (France: Éditions Gallimard, 1937).
2 Ibid.

his work signals an ill-determined space, the strangeness and shifting possibilities of the world we inhabit: a miniature storefront, staircase, and vacant hallway nestled into the gallery walls; small-scale replicas of the MCA's third-floor lounge chairs; and a representation of one of the galleries embedded in a nightstand. These works duplicate their surroundings and generate doubts about the reliability of the original places and objects. They remind us that we are constantly traversing borders between the real and the imagined and that the solid and sensory world is an illusionary conceit.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the MCA's inner gallery, hung on all sides with fabrications of the kind of freezer doors found in a supermarket or convenience store. The lettering and imagery on the doors are reversed, however, leaving viewers with the disorienting sense that they stand inside the freezer—on the other side of the looking glass, so to speak. The doors are made of wire glass, a fire retardant that prevents glass from shattering at extremely high temperatures, a tongue-in-cheek precaution that confounds the very context and purpose of a freezer. Populating the middle of this gallery are Bradley's *Gates*, works that resemble hand trucks strewn gingerly with all manner of objects, including banana peels made from steel. But do they work? Could they roll? What is the difference between a hand truck and the sculpture of a hand truck? The sculptures rest on objects that call to mind end tables, but also sculptural bases or plinths, those pieces of furniture that designate the difference between ritual and life, art and the world, the creative and the functional—an artificial divide that is tirelessly contested and beleaguered in Chris Bradley's world of objects.



Left: *Gate (Banana Peels) with Nightstand*, 2016. Steel, oak, patina, and paint; 68 x 22 x 15 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman and Emily Kay Henson.

Right: *Gate (Banana Peels) with Nightstand (detail)*, 2016. Steel, oak, patina, and paint; 68 x 22 x 15 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Robert Chase Heishman and Emily Kay Henson.

The outer gallery has a decidedly different tone. The objects here—paint cans stacked on nightstands with any number of reproduced objects, a blocky landscape made of large bronze-cast pretzel sticks, and a storefront embedded in the gallery wall—carry unwieldy multiplicities of associations and confuse any logical narratives. A single potato roams the wall above, motorized by an invisible magnetic track.

In a sense, the galleries become what philosopher Michel Foucault would call *heterotopias*:

Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory . . . Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.³

Each of the museum spaces exemplifies these notions of heterotopias: Bradley's objects transform them into reserves of imagination.⁴ Meanwhile, outside of the galleries a work is suspended in the middle of the staircase. It is one of a series of Bradley's tokens, key chain-like sculptures that often include references to art history. The one fashioned for this Chicago Works exhibition is no exception: it contains objects that resemble works of art in the MCA's permanent collection, situating Bradley's sculptures squarely in our particular institutional context.



Left: *Clyde*, 2011. Painted cast bronze and hot glue; 19 1/4 x 3 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Robert Chase-Heishman.



Right: *Token (Endless Column)*, 2015. Acrylic paint on cast bronze, acrylic paint on steel, wire, key rings, painted wood, ball chains, and hardware; 52 x 6 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Robert Chase-Heishman.

Chris Bradley's manipulation of materials creates a visual and spatial experience that underscores his playful view of the world. On a material level, his works fool the eye, prompting viewers to distrust their original impression and reexamine his objects. On a conceptual level, they suggest that all things, not just his sculptures, can be seen this way. His morphing, shifting objects have an art historical lineage, but more to the point, they imply that the shifting and unstable spaces of the exhibition extend well beyond the museum into the outside world.

³ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 27.
⁴ Ibid.



Stack (Kick Boards) with Nightstand, 2016. Poplar, oak, MDF, melamine, steel, and paint; 64 x 17 x 20 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Shane Campbell Gallery. Photo: Robert Chase-Heishman and Emily Kay Henson.

Chris Bradley (American, b. 1982) is a Chicago-based artist. His recent exhibition history includes solo shows at Shane Campbell Gallery (Chicago), Roberto Paradise (San Juan, PR), and the Museum of Contemporary Art Raleigh, and group shows at The Renaissance Society (Chicago), Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara. In 2014, he was included in the *Modern Painters* feature “25 Artists to Watch.” He has worked as an educator at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 2010.

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JUL 2

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