



Art

A look at Styrofoam and industrial design

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Heide Fasnacht's 2000 installation Exploding Airplane is part of the "Styrofoam" exhibit at the RISD Museum, in Providence.

At first glance — and even at second and third glances — it's hard to imagine two more disparate exhibitions than "Styrofoam" at the RISD Museum and "Viktor Schreckengost: Legacy Exhibition" at

the Attleboro Arts Museum.

Except for the fact that they're both worth a visit, the two shows — one focusing on one of the most maligned materials ever created, the other celebrating the life and work of one of America's most successful industrial designers — couldn't be more different.

Let's start with the RISD exhibit, which currently fills most of the museum's first-floor Farago Wing gallery (and which, under the circumstances, probably qualifies the entire RISD campus as an EPA Superfund site). Organized by contemporary art curator Judith Tannenbaum, the show features the work of 10 artists, ranging from well-known art stars such as Sol Lewitt and Richard Tuttle to younger talents such as Hong Kong-born sculptor Shirley Tse and Dutch artist-provocateur Folkert de Jong.

What unites this varied band of contributors? As you've probably guessed by now, all have, at one time or another, explored the artistic possibilities of extruded foam polystyrene, a material that most of us know by its commercially trademarked name: Styrofoam.

Why Styrofoam? Actually, a better question might be, "Why Not Styrofoam?"

Developed in Germany in the 1930s and introduced in the United States by Dow Chemical Co., Styrofoam is remarkably strong, durable and lightweight. It's also easy to mold — a fact that explains its popularity as a packing material for computers, stereos and other home electronics — and cheap to produce.

Nowadays, of course, Styrofoam is also widely disdained, both for its eco-unfriendliness (it's infamously long-lived and non-biodegradable) and for its intrinsic cheesiness as a material. (Question: Is there another material that feels so much like trash, even before you're done using it?)

Not surprisingly, most of these qualities — the good, the bad and the cheesy — surface at some point in the exhibit.

California artist B. Wurtz, for example, takes close-up photographs of hunks of Styrofoam packing material. Liberated from their original context, the sculpted white forms morph into mysterious buildings and cityscapes. One photograph even suggests a kind of mini-Stonehenge.

Other artists push the stone/Styrofoam connection even further.

New York artist Steve Keister takes molded Styrofoam packing blocks, then carves and paints them to look like pre-Columbian artifacts. Tuttle, who's known for his use of unconventional materials, does something similar to a pair of rigid Styrofoam boards he found in a house in New Mexico. Appropriately enough, the resulting sculptures are shaped like Native American ax heads and arrowheads.

Lewitt, too, plays up the foam-as-stone analogy. His 1993 installations *Black Styrofoam on White Wall* and *White Styrofoam on Black Wall* consist of broken hunks of black and white Styrofoam placed on contrasting black and white walls. The jagged patterns suggest a kind of poor man's marble.

Building references are also popular. Except for its color (a lovely powder pink), Tse's *Do Cinderblocks Dream of Being Styrofoam* could easily be mistaken for the remains of a weekend construction project. The "tower" in Tony Feher's *Blue Tower*, meanwhile, is made of blue Styrofoam bricks.

Perhaps the show's most dramatic work is Heide Fasnacht's *Exploding Airplane*, a 2000 installation that chillingly (if inadvertently) evokes the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Suspended from the gallery's ceiling, it features a silver-gray Styrofoam airliner seemingly exploding in midair.

For many of the show's artists, Styrofoam's less-than-savory environmental reputation doesn't seem to be much of a factor. (In a gallery note, Fasnacht recalls using Styrofoam mainly because it's lightweight and easy to cut and carve. Tuttle, meanwhile, offers a more balanced view in a 1988 artist's book, noting Styrofoam's sculptural potential while also calling it "one of the worst materials used by man.")

One artist who revels in Styrofoam's bad-boy image is De Jong, a young Dutch artist whose entry — a bleary-eyed, foam-splattered effigy of Abraham Lincoln called *The Piper* — is one of the stars of the show. A kind of 3-D political cartoon, this 2007 work is deliberately grotesque and over the top. It's also a not-so-subtle swipe at a country (ours) that seems to be having a bit of a tough slog at the moment.

(And, of course, what material says "civilization in decline" quite like Styrofoam?)

By contrast, the mood at the Attleboro Arts Museum couldn't be more upbeat.

Most of the good vibrations emanate from the museum's current exhibit, which celebrates the life and work of the late industrial designer Viktor Schreckengost. (And don't worry if Schreckengost's name doesn't ring a bell: over the course of a long career, Schreckengost designed hundreds of household products, from children's toys to electric fans. Even if you don't know his name, chances are you know his work.)

It also helps that Schreckengost began his career in the 1930s and '40s, a time when American design was just starting to take off. A good example are the vibrant Art Deco bowls that Schreckengost designed for the Cowan Pottery Co., beginning in the early 1930s. Decorated with scenes of stylized cars, skyscrapers and even a set of martini glasses, they're a visual tribute to the rambunctious energy of Jazz Age America.

Another highlight is a selection of children's items that Schreckengost created for companies such as Steelcraft (toys) and Murray (bikes). Designed in the "streamlined" style made popular by industrial designers such as Raymond Loewy, they include toy cars and buses, flashlights and peddle cars. There's even a streamlined "Super Deluxe" wagon — painted a bright fire-engine red, of course.

The show also highlights Schreckengost's skills as an artist (mainly as a ceramic sculptor) and teacher. Indeed, about half the show is devoted to work by Schreckengost's former students at the Cleveland Institute Art — a high-powered group that includes Joe Oros, who led the design team responsible for the original Ford Mustang, and Kirk Bennion, designer of the 2009 Corvette ZR1. (Bennion, by the way, must have some serious pull at GM: a real-life Corvette ZR1 is part of the exhibit.)

Sadly, Schreckengost passed away earlier this year, at age 101. This show, which was organized by another former student, Charles S. Tramontana, is a fitting tribute to a design titan.

"Styrofoam" continues through July 20 at the RISD Museum, 224 Benefit St., Providence. Regular hours are Tues.-Sun. 10-5. Admission: \$8 adults, \$5 seniors, \$3 students with I.D., \$2 ages 5-18. Contact: (401) 454-6500 or www.risd.edu/museum.

"Viktor Schreckengost: Legacy Exhibition" runs through May 16 at the Attleboro Arts Museum, 86 Park St., Attleboro. Hours: Tues.-Sat. 10-5. Contact: (508) 222-2644 or www.attleboroartsmuseum.org.

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