



If I can do it, you can do it. (1), 2011
Digital print on archival photo rag, paint and pastel, 36 x 47 in.

You Can Live Better

The discourse of home improvement is vast in America. Television programs, magazines, and websites concerned with helping us make domestic life better, more beautiful, tastier have proliferated in recent years – the Martha Stewart empire, HGTV, apartmenttherapy.com, Food TV, and all the rest. Collectively they parse and task-analyze the desires and aesthetic judgments of both the DIY advisers and their audiences into instructional quanta for beautifying the stuff of daily life with our labor and money.

One way to understand all this “you can live better” discussion is to take it as a symptom of cultural anxiety about the conditions of domestic life in general: one chatters on about things one worries about. (Foucault made this point about the proliferation of sex advice in the 1970s.) Anxiety or no, clearly our nation feels a need to improve its kitchens and dens, to better its roasts and cakes. Otherwise the whole discourse wouldn’t exist.

The sculptures and drawings in Josephine Durkin’s *Icing* (*Just like this...*) draw a great deal of their energy from DIY instructional programs, which makes a lot of sense: what TV design advisers usually advise is the stuff of visual art. Color harmonies and proportional relationships and repetitions of like and similar shapes are red meat for HGTV and artists, too.

In Durkin’s work, these formal (and therefore general) parallels are individuated and frankly emotional. When I visited her studio recently our talk turned to the mindset of the audience for Martha Stewart, et al, to the comfort someone might take in understanding a big project as a linear series of distinct steps. A perhaps daunting task is made manageable. Its result is compellingly illustrated in before-and-after photos. Accordingly, the wall reliefs in this show incorporate gestural paint roller marks with stencil-like, patterned forms and cast plastic representations of hand towels. Items a redesign project might involve are themselves assembled and painted in ways that clearly reveal the process of the sculptures’ making.



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The formal elements, the referenced tools, and their modes of assembly work together to illustrate how a project is conceived and actualized while simultaneously integrating themselves into an elegant work of art. Her drawings, comprised of photos of studio leftovers which she marks over and recomposes with assorted media, similarly reflect their making in the finished product as they also incorporate the sort of redesign strategies one encounters on HGTV.

A number of artists have addressed domestic comforts in the past and more recently. The European tradition of genre painting, Berthe Morisot's mother and child paintings, and especially Andrea Zittel's sculptural investigations of furniture, room and building design all come to mind. But what I find compelling about Durkin's latest work is its connection to the mass media transmission of taste and technique. Like the great conceptual artist Sol Lewitt who made drawings in the form of lists of instructions to be carried out by teams of assistants, or like an art teacher coaxing good work from her students, Martha Stewart and the teams behind Apartment Therapy and the like work to raise the aesthetic awareness of their audience and lead them through processes intended to improve their visual environment.

Durkin's work acknowledges the distinction between mass media design instruction and fine art as it incorporates something of the former into the latter, but it gently refuses to condescend to its source of inspiration.

Michael Odom
 Artist and Critic, *Art Forum and Art Papers*