

design

GO NUTS!

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT THERE WAS NOTHING NEW IN DESIGN, TAG-TEAM ARTISTS GUYTON\WALKER SCREW A LIGHTBULB INTO A COCONUT. LET THERE BE LIGHT

Why coconuts? It's the most obvious question, but there's really no avoiding it. After all, there they are in all their hairy tropical glory, dumbly literal in their unmistakable form and yet undeniably endowed with sophomoric nudge-nudge-wink-wink metaphorical associations. (To take only the most recent example: advertisements for the television program *The Real Gilligan's Island* do little more than gleefully expound on the unsurprising sexual similes inherent to the fruit. "Hold onto your coconuts!" the show's campaign advises with faux-camp aplomb.) But mine is not a general question—not one addressing some coconut zeitgeist. Rather, it's aimed at two artists who collaborate under the nomenclature (born of their combined surnames) Guyton\Walker.

"Why coconuts?" is the rather inelegant way I kicked off a recent exchange with Kelley Walker, referring to one of his and Wade Guyton's latest inventions, a kind of art object meets design object meets not-quite-definable object: the coconut lamp. The lamp—in fact a number of coconut lamps—first appeared in the duo's solo exhibition (titled "The Failure of Judgment Part III") at Greene Nafati Gallery in New York City earlier this year. The show comprised an elaborate installation involving silk-screened and ink-jetted "paintings," stacks of paint cans whose labels boasted juicy images of sliced scanned fruit, handmade flags, and myriad instances of print advertisements borrowed from Ketel One, Lit and lolling between the paint cans and hung from ceiling beams in garlandlike strands, the coconut lamps were at once stylish and stark, utilitarian and utterly frivolous, displaying a kind of Home Depot meets MoMA Design Store logic. Along these lines, the lamps are quite adaptable and available for relatively cheap purchase (often in non-"art" venues like bookshops) as single units, as strands with multiple fixtures, or even in clusters that approximate Mediterranean versions of a Baroque chandelier. (Indeed, a hyperbolic constellation of the coconut lamps appeared recently in a group exhibition at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City, with nearly 170 individual lanterns making up the enormous hanging work.)

But no matter how interesting the contexts, the coconut question remains. Why nestle lightbulbs into the emptied shells of coconuts to begin with? Walker cites the initial impulse as little more than that—while scanning the innards of different fruits, including coconuts, he and Guyton happened on the idea of converting the cast-off rinds into a ready-made design motif. The consistently orbed shape of the coconut seemed to call out for its illuminating complement in the equally orbed lightbulb (though the artists play with the shapes and sizes of bulbs, often inserting overtly phallic bulbs, too-small bulbs, too-big bulbs—you get the picture). While the coconut meat has to be painstakingly scraped out by hand before the shell can be appropriated as a fixture component (something the artists and a team of friends have mastered with time, diligence, a variety of knives, and Ketel One drinks), there is nonetheless something so immediately easy—if hardly articulable—about the relationship between coconut and bulb. The lamps are simply the end result of bringing two similar but ultimately incompatible globes together, one furry and brown and the other slippery and translucent. Experiments in the dialectics of symmetry, the coconut lamps posit a formal X=Y only to point out how utterly over-determined such formal analogies prove to be.

And it is precisely the over-determined, even self-mocking, nature of the coconut (to say nothing of the lightbulb, which itself certainly crops up in a fair number of jokes) that makes it such an attractive object to Guyton\Walker. Common, banal, arguably low-end, the coconut has nonetheless operated as a repository for fetish, a thinly veiled allusion to exoticism and sexuality. Other artists have certainly employed the sex appeal of fruit (Gauguin comes to mind), but Guyton\Walker are as interested in the object itself as in its potent subtexts and thus present their coconuts rather nakedly, emphasizing their materiality and not just their use as metaphoric camouflage. This is hardly to say that they take the coconut entirely seriously—its kitsch is played to the hilt, while calling into question the line between the tasteful and the utterly tasteless. (One imagines the coconut lamps adorning a middle-American theme restaurant just as comfortably as a Breuer-built home.) And so, while the coconut lamps fulfill certain expectations of both "art" and "design," they elude such distinctions just as easily, reflecting (upon) the environments in which they are placed.

One inevitably thinks of a slightly older generation of contemporary artists, including Liam Gillick and Jorge Pardo, when the triad of terms "art, design, and social context" arises. Yet as much as Guyton\Walker can be considered among the fallout and lineage of '90s "relational aesthetics," they can also be thought of as employing their own art-life strategies, inspired by sources as diverse as Fluxus, Andy Warhol, Cady Noland, and Sherrie Levine. But even with all the ways we can think through Guyton\Walker's lamps, the question, "Why coconuts?" is succinctly enough answered by one of its makers. As Walker has it, when all is said and done, "It's really all about the ease of screwing a bulb into a coconut." **Johanna Burton**

Photography Horacio Salinas

