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By Brienne Walsh

Sara Greenberger Rafferty Captures The Void Where Shopping Used To Exist



A work in Sara Greenberger Rafferty's "Tester" series, which was based on iPhone imagery she took in a beauty store right before the pandemic. COURTESY OF CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

The genesis of Sara Greenberger Rafferty's solo exhibition of new work, [currently open at Carnegie Museum of Art through February 6, 2022](#), was in the early days of the pandemic. She was on the West Coast (she lives in New York) for a cousin's wedding, and she needed to buy shampoo, or some other beauty item, in advance of the event. It was the end of February 2020. The pandemic had begun, but most people didn't believe it would affect them, yet. Rafferty went to a Sephora or an Ulta Beauty — she can't remember which — to buy the beauty item and was immediately drawn to the texture of the sample make-up palettes, which bore the marks of the fingers that had touched them previously. "Through the colors that were most tried on you could notice something about the body of people who are in the community," she says.

Upon returning to New York, Rafferty printed the images off her iPhone, and hung them in her studio. "I definitely felt a butterfly feeling when I first saw them," she says. She saw echoes of Walter Benjamin's "Arcades Project," which dissected the experience of shopping in glass-roofed marketplaces full of shops in 19th century Paris. The pandemic, by now, had shut down most of the country, and Rafferty was alone in her studio. "I realized that sticking your hand in a communal thing and putting it on your face is a thing that is ending," Rafferty says. With plenty of time on her hands, she also began looking through images, and came across Polaroids of wigs on mannequins she had taken when she worked at Barneys, the now defunct luxury department store, in the 1990s. Both types of imagery related to the department store, and more obliquely, to a dying form of consumerism that involved visiting stores in person, on full display. They became the foundation for the exhibition, which examines shopping in the 21st century through several photography-based works. "They challenge assumptions and inherited habits with imagery," says Dan Leers, the curator of the exhibition, about artworks. "They take objects we look at on a daily basis and flip them in an attempt to make people reconsider their relationship with [such objects]."



A view of Sara Greenberger Rafferty's "Buttons," series made in 2021. COURTESY OF CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

Buttons (2021) is a series of seven glass discs that look like human torsos; closer examination reveals that the bulky buttons on the torsos are iPhone home buttons. The "Tester" series uses the photographs Rafferty took of make-up palettes in advance of her cousin's wedding, and places them in sleeves of kiln-blown glass, almost as if they are precious jewels, or rare photographic slides. *THE DEAD 20TH CENTURY (What ♥ was saved)* is a wall-based mural that mines the objects that Rafferty has saved or "liked" in online auctions — a Moschino smiley face purse, a baby stroller, an Eames chair. *Samples* (2021) is a wall-based mosaic that combines rectangles of opaque white glass with the Polaroids of wigs from Barneys, and two vases that will be filled with fresh flowers on a weekly basis by Carnegie Museum of Art's Youth Arts Initiative. *Search Emoji* (2021) is another mosaic, this time in color, that is punctuated by photographs of the magnifying glass used as a symbol that you can search for information online. In Rafferty's work, the magnifying glasses are clear, and show nothing but the wall behind them. There's an overwhelming sense that the objects sold to beautify codify women's looks over the past century are on display — the exhibition immediately evokes "Kardashian" — as well as the means of accessing them. But what, specifically, is Rafferty trying to capture about all of that history, and how it fits into the present moment?



Sara Greenberger Rafferty's "Search Emoji" (2021) COURTESY OF CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

There's a sense that what you are looking at is the past two centuries of shopping experiences being flattened into two dimensional space. Not theoretically, but physically, using some sort of science fiction machine that can take objects and transform so that they can be physically archived in a filing cabinet. Archived, and then trotted out to explain the physical, sensory experience of consuming in the year 2021. Gone is the "Ladies Paradise" that was the 19th century department store described by Émile Zola and Benjamin. Gone are window displays, perfume samplers, make-up counters, glitz and glamor. Gone also is the mall of the 1990s, with its bright, poppy colors and scents of Auntie Anne's pretzels and Abercrombie and Fitch body spray. Left, instead, are colorful but sensorily dull objects that offer little in the way of charisma. The exhibition ultimately captures the flattening of experience that occurred in the past two decades when we moved from getting our make-up done at the Mac counter to buying lip kits from Kylie Cosmetics online based on colorful pixels we can't touch, smell or taste.



Samples (2021) by Sara Greenberger Rafferty COURTESY THE CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART

The exhibition is ultimately a void where stimulation used to exist. In five hundred years, if the artwork survives, what will it say to the people who discover it? To me, it would say that humans in the 21st century lived dull lives disconnected from our own bodies. Everything that can be consumed has been commodified and uploaded, and we're left sitting in empty, flat space.

For more information about the exhibition, [visit this page.](#)