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LUHRING AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com



Steve Wolfe, *Untitled (Cutty Sark Carton)*, 1992–93, oil, screenprint, lithography, modeling paste, canvasboard, wood; oil and screenprint on cardboard with wooden armature, 14 x 33 x 21".

STEVE WOLFE

LUHRING AUGUSTINE
GALLERY

Apropos of nothing, I wonder who wrote the book of love. Really! I do! Could it be Steve Wolfe? Certainly his books are lovingly made, which is promising—yet something in them is mute and withholding. Ain't that always the way.

Wolfe makes copies of books—not as writing (like Borges's *Pierre Menard*, who composes his own *Don Quixote*) but as thing. Wolfe's artworks duplicate familiar editions of favorite literature, but they are dormant objects. While they may well be hollow, I imagine them as solid: Their materials are stuffs like wood, particle-board, and galvanized steel, and despite the oil paint and lithography and silk-screen inks that give them mimetic impeccability, they are taxonomically closest to sculpture. Or are they? Like paintings, they hang on the wall—except for the couple that fall off it, and for the many packed in boxes (also artist-made) on the floor. The works' faithfulness to their originals, meanwhile, must ultimately trace to photography, even while they are three-dimensional and fastidiously handmade. Their models in part must also lie in text, in language—which, however, they index only to entomb behind their synecdochic skins. These books that cannot be opened end up strikingly open in definition.

Wolfe has a heritage in American trompe l'oeil artists like John Peto—one piece here counterfeits a Peto catalogue—but a nearer ancestor is Andy Warhol, especially in his Brillo boxes of 1964. Wolfe's own boxes surely nod to those objects (and hold, among other things, a book on Warhol). A more current cousin is Robert Gober, with his handmade newspaper stacks and kitty-litter bags, which, however, show more physical touch and surrealistic temper than Wolfe's work does. Where Gober makes you do a double take, sift the familiar from the subtly different, Wolfe's books invite you to try to pick them up and read. There is an erotic purr in their beautiful craft, as well as something richer than nostalgia: Like a time capsule, Wolfe's choices of literature, and his reproductions of cherished jacket designs, constitute a portrait of a period aesthetic, a sensibility, an ethos. We meet quite particular modern masters—Joyce, Nabokov, Beckett, Sartre, Burroughs, Proust, and so on, with diversions for fun into Chandler and Colette—plus a sprinkling of volumes on canonical artists: Picasso, Mondrian, Bacon. The works are made in for a generation's intellectual education.

We might notice, though, that no one, be they writer or subject, is young. Only a few aren't dead, in fact, and Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*, published in 1966, may be the newest book represented here. This gives the work an undertone that rubs against its bibliophilic luxe. For Arthur Danto, Warhol's Brillo boxes marked an end, of a kind, to art, being indistinguishable from commonplace objects; so one might see the Brillo works as elegies. The same is true of Wolfe's books, which, in sacrificing their pages of words to become sealed blocks, mark endings too—not just of literacy but of qualities of mind. Have those crates come out of the attic, or are they bound for it? The latter, surely, since one is a cow-pattern Gateway computer box: Long postdating its '60s contents, it must have been packed recently, not back then. The liquor logos on most of the other cartons offer equally inglorious endpoints for the brilliant corpses inside.

—David Frankel