

Elizabeth Tjepkema and Georgiana Phua at Nicole Villeneuve Gallery  
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The exhibition in the small, sixth-floor, Fine Arts Building space is entitled "IKEA" for good reason, as both Elizabeth Tjepkema and Georgiana Phua integrate the actual mass-produced Scandinavian designs into their installation-based works. However, this exhibition brings to mind less of the "assemble-it-yourself" nature of the designs, and more of the ways in which the brand's aesthetic has become so widely circulated and adopted, and the ways in which the middle-class attempt to create homey, domestic environments and incorporate them into our lives. Through Drew Noble's curation, the pairing of the artists not only reinforces their obvious connections to the theme, but also establishes them as foils, each coming to the IKEA brand as an artistic solution from vastly different perspectives.

Phua's works call to mind how many of us find ourselves attached to these un-unique, faux-wood veneered piles of particle-board, in spite of our better judgments. Phua's installation is at Nicole Villeneuve Gallery in its second manifestation, and was assembled not by the artist herself, but by the exhibition's curator, Noble. Phua's instructions called for Noble to gather actual IKEA items, such as a mouse pad, a file holder, a cheese knife, a desk chair a lamp and several side tables, donated by the curator's friends and family. Once assembled, these items are researched and labeled, using Phua's handmade tags composed of watercolor paper and linen string. The tags affixed to each item indicate the original sale price of each item, which is also the price that the items are for sale in the gallery.

These unexceptional items bear the wear-and-tear of use. That these items are donated out of the kindness of friends' hearts lends an overarching sweetness to the installation, a naïveté the curator describes as "unpopular" in contemporary art of the moment, and precisely the reason she was drawn to Phua's works in the first place. This vulnerability is reinforced by Phua's Like Home 2011, a handmade book in the style of the IKEA catalog, in which watercolor images of people in domestic spaces are lovingly painted, and the household items they are in contact with painted out. In both works of Phua's installation, the humanity embedded in these unremarkable objects prompts us to imagine the individuals who have lived with and cared for them.

In stark contrast to Phua's tender intentions, Tjepkema's three precisely placed works embody the aesthetic of the IKEA brand: clean and formal, with only a hint of humanity. In *Everything I Would Take to New York*, a drawing cataloging the artist's belongings sits atop several flat boards from a piece of deconstructed IKEA shelving, with the edges of the paper curling slightly. The IKEA shelf of Tjepkema's *Conversation Piece* exhibits an entire conversation between the artist and her husband, handwritten on strips of paper. The strips are of equal size and shape, adhered to the surface of the shelf ever so gingerly askew, a staged casualness reminiscent of the manner in which the haphazardly arranged piles of old-fashioned books in the IKEA ads are meant to help us imagine living comfortably in those excessively compartmentalized spaces.

Tjepkema's *Untitled (Graphite Wall Drawing)* is perhaps the most exquisite example of the artist's brand of lived-in formalism. A life-size silhouette of a peg-style coat rack is drawn directly onto the gallery wall, fittingly situated above the shoulders of the gallery-goers. This work's simple shape and neutral palette situates it in a unique place among art historical genres; somewhere between the mural tradition and a Richard Tuttle, the piece challenges the sterility of minimalism with the slightest nod to the homey and the decorative.

IKEA: Works by Elizabeth Tjepkema and Georgiana Phua was on display January 14 through January 30, 2011 at 410 S Michigan Avenue, Suite 629 Chicago. Upcoming shows include *Mailin' It In: A group exhibition of postcard size art*, February 11- February 28, 2011 and *Chinatsu Ikeda*, March 4- March 10, 2011.