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It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's... an "It" Bag

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I've never actually seen a Hermès Birkin bag. Most of what I know about these accessories, which I'm told go for as much as \$150,000 each, is based on Mark Khaisman's colored packing tape mock-ups, now on view at Philadelphia's Pentimenti gallery. Entitled "It is, on the other hand, a very beautiful bag," the exhibition includes a giant Birkin in low relief flanked by dozens of images on light box transparency.



Birkin Bag 2, 27 x 20.5 x 6 inches, Packaging tape on plexiglas with translucent resin light box, 2013, Courtesy of Pentimenti Gallery

Mimicking Internet chatter, Khaisman's work throws its hands up in resignation about the morality of possessing such a monstrously overpriced object at a time when "this economy" is putting hard-working Americans are being put out on the street. His \$6,000 - \$12,000 art objects made out of material that can be purchased for \$3.99 let you get in on that debate -- but at a lower price point.

Built against the glow of fluorescent light, the two-dimensional versions convey nothing of the feel, texture, or smell of a Birkin's leather -- if "leather" can rightly describe items made of ostrich or a salt water crocodile. Instead, Khaisman's overlapping vertical and horizontal bands of tape simulate the fuzziness of an enlarged phone camera image. Such deformation is appropriate because the fashion icons are typically glimpsed in the blur of the paparazzo's photograph. The bag's substance is as much internet gossip as old-world craft.

Khaisman's works owe their vivid colors -- red, green, yellow -- to the kinds of tape available to him. I cannot say how accurately these colors match those of the real bags. By overlapping two or more differently-colored tape bands, though, he arrives at a highly nuanced palette of his own, and by filtering the light behind, creates rich illusions of shadow.

The artist shows off the painstaking trial and error process he used to create his colors by displaying its by-product: a monstrous wad of discarded tape. Sure, this art is made out of warehouse throwaways -- but look at that workmanship!

Like pop art, Khaisman's works reproduce reproduction. Displayed one after another in their various colors, Khaisman's Birkins function like the magazine images (car crash, electric chair, Mao, etc.) that Warhol re-made a thousand times in silkscreen. In contrast to the bland flatness of news photographs or advertisements, these works acquire a gummy physicality from their maker's meticulous layering of tape. They are now one-of-a-kind multiples.



Birkin Bag 12, 27 x 20.5 x 6 inches, Packaging tape on plexiglas with translucent resin light box, 2013, Courtesy of Pentimenti Gallery

Just over 100 years ago, in an age like our own when businessmen too big to fail were proudly showing off their unsinkable yachts, economist Thorstein Veblen ignited a debate about whether individuals make rational decisions in the marketplace. Are we not distracted by the baser instinct to consume conspicuously, that others will take note of our social worth?

At the core of that debate is whether human beings are rational at all. We make good talk about use-value and the greatest-good-for-the-greatest-number, but in the end we are seduced--not just by the prospect of owning something that says "I don't work for a living," but by sheer beauty. Whether it's gold, diamonds, ostrich, or worthless packing tape, we like the way things look.

Starting at \$6,000 a pop, Khaisman's tape mockups of the fashion icons are a special kind of consumables. One might expect his humble medium to be impermanent, but packing tape's refusal to decompose actually interferes with the recycling of boxes. When, like Halston or Benetton, the Birkin is no longer a fashion necessity, the acid glow of the more modestly-priced Khaisman light box will remind you that in days past, people were willing to blow an entire year's earnings on a something-or-other bag.

Mark Khaisman's exhibition It is, on the other hand, a very beautiful bag, is on view March 1- April 13 2013 at Pentimenti Gallery, Philadelphia

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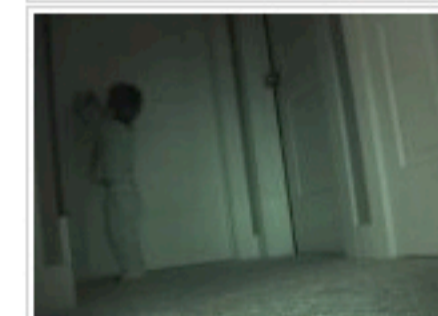
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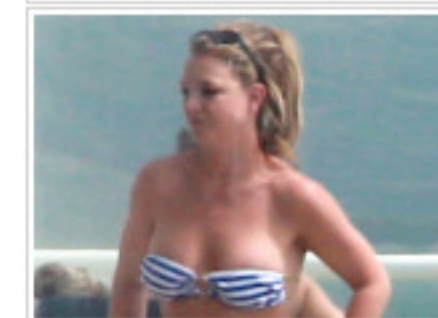
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