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The RISD Museum of Art Presents Styrofoam

PROVIDENCE, RI.- the RISD museum of art presents styrofoam, an exhibition of works by ten artists made of the commonplace material known for its light weight quality and wide application. Opening Friday, March 14 in the lower Farago Gallery, Styrofoam highlights both the earlier and current uses of this material by artists in a wide range of styles and approaches. The exhibition was organized by Judith Tannenbaum, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art. The artists in the exhibition are Heide Fasnacht, Tony Feher, Tom Friedman, Folkert de Jong, Steve Keister, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Pearson, Shirley Tse, Richard Tuttle, and B. Wurtz.

Styrofoam is not new to most artists as a material. Its cheap availability and malleability have made it a staple in the making of models and molds for casting. But today more artists are using it as a primary material or as subject matter in its own right. The exhibition presents a diverse group of artists who have found the material to be both inspiring and practical. Tannenbaum became interested in how artists were using styrofoam and foam products several years ago when she began to see it appearing more and more at galleries and art fairs. Since that time, she has discovered that there is a historical precedent by several established figures such as minimalist sculptor Carl Andre who created important works in the 1960s.

Since the 1960s, Richard Tuttle has produced an influential body of drawings, prints, artist's books, paintings, and sculptural objects composed of humble, everyday materials such as wire, cloth, string, pins, cardboard, plywood, bubble wrap, and styrofoam. Works from his Lonesome Cowboy Styrofoam series (1988) will be included in the exhibition along with the related book that he produced.

The exhibition is not a comprehensive survey of styrofoam art but rather a cross-section of diverse approaches by artists of different generations. In the center of the exhibition stands *The Piper*, a life-size portrayal of Abraham Lincoln by the young Dutch artist Folkert de Jong that caught the attention of Tannenbaum at last year's annual Armory Show in New York. "Ambitious and expressionistic," the painted and carved styrofoam work further prompted Tannenbaum to assemble this exhibition of objects both large and small. Tannenbaum had been aware of the use of styrofoam by artists such as Richard Tuttle, Tom Friedman, Tony Feher, and Shirley Tse, but she soon discovered others who worked in it, including Heide Fasnacht, Bruce Pearson, Steve Keister, Sol LeWitt, and B. Wurtz. Some reuse pre-existing elements that they find unexpectedly in the course of their daily activities, whereas others start with large industrial sheets. The ways in which they adapt or transform the material, whether purchased or found, may or may not contrast with its original intended function.

Above the de Jong Piper hangs Fasnacht's *Exploding Airplane*. Styrofoam's near-weightlessness makes it a perfect medium to be installed aloft, and Fasnacht deftly explores its gravity-defying properties in this silver-painted installation that seems frozen in the midst of obliteration. Tannenbaum suggests that styrofoam's challenges are also its assets. Taking advantage of the material's lightness and cheapness, as well as the ease with which it can be shaped, today's artists are carving, molding, casting from it, and assembling it into entirely new images and forms, and in the process are expanding the definitions of painting and sculpture.

The generic term styrofoam takes its name from the trademarked extruded polystyrene Styrofoam™ developed by Dow Chemical as a building material used for insulation. The ubiquitous foam material fashioned into take-out coffee cups, packing peanuts, or – as some of us may remember – the screechy containers once used for Big Macs, is made from expanded, rather than extruded, polystyrene. Although a German pharmacist first discovered natural plant-based polystyrene in 1839, it was not until the 1930s that the material was developed for manufacture and commercial application.

This exhibition was organized by Judith Tannenbaum, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art. She was named The RISD Museum's first curator of contemporary art in 2000. In 2002, she became the Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art, the Museum's first endowed position. At RISD she has organized *Wunderground: Providence, 1995 to the present* (2006); *Island Nations: New Art from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the Diaspora* (2004), *Betty Woodman: Il Giardino dipinto* (2005), *On the Wall: Wallpaper by Contemporary Artists* (2003), and *Jim Isermann: Logic Rules* (2000), among other exhibitions. From 1986 to 2000, Tannenbaum served variously as curator, associate director, and interim director at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.