

Ricky Swallow by Jen Hutton (Made in LA, June 2014)

From his early, uncannily real vanitas carved from wood to his wide range of works on paper, Ricky Swallow readily demonstrates his technical skill as a fabricator and draftsman. Perhaps not surprisingly, Swallow is also a first-rate looker and collector who relies on a sizeable physical and virtual archive of forms as source material. His current work, a series of “object studies” fabricated from cardboard and cast in bronze (2010–) perhaps best illustrates these inclinations. Each small sculpture nods to an item on Swallow’s hefty list of references: Werkstätte tableware, Memphis décor, Hans Coper’s vases, Alberto Giacometti’s early Cubist sculptures, Robert Therrien’s reductive domestic forms, Christina Ramberg’s typologies of chairs and other everyday objects, and so on.

In these works, Swallow also presents a romanticized version of modernism, or more specifically, a set of design concerns rooted in domesticity. Each object’s multiple views are pulled more tightly together, becoming a deliberately un-grand piece suited for tabletop or pedestal display. His borrowed forms sit comfortably in their typicality in as much as they effortlessly point to specific genres (modernist-style vases) or loaded subjects such as pipes and guitars (René Magritte and Pablo Picasso). As Swallow puts it, “As an artist, you are a guest to any material.” His newest bronzes delve further into abstraction, resulting in playful variations on his vocabulary of forms. For example, the edges of Cup/Unraveling’s (2013) hollow half- sphere peel away like the skin of an apple; and Staggered Vessel with Rings (2013), with its cascading shallow bowls, is a gravity-defying mise en abyme.

While the bronzes’ smaller scale applies more pressure to formal decisions such as color and shape, ultimately, the germinating idea for this work was about flipping a familiar process. Unlike his earlier carved-wood sculptures, these “object studies” allowed for more play: with the discarded cardboard, Swallow can build quickly, folding and gluing to construct simple forms or vignettes. Likewise, the medium offered a “readymade” surface that the artist had previously sought in his carved works.