

In her own words, artist Lauren Adams represents through her paintings situations that “take to task American consumerism”. Similarly, artist Jasey Jones layers images such as vintage advertising and contemporary packaging barcodes to create inescapable references to consumerism. Thorstein Veblen, noted nineteenth-century sociologist and economist, invented the term “conspicuous consumption” to refer to the practice of spending money on luxury goods as statements of economic power. Through their works in the exhibition, *Belongings Once Were*, Adams and Jones invite their viewers to consider the definitions and aesthetics of luxury vs. need through time, and the price of acquisition and who may have paid it. Most striking in the work of each artist is the frequent juxtaposition of famous paintings or delicate porcelain, objects synonymous with wealth and luxury, with sobering images of slave ships or receipts for the sale of children. Through layers of paint, paper, and porcelain, the artists also layer contrasting definitions of art, product, and the price of wealth.

The noted art historian, Leo Steinberg, once famously remarked that all art is about art in a groundbreaking article of the same title. In *Belongings Once Were* the viewer will recognize iconic artworks such as Gauguin’s French Polynesia, the Palace at Versailles, or English Garden porcelain. The artists, however, invite the viewer to look beyond the familiar images. In *Decorum #10*, Adams directs the viewer to consider the life of a Polynesian woman pre-European contact prior to her marketing and objectification. Similarly, *Decorum #7* invites one to consider the once rare and elegant pastime of taking tea against a representation of the tiles of the courtyard of Versailles, which were laid with backbreaking labor. In a clever and thought-provoking play on words, *Decorum #20* depicts luxurious Toile fabric by Brunschwig & Fils overlaid by silhouettes of slaves who helped make the creation of such fabrics possible: toil begets Toile.

Jones’s artworks are equally jarring as they compel the viewer to look deeper beyond consumer goods to the human experience they reflect. Delicate English and Chinese porcelains were frequent cargoes on eighteenth-century mercantile ships, as were slaves. In *Slave Ship Mutiny*, Jones uses the

material cargo, porcelain, to evoke considerations of the human cargo, South African slaves. The Dutch East India Company trafficked in goods, and humans as goods. Seeing the two together in one artwork startles the viewer into considering the connection.

In a second work, *Rosie's Tiger Scream*, Jones, through a disjointed self-portrait on porcelain, denotes human beings as collected fragments of experience. Interestingly, the works of both Adams and Jones highlight how luxury consumer goods can separate us from human experience. Conspicuous consumption can remove the buyer from any experience beyond the next purchase, or from consideration of how consumer goods came to be. In turn, the artists invite us to question that which luxury products can keep us from questioning: the human price and experience behind the wanting and acquiring. If all art indeed is about art, the works in *Belongings Once Were* call to mind the poet, William Wordsworth, who wrote in *The World is Too Much With Us*, "getting and spending we lay waste our powers". The poet questioned the early nineteenth-century burgeoning concern with accumulating commodities, just as the works of Adams and Jones invite the same question now and through time.

Historians who study material culture, broadly defined as anything made or modified by humans, read objects for what they reveal about the culture that produced them, much as traditional historians read documents. Art historians analyze form, technique, and subject matter to understand artistic creations as expressions of particular time periods and talents. The works in *Belongings Once Were* invite interest and contemplation because they merge artworks and objects into artworks once again. The paintings and porcelains both reflect and comment on consumer culture, past and present.

As contemporary artists, Adams and Jones enter a long-standing historical tradition of questioning the value of consumer goods, and a long-standing art historical tradition, particularly in the United States, of using art as medium for social commentary. Jones sees contemporary Americans as "locked inside a fruitful prison" of buying. Adams notes that she attempts to create a "capitalist sense of time"

by suggesting that consumer goods can make art expendable. Both artists demonstrate in varied and powerful ways that the pursuit of luxury can make the human producers expendable, or reduce life to fragments of undervalued experience beneath the primacy of buying. The works compel considerations of buying and selling; producing and consuming; looking and seeing. For each artist, artistic vision and creation invite the viewer to think deeply about qualities of life, work, and art.

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*Belongings Once Were*

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