

# Trash talks in sculpture show at Speedwell Projects

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By Daniel  
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Adriane Herman's "Out of Sorts" at Speedwell Projects features five large rectangular bales of recycled materials gathered and compressed by Ecomaine, as well as photographs, printed fabrics and benches created from repurposed materials.

The bales are essentially giant blocks of crushed cans or other recyclable materials. And Herman has not gone out of her way to present them as fussy aesthetic objects. On the contrary, as bits calve from the blocks, Herman lets them be. From one, for example, a wedge of old newspapers fell and was left to lie as it would.

## ART REVIEW

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**WHAT:** "Out of Sorts" by Adriane Herman

**WHERE:** Speedwell Projects, 630 Forest Ave., Portland

**WHEN:** Noon to 6 p.m. Thursday to Saturday; through Oct. 14

**INFO:** [speedwellprojects.com](http://speedwellprojects.com), 272-0863

To be sure, these are messy objects in more ways than one would expect from works of art. The cans – beer, soda and, among so many other types, bizarrely large quantities of cat food tins – are not completely clean, so they attract flies (which makes these objects unique in my many years of museum and gallery visits). To combat the flies, Herman has added fly traps to the scene, including the old type, featuring hanging strips of sticky paper and unnerving open jars of yellow liquid.

The blocks are fascinating, and it seems likely they will appear very differently to various viewers. Empty cans are light, for example, so some people will imagine the blocks are light. But compressed metal – even aluminum – is heavy, so others may see these as heavy objects. (At about 800 pounds each, the truth is closer to the metal-minded.)

Also, people coming to an arts venue to see the work by a major artist (Herman's works are held by major public collections such as the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and, among many others, the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven) expect to see art-made works, so many will assume Herman made these bales in her studio. (She didn't.)



Viewers peruse paper baled by Ecomaine for recycling with a detour to Adriane Herman's "Out of Sorts" exhibition at Speedwell projects.

By taking the art perspective, the bales enter some witty conversations and comparisons with minimalist work, such as "4,5,6" (2000), a group of three, rusting steel blocks by Richard Serra that sit in the entry courtyard of the Colby College Museum of Art. "4,5,6" is a challenging work, spartanly spare, heavy-feeling and industrial. With their busy, maximal look, Herman's pieces have a different feel, but they too challenge with an anti-aesthetic appearance. (This is beautifully apparent in black and white photographs of "Out of Sorts" I saw by photographer David McCaskill.) But minimalist forms are the basis for the sculptural wit in Herman's work: If you're up on sculpture, they engage (with ironic flare) with works by minimalist stars like Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Serra, among others.

Herman prints her photos of the recycling blocks on fabric, which she used to upholster the jury-rigged benches. She hangs about a dozen similarly printed scarves on pegs on the back wall, inviting viewers to wear them (in whatever way they wish) as they experience the exhibition.

The successful message of "Out of Sorts" is complicity. We consume. We discard. And even when we recycle, our consumption has an impact, an aesthetic. Herman's touch here is soft and empathetic. Her wit within the show gives the sense that we can laugh at ourselves, our follies, our failings. (Our mettle, you could say, is irony.) Here, Herman is not self-righteous or shrill, but inquiring and philosophical. And the work is playful in a recognizable way, the

way junkyards present fascinating possibilities to kids. These crazy, dirty and sometimes slightly dangerous objects (watch your hands: crushed cans can be sharp) are intriguing, even fascinating. One reason for this is the fact that the bales represent an interruption of the recycling process. Even if this doesn't strike you as patently obvious, the sense of journey and the current displacement are palpably uncanny.

The practically inexplicable oddness of the presence of the bales is enhanced by Herman's photos. Together it might be easy enough to describe them as scenes of bottles and things to be recycled as seen in the real world. But the images are quiet, subtle details like film stills of the oddest moments. We see a man's foot at a seat in a theater, for example. Of course, we pay attention to the man – it's a narrative after all – but Herman includes the image because of the plastic water bottle down behind the foot, an almost already forgotten afterthought by the time we find it. Another scene shows a pile of discarded lawn-waste bags. Another finds a Three Musketeers candy bar wrapper absently left behind on a couch. It might seem obvious: Sure, recycling stuff, right? But the photos in particular hint at a different strategy. What we are seeing are traces – evidence. The wrappers and cans, etc., are the footprints of our consumption – what we leave behind even when we believe we are walking away. But evidence is also what indicts us, the proof of our complicity, or worse.

But, again, Herman's touch is not heavy-handed. She doesn't tell us she's right and we're wrong. She doesn't chide. She doesn't lecture. (In fact, at the opening, she wore a dress made of fabric printed with her photos of recycled cans: She's in this no less than anyone else.) But she does offer the opportunity for the public to think about recycling, about the process, about the efforts, the ethic.

"Out of Sorts" is a surprising exhibition because it succeeds simultaneously on several levels. As an installation, it is creative and unusual, possibly unique. As sculpture, it is wittily engaged with its modernist precedents, including Minimalism and Pop art. As art, it has meaning, both in terms of aesthetic and moral content. And in terms of engaging the public, Herman presents some insight and education about a real issue that directly affects the community and the economy. "Out of Sorts" is a trashy show, but in a good way.

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