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Artist Ethan Hayes-Chute solves ‘problems’ with wit



MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER

“Spice Trade (Production Line)” by Ethan Hayes-Chute.

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CAMBRIDGE — Humans excel at finding solutions to “problems” that don’t always justify the description. That’s to say, we inflate “predicaments” (the word suggests a certain awareness of fate) into problems and then invent brilliant solutions. Viagra, for instance.

There’s something frenetic and even a bit hysterical about the process. But we’re so good at it!

A very droll show at MIT’s List Visual Arts Center by the Freeport, Maine-born, Berlin-based artist Ethan Hayes-Chute revolves around a video that confronts, indomitably, something between a predicament and a problem: How do you cook a frozen pizza?

It’s a problem if you’re hungry, obviously. But if you don’t have a functioning oven, if you’re a hoarder surrounded by random stuff, and if you are reduced to frozen pizzas for sustenance, it could be thought of more as a predicament, couldn’t it?

The video is part of a room-size installation that resembles a do-it-yourself workshop, replete with workbench, tools, wood shavings, clock radio, jars of screws, and bowl of empty pistachio shells.



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The room-size installation of works by Ethan Hayes-Chute.

You walk into it, and immediately feel unsure: Is this the space of a rational person who loves to make things and thereby solve problems — that exemplary type, a handyman? Or does it suggest the recent presence of a tinkerer who talks to himself and has wandered off the highway of life onto a country lane which is about to peter out in a lonely forest?

Whoever it is at least seems to have retained a sense of humor. Shelves to your left carry spice jars filled with homemade blends of “mixed granular contents” that have labels typed up on an old Epson HX-20 computer: “Truly, A Funky Blend,” “Mr Mayo’s Marvelous Mix,” “Mme. Panash’s Hot Mix Dune Spice,” and “Baba-Zito Ice.”

Two of the computers — widely regarded as the first laptops — are also part of the installation. (Hayes-Chute has described the HX-20 as “a sort of retro-futuristic concrete poetry device.”) One of the computers has been reprogrammed to function as a “data collector” addressing the pressing question of . . . how we like our eggs. Use the keyboard to type in your name, age, ZIP code, and how you like your eggs, and the computer will print out the results.

The whole installation is a delight — witty, full of subtle details, uncanny. But let’s return to the video at the heart of the show, “The New Domestic Woodshop,” and to the subject of inflating predicaments into problems: What can be done to transform a frozen pizza-for-one into a delicious, crispy, sizzling treat?

Hayes-Chute, a bearded, poker-faced presence with a tendency to swallow his words, sets to work, channeling the spirit of shows like “This Old House” and their YouTube spawn — those amateur tutorials that teach you how to do everything from unblock your drain to play forgotten hits from the 1980s on a pump organ. Lying around in his hoarder’s paradise, he happens to have two electric hot plates and a sheet of steel that he can fashion into a box. Cutting a hole in the top and bottom of the box, he places one hot plate below and one, upside down, on top.

Voila! A pizza oven.



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“The New Domestic Woodshop” videos (detail) by Ethan Hayes-Chute.

This, and a subsequent video, which shows the artist fashioning a round wooden platter on which the pizza can be sliced and served, constitute Hayes-Chute’s contributions to a collaborative project, “CONGLOMERATE TV,” founded recently in Berlin.

It is complemented by a third video, separate from the installation, called “Re-rolling Rolls of Paper Into Smaller Rolls.” The action described in the title is performed, ingeniously, with the help of an electric drill.

The footage, in black-and-white, is soothing and even rather mesmerizing to watch. Staring at this unfolding testament to human resourcefulness and can-do, I thought of something the German philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-69) once wrote: “That the world is out of joint is shown everywhere in the fact that however a problem is solved, the solution is false.”

Yes, I thought. But what if it’s not so much the solution as the problem that’s false? Who, after all, needs smaller rolls of paper? What was wrong with the slightly larger ones?