

Franklin Adams: A Retrospective

January 15 – February 13, 2009

Franklin Adams was an artist whose practice moved beyond the confines of any particular discipline, gaining assurance and fluency by crossing the boundary of so-called fine art to explore the fertile territories of architecture, illustration, graphic and interior design, and the collaborative arena of set and costume design. That all his work was informed and enriched by this creative cross-pollination was the reward for his courage and curiosity.

Throughout his professional career, he undertook significant projects in graphic design, one of the first being the redesign in 1966 of the format for the critically acclaimed *Tulane Drama Review*. Among a long and distinguished client list, probably his most noted design work in New Orleans is the graphic identity he created for Mignon Faget, Ltd. He was the man who, to a very large degree, 'branded' New Orleans, elegantly redefining the city's identity at a time when graphic design was handled in a somewhat cavalier manner.

His engagement with theater and performance was characterized by innovation early in his career. In the 1960s, Franklin Adams' design for *TDR* evolved into a collaboration with Richard Schechner, then editor of *TDR* and an assistant professor and producing director in Tulane's theater department. Richard Schechner's account of those times, *Franklin Adams and Me*, is included in this exhibition.

Despite his unassuming nature, the New Orleans art community has long recognized Franklin Adams as a painter, draughtsman and sculptor of excellence. His work from the 1960s explores abstraction with characteristic elegance. The small bronze sculptures suggest the distillations of graphic design while anticipating the stylizations of the series Franklin called his 'carpentered' pieces. The representation of the everyday object as icon is an idea that has persisted since the mid nineteenth century, originating in Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life*, reaching a climax in the mid twentieth century with the playful, rueful monuments of Claes Oldenburg and the cynical, ironic reflections of Andy Warhol. Others have imbued the everyday with associative or structural significance, constructing understated metaphors that invite but do not demand, interpretation. In such pieces as *Bed, Table, Window, Chain Link Fence* and *Bamboo Package*, Franklin Adams' knowing and reductive style shares the desire to mythologize the everyday object, be it personal or collective, that characterizes the work of such artists as Jasper Johns and Jim Dine, the latter of whom shared Franklin's engagement with the heart as icon. Franklin Adams is one of several significant American artists to revisit this paradigm in rejection of the limitations of 1950s aestheticism, a decision which helped to redefine the boundaries of art after Modernism.

The drawings of clothing he called *Layers of Intimacy* are his last body of work. In a culture in which so many people have lost so many 'things,' these drawings of clothing have an added poignancy in that they capture so eloquently the very specific ways in which we impress ourselves upon the accessories of our lives so that they become portraits of choice and temporality.

It is no exaggeration to say that the trajectory of Franklin Adams' career is in itself a cultural history of New Orleans during the fifty years he lived, so very completely, in this city. The curiosity, generosity and commitment that characterized his life have contributed immeasurably to the richness and diversity of New Orleans' unique art community.

Franklin Adams joined the faculty of the Newcomb College Art Department in 1958, becoming a member of the faculty of the Tulane School of Architecture's faculty for the last nineteen years of his teaching career.

--Carol Leake, Exhibition Curator