A Collection’s Contest Of Objects

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Some exhibitions are almost too smart for their own good. Especially in these days of post-post-everything, relational aesthetics, institutional critique and endless “interventions,” art shows can be so cerebral and self-conscious, so full of high-concept attitude, that the art is lost in the shuffle.

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"If You Lived Here, You’d Be Home by Now," at the Hessel Museum of Art at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, is a case in point. Organized by a fairly heavy-hitting troika, consisting of Tom Eccles, the director of the Bard Center; Lynne Cooke, the longtime curator at the Dia Art Foundation; and the artist Josiah McElheny, the exhibition often teeters on the brink of extreme curatorial pretentiousness and occasionally tips over, reducing the art on view to mere illustrations of agendas, or even space fillers. At the same time, its cross-fertilizing mixture of art and décor, form and function, and politics and aesthetics is too meaty and energetic not to succeed on some fronts.

Mr. McElheny comes across as the show’s driving force. Its center of gravity is very much the conflation of the disciplines, and histories, of art, craft, design and display, subjects that he regularly attends to in his own sculptures and installations.

According to the museum’s news release, the show is “about the life of the art object in domestic spaces,” but this benign-sounding description is not the half of it. The exhibition
At the Hessel Museum exhibition, a gallery includes a sculpture and a chair from Franz West's "Echolalia," and a Christopher Wool painting, "I Can't Stand Myself When You Touch Me."

Where Blinky Palermo replaces Martha Stewart.

Paul Evans (int by the dealer Amalia Dayan and her husband, Adam Lindemann) contains works by Mr. Knebel, Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys and Mr. Wool. But these assorted art-works and artifacts mostly provide a beautifying frame for a riadantly simple wrap-around apron-dress by the artist Andrea Zittel, displayed on a mannequin. Mode of green wool felt with a wobbly band of white up its center, it dominates the room like a vision seemingly fashioned from shimmering moonlight and seaweed, while also pointing up the haphazardness of the larger display.

In general, the mash-ups enhance by default an appreciation of the white cube gallery as a facilitator of visual concentration. But they can also emphasize, in interesting ways, how art implices our physical selves. One room features a projection of Chantal Ackerman's 1971 "Dans le Miroir," an early short film of a beautiful, scantly clad young woman turning this way and that before a full-length mirror, ruthlessly evaluating her physical attributes. It shares the space with one other object: "Thorsid's" Barge, a large carved-foam sculpture-cum-couch draped with white cotton that Mr. Chamberlain made in 1980-81. The combination is simplistic but effective: reclining on the couch to watch the film can become a test of your ease with your own body.

Three other videos in different galleries amplify the complex psychological overtones of disgust and infatuation hinted at in Ms. Ackerman's video. Jason Simon's haunting "Vera," from 2003, gives us a young woman, a recovering but still delusional shopaholic, discussing her addiction alternately as an illness, a form of collecting and a kind of art form. In the 2006-6 video (made with Jeff Preiss) "May I Help You," Andrea Fraser reprises her classic institutional-critique performance as an art dealer whose sales pitch slides seamlessly among reverence and hostility, privilege and deprivations, cataloging and skewering various stereotypical relationships to art.

And Michel Auder's "Chasing the Dragon" from 1971-87, starring Eric Bogosian, melds autobiographical documentary with a stagy tale of bohemian dissipation based on William Burroughs' "Junkie." Sleepy and pretentious, it nonetheless ends the show with a needed jolt, which is a glimpse of the strange, often desperate place that most art comes from.