

PROFILE: MATHIEU MERCIER MARK RAPPOLT

What connects Alexander Rodchenko to Combat® Source Kill cockroach poison? It's not the fact that the Constructivist once dabbled in theatre designs for a 1929 Mayakovsky play called *The Bedbug*. Nor is it anything to do with keeping uninvited guests out of his 1925 Worker's Club installation. What links the two is an apparently simple stack of cardboard boxes.

Combat (After Rodchenko) (2003) is sculpture by the young French artist Mathieu Mercier.



Boxes of the branded insecticide have been stacked according to the pattern of Rodchenko's *Spatial Construction No. 30 (1920-1)*. At first it all seems like a bit of a joke, the work of some demented hardware-store employee who's read one too many art history books and evidently has a little too much time on his hands. Or perhaps it's something designed to raise a chuckle from a very limited gang of artworld cognoscenti. The combination of Rodchenko's utopian experiments in the rational ordering of standard component parts with the garish packaging of contemporary consumer goods leaves the ensemble stranded somewhere between the supermarket checkout counter and the whitewashed gallery wall. In that respect it's like an Absolut vodka advertisement and, not surprisingly, Mercier has already done one of those (it's an Absolut bottle turned into a lamp stand).

So, Mercier is a man who turns product placement into an art form. And in his various adaptations of Rodchenko he's done it with a whole series of garishly packaged

American products including Glad rubbish bags (Rodchenko's No.21), Good & Plenty sweets (No.22) and Aim toothpaste (No. 23) (all 2003). It's as if Andy Warhol has been put in charge of a Soviet-style five-year plan in the strangest fusion of East and West. But while there is undoubtedly humour in the work, it offers more than just a chance for a few gallerists to have a giggle. In fact, you could see *Combat* as a very logical extension of the Constructivist command that every man should 'take the shortest road leading to the factory'. And in that respect Mercier is simply giving Rodchenko a helping hand. Perhaps he shows how successful Rodchenko was in his attempts to provide art with a universal language. Perhaps this is even progress: where the Russian was forced to make his constructions out of bits of wood, and make cryptic statements about factories and industry, Mercier has shiny, boxed products to make his stack. And in the ultimate victory of cleanliness and efficiency, there won't be cockroaches or litter anywhere in sight.

Indeed, Mercier takes these kinds of stacking experiments to a whole other level. *Cubes (1998)* is a series of five-sided cubes that fit one inside the other like a series of stripped down Russian dolls. Collected together they make an attractive-looking geometric sculpture (albeit with a cheap-looking melamine top); when unpacked and combined with a simple telephone they create what you might describe as the ultimate cubist office (the largest cube becomes the desk, the smallest a pen-holder), a statement of rational order,

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innovative DIY handicraft. It is a transformation that is at once magical (in its exploration of the potentials of simple materials) and boring (in its sheer repetition), a reflection and, to some degree, a celebration of a world in which an environment or a lifestyle comes packaged in a box. Get enough cubes and you can make of them what you want. Rodchenko is not the only Modernist to get the Mercier treatment; look at the series of works titled *Drum and Bass* (2003). At first glance you might recognise the wall-mounted works as being copies of paintings by Mondrian: those familiar black-lined grids set

against a white background with the odd block of vibrant primary colour. On closer inspection they turn out to be cheap flatpack shelves, supporting clumps of variously coloured plastic objects, such as ring binders, jerry cans and tool trays, which have practical uses to do with filing, ordering, collecting and containing. As a singular item it is an artwork, when broken down it is simply an accumulation of cheap, but relatively pretty, things.

While the title of the series points viewers towards a DJ culture of samples and remixes (and, for fans of artworld references, updates Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942 - 43)), the work also connects with the kind of thing we see almost every day on the television – DIY and home improvement shows in which we are told that we can create any effect cheaply and make everything ourselves. *Drum and Bass* celebrates Mondrian as a bridge between art and design by chromatically cataloguing consumer objects. In doing so, Mercier reveals Mondrian's artworks to be filing systems, and Mondrian himself to be the art world's equivalent of a supermarket shelf-stacker. As much as it belongs in the gallery, *Drum and Bass* is very much a part of a world of wood laminates, plastic chandeliers, sprayed marble effects, jigsaws and MDF drawers. It's a world in which everything, artworks, designer goods and houses included, has an equivalent in something else. And that's why Mercier never prescribes the way his work should be seen: one man's set of DIY shelves is another's artistic bricolage.