

# AMERICAN SHIPS

TINA RIVERS

Tina Rivers

Traditionally, the image of a ship on the horizon line represents our desire for either rescue or escape. But in Zak Kitnick's series American Ships, the titular ships are less a metaphor than a case study in the phenomenology of perception: Though rationally, we understand the ship on the horizon to be a three-dimensional object with mass and volume, when viewed from a great distance, it dematerializes into a flat image, or mirage. This tension between abstract knowledge and perceptual experience informs much of Kitnick's oeuvre, and in American Ships, it manifests as a revived dialectic between presence and absence, object and image, depth and flatness.

The series was inspired by Kitnick's collection of the typological posters of foods (such as fruits, vegetables, cheeses, or dry goods like pastas)

that one finds in middlebrow kitchens and suburban restaurants. Formally, these posters suspend vivid, close-up, dead-pan photographs of individual specimens in the flat space of a monochrome background. Though the photographs document the appearance of the specimens in great detail, the specimens themselves are removed from their physical contexts and placed in a diagrammatic space, hearkening back to early modern illustrations of the natural world.<sup>1</sup> But the deployment of the visual language of scientific objectivity is ironic: these posters provide no information about their specimens (aside from their appearance), eschewing even the spatial order of taxonomy for arrangements that maximize visual pleasure through symmetry or other formal devices. The relationships between the

American Ships

specimens—such as their respective places of origin, or how they might be genealogically connected, or what their different culinary uses might be—are therefore repressed, in favor of their visual correspondences. In sum, aesthetics trumps knowledge.

In the mode of the assisted ready-made, Kitnick's American Ships reproduce and recombine elements of these posters, transforming the base material through the medium of direct-to-substrate UV prints on conjoined steel shelves. This medium preserves the industrial aspect of the posters, as well as some of their visual and tactile flatness, as the ink is actually a plastic that is bonded to the surface of the metal, in a manner similar to the manufacturing of high-end commercial signage (industrial forms of production and distribution are never far from Kitnick's mind). The flatness of the posters is heightened by the deliberate misalignment of the print, creating an empty plane that functions as an internal frame: In American Ships, the same monochrome plane that served as background to the specimens in the posters itself becomes foreground to the silver coating of the steel shelves, visually bracketing the illusory depth of the originals. The works therefore echo those of Andy Warhol both in tone (with their complicated relationship to seductive imagery) and appearance (through the use of misalignment and visual spacing, which underlined Warhol's use of mechanical forms of reproduction and, as Thomas Crow has argued, created a kind of palate cleanser in an increasingly saturated visual economy).<sup>2</sup>

The use of formal devices to flatten pictorial space not only underlines the disconnect between the images and the objects they purport to represent, but also shifts our attention from the specimens themselves to the logic that governs their arrangement in space—especially given the noticeable seams of the shelves, which divide the pictorial field into quadrants. As with the original posters, the arrangement is governed by aesthetic, not scientific, principles. By highlighting this logic—a logic embedded in the original posters, which are a mainstay of American popular culture—Kitnick draws our attention to the principles that govern the organization and distribution of information, but which typically go unexamined. In other words, Kitnick's work shines an anti-septic light not simply on the uses and abuses of power, but on the aesthetics that govern the information networks through which that power circulates.<sup>3</sup>

As made apparent by some of the more recent works in the series—which fragment and recombine the source material in an obvious fashion—pastiche remains one of the predominant aesthetics of information today. In violating the integrity of the original picture planes to create new “remixes,” these works point to the new hegemony of the non-Albertian pictorial space championed by Microsoft's Windows, as well as the processes of aggregation and recombination that undergird “the information economy.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, our decentralized knowledge bases and discontinuous pictorial fields are paralleled by a new world order, which is also reflected by Kitnick's newer works, in a most literal sense: given that the posters upon which these works draw are frequently enlisted to perpetuate nationalist stereotypes (one typically finds the tomato posters in Italian restaurants, the

cheese posters in French restaurants, etc.), the recombination of specimens reminds us that geopolitical boundaries are another underlying structure that continue to be remixed, from the formation of the E.U. to the Arab Spring.

The notion of geopolitics brings us to the second valence of the title of American Ships: as Kitnick has pointed out, “ships” functions as both a noun and a verb. Aside from referring to the literal distance between objects and images, “ships” draws our attention to the movement of commodities around the world by international corporations—entities whose sovereign power increasingly challenges that of nation-states. Another work about shipping, Allan Sekula's Fish Story (1988-95), argues that production today remains slow, laborious, and geographically-defined, contrary to the conjoined rhetorics of virtualization and globalization; Kitnick's American Ships approaches the problem from the other end, examining the role of consumption, or taste, in the circulation of commodities. After all, the specimens on the posters are typically perishable food products, and their ability to be consumed (i.e., to taste right) across national and international markets is a function of the speed and seamlessness of shipping. Thus, taste is a function of time, literally, and also in the sense that a culture's tastes are historically contingent. In this light, Kitnick's remixing of different food types is a visual metaphor for the ways that cuisines are being “fused” and crops are being “engineered,” with cultural, economic, political, and environmental ramifications.

But American Ships isn't only about the globalization of our culinary tastes—it's also about our taste for art, and for images more broadly. Because the works are printed on flat, modular

steel shelves of the type you would see in a “big box” store, they suggest the ways in which the art market today is imbricated with international shipping (specifically, the flat-pack system most of us associate with IKEA) and also the science of commodity marketing and display. But even as they refuse the mythology of art’s ivory tower, they insist that (some) works of art are more than a line item in an investment portfolio, or a cool image to be circulated on social media: **Primarily, Kitnick’s American Ships are images (and compelling ones at that), but like Donald Judd’s “specific objects,” they are also concrete forms that project away from the wall and into our space. In this regard, they emphasize that information—even visual information—is not yet fully virtual, but rather, continues to take form only through specific and concrete materials, technologies, processes, and protocols. The ship on the horizon is always a ghostly image, but the closer we sail, the more corporeal she becomes.**

- 1 Notably, this model was resisted by the American naturalist John James Audubon; Jennifer L. Roberts has argued that his insistence on depicting his specimens in their native contexts is a symptom of the same anxiety over the incommensurability of image and object that informs Kitnick’s project. See Jennifer L. Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
- 2 See Thomas Crow, “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol,” *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 49-65.
- 3 David Joselit has written extensively on the effect of new information technologies on art; see, for example, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- 4 On the historical transformation of pictorial space, see Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).