

Jean Wells, Hot Lips, 2010. Glass mosaic tiles. H 30, W 36 in.

Jean Wells

"Re-Pop"
David Richard Contemporary
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For someone working with explosive colors, hot topics, and shimmering glass, Jean Wells is noticeably reticent. Her glass mosaic sculptures could illuminate a dark room—but she's willing to simply to leave the lights on. That is, she lets her large gestural works speak for themselves, with minimal commentary on her part.

The California-based sculptor crafts larger-than-life consumer objects and brings them to life (or some silver-screen estimation of it) with her custom-created mosaic glass tiling. Using the Byzantine tile techniques she learned from her father, the mosaic artist Thomas Wells, she dresses up everyday objects such as crayons, hats, and even a toilet bowl, with the glitz and glamour of Vegas showgirls.

In her solo exhibition "Re-Pop," 14 pieces represent the sort of nauseous frenzy one can find by flipping through cable channels or peering into America's overstocked closets.

Gaga—a shimmering, two-foot-tall torso with a nude backside and a front clothed only by thoughtfully placed, ornate crystal brooches—greets window shoppers in downtown Santa Fe.

To her left, fresh red lipstick stands uncapped and ridiculously bold. It is likely the same product, ostensibly, that contours the plump, red-wax-candy lips of *Hot Lips*, another Wells work that beckons from further inside the gallery, longing for one more touch-up to happiness.

Taking up the opposite window display (perhaps an appropriate artistic concession; the works are for sale, after all), a cowboy hat and boots as well as a series of Hershey Kisses glisten. Each of the Kisses, scaled to the size of a rotisserie chicken, is outfitted with the product's trademark paper tag, lest one forget the brand's entrenched marketing. The texture of the mosaic glass sumptuously mimics the iconic chocolate's crumpled aluminum casing. With these pieces, Wells successfully evokes the disheartening primacy of mass-produced foods, which have been marketed to appeal to sexual as much as epicurean desires.

The mosaics are largely monochromatic, letting the light that catches their glass contours account for shading. Adornments made from other media—a gun and a badge in metal relief tucked in here, iridescent blue-green feathers there—add contrast to the glasswork.

The disparate objects in "Re-Pop" fit together with a logic befitting our culture's short attention span; these pop-culture signifiers share the same physical and theoretical space on billboards and marketing detritus across the land. In fact, from the subject matter one could

create *Cosmopolitan* cover lines: "Lady Gaga Rocks Backless, Meatless Dress," "Get Redder, Fuller Lips Now," "Shed Pounds by Eating Chocolate?"

With the representations creating so much white noise on their own, Wells keeps mostly to the background. She never explicitly makes a judgment—positive or negative—about her subject matter. The lipstick could be considered bright and beautiful, or a commentary on impossible female beauty standards; Wells doesn't say which. She does, however, offer one hint. Her Fishbowl is a clear-glass mosaic commode that sparkles, the disaffected (and disinfected) endpoint of much of what we buy. Within the Lysol-blue bowl hides the exhibition's sole human face—and the only subject unadorned with glass—wearing goggles with closed eyes beneath real water. Above, two beautiful orange goldfish flit about in the toilet bowl water, wide-eyed and openmouthed, in striking contrast (they are in fact real) to the human face and the rest of the exhibition. The fish provide a jolt of reality amid a world that has forgotten what reality means. Indeed, the piece suggests that we humans are so drowning in a world of products and their attendant marketing, we can't see what's unfolding before our eyes.

Like her Pop Art predecessors—Andy Warhol,
Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg—Wells
dabbles in the everyday. While her works are
not a mindless celebration of pop culture,
they're not an outright denouncement, either.
Like her Pop forebears, she skirts the line
between indulging in and critiquing consumerist
culture, providing just enough commentary—
with her choice of a consumerist theme and
Fishbowl—to demonstrate at least uneasiness
about her subject matter.

As Lichtenstein said when discussing Pop Art in a 1963 interview: "Well, it is an involvement with what I think to be one of the most brazen and threatening characteristics of our culture, things we hate, but which are also powerful in their impingement on us."

Similarly, "Re-Pop" presents a wedge of American consumer culture that needs few footnotes, due to the indelible grip the objects represented have on their audience. Wells simply coordinates a savvy portfolio of related iconography and says it with a Kiss.

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