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**VOICE**

## Jason Dodge Creates Compelling Environments For Those With Enough Patience

By R. C. Baker  
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Exhibition view, *We are the meeting.*, 2014. Photo: Jean Vong Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

“I am happy to answer any more questions. I never intend specific meaning, so my answers may seem circular. You are the conduit for the meaning. Best, Jason.”

Well, um . . . thanks.

Perhaps, as a critic, I should welcome such *carte blanche* from an artist who answered by e-mail — indeed, in a rather circular fashion — a few questions about his current show. (Dodge, born in Pennsylvania in 1969, lives in Berlin.)

And questions are in order when the first thing you notice in the gallery’s entrance area is what looks to be a forgotten bag of groceries. Then you see that same bag noted on the exhibition list as *The beginning and the end*. (A second grocery bag resides in the last gallery.)

There’s no doubt that food, along with air, are staples of beginning, then sustaining, life. And somehow, with just a smattering of objects in the gallery’s otherwise empty spaces, Dodge makes such quotidian fundamentals radiant.

Take, for example, a large wicker basket woven by a blind man in Germany and set out on the floor. Dodge told me that his question to the craftsman was, “in the mind’s eye how big of a basket could you make?” For the exhibition, Dodge has attached a brightly burning spotlight low on the wall, while another, bolted to the empty basket, is turned off but glows nonetheless, because the two bulbs face each other in a gentle kiss.

This luminous embrace foretells its own demise, however. Should the basket meet its destiny and be filled with something weighty — a curled-up body would fit nicely — the pressure pushing at its flexible sides could easily cause the caressing bulbs to shatter. This possibility creates a palpable awareness of the air in the basket and the fragile intensity of the light, an awareness also kindled in the rear gallery, where unlit florescent tubes are scattered on the floor, some wrapped in rose-colored gels. Throughout each day, the gallery's staff systematically switches out the overhead white and rose lights, gradually changing the color of the space. During our visit the light was perhaps three-quarters rose, the walls at the divide seemingly spray-painted pink over white. After our eyes absorbed the hue for a bit, the gray floors and white walls of the adjoining galleries appeared to take on a greenish cast, creating a sort of walk-in Josef Albers color study.

An electrical cord runs horizontally a little above head level along the walls of these front rooms, like the rim of a vast bowl. This oddly delineated volume calls out in turn to the latent expansiveness of the basket's sides and, by extension, the expansiveness inherent to art, which is always reconnoitering the frontiers of being.

In some corners, Dodge has scattered pine needles and other sweepings from the holidays in a surpassingly ephemeral piece titled *We carry our sleeping children*. This gentle phrase might conjure Christmas Eve dotting; considering the thin metal tube filled with poison hemlock seeds that pokes through walls and runs along the middle of the floor, those words could also imply tragedy. A yellow pillow titled *The mayor is sleeping*. *The mayor of Nuremberg is sleeping* lies on the floor next to a prone metal chimney. That title charges this pairing with ghastly associations, Nuremberg being the spiritual seat of Nazism — although its current mayor, a progressive social democrat, represents the antithesis of Germany's ashen past. Dodge's deft visual chops create a compelling environment that rewards the patient viewer with intimations of delight, woe, and uneasiness — to pluck rather bluntly from the varied emotions his juxtapositions arouse. His titles engender an even broader nimbus of history, art theory, and speculation.

One can easily follow various connections between objects to far-flung conclusions. Here's one rabbit hole to dive into: Combine the poison with the precariously positioned light bulbs, the chimney, and Nuremberg, and it might occur to you that hemlock is an ancient method of choosing the exact time of one's demise, a bit of control in a chaotic, sometimes savage world. Those seemingly abandoned groceries might bring forth a vision of last meals, followed by a flash on da Vinci's *Last Supper*, an image that powerfully transmits its drama of death foretold, despite centuries of erratic conservation that have left it faded and abraded.

Similar to that tale's ultimate resolution, Dodge achieves something of a resurrection for his objects: Enigmatic grace emanating from utilitarian dross.

Or not. Go judge for yourself. If I am the conduit of meaning, then so, too, are you.