

Anna Elise Johnson, Structural Adjustment at The Mission

By Danielle Wilcox



Courtesy of The Mission

Upon entering The Mission's current show, *Structural Adjustment*, visitors are immersed in the orange and yellow glow from the front window collage, which serves as the most literal translation of what the artist wants her viewers to understand about the structures that unfold around the room.

From there, the shapes of Anna Elise Johnson's acrylic blocks are lit so that the layers of appropriated photographs create a stained glass effect, almost church-like, and cast colored light behind and around each prism.

Blocks are cleanly displayed and carefully lit on their personalized white pedestal, and each piece has a twin, a mirror, appearing either directly adjacent or facing it, as

if the conversations taking place in each collage are solely dialogues meant for only each other.



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The show is aptly named. The trapezoidal and rectangular collages, some which call to mind vessels, are thoughtfully shaped. They carry the layers of appropriated imagery of leaders from the Monetary Fund, World Bank, U.S. State Department and other heads of state undergoing “structural adjustment — term for loans provided to countries that experience economic crisis. In a highly accessible, and all together aesthetically pleasing play of light and texture, the work appears to be all but empty. If anything, there is too much to look at. The eye is overwhelmed at its task to identify each shape and understand its overall significance to Johnson’s critique on the ritualistic performance of enacting policy through leaders, politicians who remain completely isolated from those they politic for.

Studying the side of the blocks is where the message become more complicated. Nothing more than thin lines pressing clear, empty slabs of plastic compose the pieces. It's as if the collages, so dense and meaningful when viewed from the front, are eviscerated into empty stills as soon as one looks more closely. The light from each, as noted before, transcend the blocks. Their colored shadows reach beyond themselves and manipulate the space around them, which is no coincidence.

“Table II” is a collage of dinner tables and meeting spaces. Viewers can then imagine the type of decadence implemented when these leaders meet. How detailed the place settings were, how expensive the food and drink must have been. These are the symbols Johnson is focusing in on and exploding in her acrylics. The mundane objects act as props and help further abstract the policy makers from the economies their decisions affect. One can continue to imagine the assemblage of other props in place to increase the theatricality of these hand-shaking stages: tailored suits, leather shoes, silk neckties and clean hands. What appears to be isn't, Johnson is saying. Let us not be overwhelmed by the thickly composed collages of each acrylic block, but remember the emptiness that exists between each carefully colored and formed façade.

Anna Elise Johnson's *Structural Adjustment* is on display through April 23rd at THE MISSION, 1431 W Chicago Ave.