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LOUIS VUITTON'S DISCRIMINATING SUPPORT FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

BY IRINA MAKAROVA

KOBE — Through recent collaborations with celebrated artists, the French luxury fashion brand Louis Vuitton has sought to make its name synonymous with cutting-edge contemporary art. In 2007, Richard Prince's *Nurse* paintings (2002–06), based on covers of pulp novels, inspired the outfits and attitude of a Vuitton runway collection. Later that year, Takashi Murakami placed a stand-alone Vuitton boutique in the center of his survey exhibition at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA). The company also has longterm artistic ambitions: the Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation, a contemporary art museum in Paris' Jardin d'Acclimatation, will open later in 2010, and the Louis Vuitton Young Arts Project, a collaboration with five London museums to enable "younger, often less

privileged people to access the art world," launched on May 12.

It was ironic, then, that nine works by 42-year-old artist Mitsuhiro Okamoto had been pulled from display on May 7, at Vuitton's request, from the Kobe Fashion Museum's group show, "A Strange Tale of Fashion." Okamoto's soft, toy-like sculptures of locusts covered in monogrammed cloth from Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Fendi, Gucci and Coach had been shown since April 15. A May 6 letter from the brand demanded that the works be removed from the museum and the artist's website, and not be exhibited publicly again. Presupposing that Okamoto's works were fabricated from counterfeit merchandise, Vuitton claimed that the artist's chosen materials promoted the market for cheap, black-market handbags.

The series, entitled "BATTA mon" (2007–10), comments on the destructive influence that luxury status holds on contemporary society: *batta* means "locust" and *batta-mon* means "knockoff." The works are typical of the Kyoto-based Okamoto's oeuvre, which routinely satirizes value in contemporary society. In *Euro Ring* (2002), for example, the artist cut out the center of a one euro coin, leaving a starred ring that can be worn as a piece of jewelry, its indeterminable value proudly displayed.

Can a corporation, apart from its ownership of a logo, also have ownership of a voice? Had the work been created in the United States, according to copyright lawyer Leslie Steinau, Okamoto would have been protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution, since they express "artistic relevance," are not commercial products and do not claim the corporation's involvement. Okamoto explained to *ArtAsiaPacific* that he had not created the series to profit from ▶▶

MITSUHIRO OKAMOTO, *BATTA mon LV*, 2007, sculpture made from found Louis Vuitton-branded fabric. Courtesy the artist.

▶▶ Vuitton's reputation. The artist's aim was to critique the relationship between appearance, illusion and value in a commercialized society, yet Vuitton failed to find aesthetic value in the work. The company's interest apparently goes no further than basic legal issues regarding the use of their trademark and the image of the 150-year-old brand. It is important to note that none of the other luxury brands used in Okamoto's work have issued objections to the sculptures. Louis Vuitton's public relations department declined to comment for this article.

Okamoto has not disclosed whether the bags came from illegal sources, as the ambiguity of authenticity and value informs his project. Takashi Murakami spoke of a similar ambiguity when he sold stretched and framed factory leftovers as "limited edition" Vuitton prints in his 2007 MoCA exhibition, but his artistic statement had Vuitton's approval. Art collector Clint Arthur sued the corporation after purchasing USD 12,000 worth of those works, claiming that Vuitton had violated the Fine Prints Act of California, which requires that the origins of multiples be fully disclosed. The fact that the "prints" were essentially manufacturer's scraps was not revealed when the works were sold. Arthur's initial suit was dismissed when he refused a refund on moral grounds, and he continues to pursue the case.

This corporate caprice has precedent in the 2008 example of Nadia Plesner, a Dutch student who created a charity T-shirt for the humanitarian campaign Divest for Darfur that depicted a starving child holding a Vuitton purse. Plesner's use of Vuitton's logo resulted in a lawsuit threatening fines of \$7,500 for each day she continued to sell the product, each day she shared the cease-and-desist letter and each day she wrote the words "Louis Vuitton" on her website. The logo was removed from the shirt.

In April 2008, Vuitton forced the Parisian boutique Colette to close a six-day window installation after five days by threatening to sue Cyril Duval, a French conceptual artist who works under the name Item Idem, for displaying a sculpture of a suit of armor made from multiple fake Vuitton bags. Again, the company claimed that the artwork tacitly endorsed the counterfeit market.

While the elite artists of the art world are licensed as promotional tools to multiply profit and cachet, Louis Vuitton continues to stifle unendorsed artwork. In November, the artist will display the "BATTA mon" series at the Contemporary Arts and Spirits space in Osaka. The gallery is aware of Vuitton's position, and remains enthusiastic to exhibit Okamoto's work. ■