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BEST OF

by

NIMER ALECK

Under the Direction of Ruth Stanford

### ABSTRACT

The majority of modern popular trophies seem to act as memorials to small victories. Foiled plastic figures sitting atop extruded tubes of holographic tape are given for everything from internationally recognized achievement to participation in regional events. These architectural sculptures are icons of success. This thesis explores the themes, processes, and contexts that inform the ways that we perceive value. Using the iconography of the popular modern trophy, this thesis and the artwork associated with it examines the constructs of value within visual culture. My goal is to display and understand the way we appreciate and define that which implies worth.

INDEX WORDS: Value, Award, Trophy, Award proliferation, Craftsmanship, Industry, Surface design, Perception, Context, Fine art, Sculpture, Woodcarving, Casting, Plastic

BEST OF

by

NIMER ALECK

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011



BEST OF

by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2011

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my friends, colleagues, and family.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the hard work, patience, and profound criticism of my thesis committee. Thank you: Ruth, George, and Kimberly.

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## **Artist Statement**

I have immersed myself in observation, research, and pensive commentary on our existing culture of consumption. This interest has fueled the contrast between my personal ideals regarding consumerism and the observation of my own addiction to the act of consumption. How we consume, the materialization of value, and the flux in our value system created by an inherent lack of conservation are rapidly becoming major themes in my artistic conscience. I wish to create a dialog with the viewer that questions the relationship between who we are and what we have.

## **Purpose of Study**

This body of work focuses on the proliferation of award culture and the effects of industrial production techniques on our perceptions of value. By drawing on the iconography of the popular modern trophy, it is my intent to display and understand the way we appreciate value in its many forms. Materials and techniques have been chosen in order to point out visual tools used by industry to alter our recognition of value. It is my goal to expose the disconnect between perceived and tangible worth.

## **Personal Background**

While carrying a trophy picked from a curbside trash pile, I found myself repeatedly approached by people on the street. As individuals approached, they commented on the trophy I carried and speculated as to my accomplishments. Some acted out with displays of skill, attempting to earn from me the small award of extruded plastic topped with a small golden car. This was the moment when my interest in the iconography of the modern trophy took root. While the desire to be rewarded with these objects of distinction and the surface observations of their function had long been part of my personal history, I found myself increasingly aware of a wide fluctuation in their projected value. In addition, I increasingly found myself coming across examples of these trophies in my daily life.

There is a theory of recognition proposing that if you ask a person how many red barns they see each day during their commute, the sum is likely to be unknown. Once the question is posed, there is a heightened awareness of the existence of each red barn encountered in the future. In the following days, the sum of red barns between point A and point B is likely to be a known quantity. In addition, one is likely to recognize the red barn in exponentially more instances outside of the two points. With the wide breadth of experiences in daily life, the way we experience and recognize the world around us is, in part, governed by where an idea or event sits in the hierarchy of our consciousness. A marble base with holographic columns and shiny gold ornamentation has been my red barn for the past two years.

As a young adult, many of my pursuits held the possibility of earning an award of distinction. Be it through sports, music, art, or academics, each accomplishment was physically commemorated by trophies, medals, or ribbons. Eight years after I had earned my last athletic championship trophy, the icon of the popular modern trophy moved to front of the line in my artistic consciousness. Softball trophies in restaurants, “Best of” plaques in car repair shops, and an astounding assortment of trophies and plaques at thrift and second-hand stores became difficult to ignore. As commonly used, a trophy is an object given to a specific group or person, at a specific time, in recognition of a specific achievement. It makes little sense that one would discard such a specific signifier of achievement and even less that such an object could make its way back to a market of consumption. Immediately, I began collecting these second-hand trophies. As the collection of awards grew so did the aura of accomplishment that surrounded it. The visual impact of a random assortment of trophies from other people’s accomplishments is indistinguishable from the specific and earned collection of awards in an individual’s or an institution’s trophy case.

Functioning as a glass mausoleum, trophy cases are where the memorials of our accomplishments retire, becoming symbols of the past and no longer the center of any focus. Instead, the eye begins to understand the collection of multiples as a single form. The apparent value of the trophy case trumps any individual piece lending its value to the collection. The case as a whole image becomes a mass representation of prestige, physically manifested in the hallways and on the walls of our schools, businesses, and arenas. It was from outside the sliding glass lock of the school’s trophy case that I begin to recognize the falsification of value achieved through



use of modern production technologies. Vacuum cast plastic with gold foil paint and holographic tape had replaced the marble, wood, and cast metals of trophies from an earlier era.

Next to trophies from previous generations modern wares look almost too bright, shiny, and perfect. From the historic hammered silver trophies, to the cheap cast metal awards that preceded the switch to plastic, each took a patina as it aged. The chemical process of oxidization changes the surface of the metal and visually links these awards to other objects of understood value such as artifacts, monuments, fine art, and metal currency. The high level of manufactured finish makes modern awards seem almost unattainable. With this change comes a shift in the function of the modern trophy from object to spectacle. The photographic opportunities now outweigh the tangible value of the given object. The function of the contemporary trophy seems to have changed from being an object that memorializes achievement to a prop for photographs.

New production and surface technologies allow for a shift in our aesthetic understanding of worth. Where once a mirror polished surface could only be achieved through time-consuming and skilled manipulation of materials, it is now achieved in seconds through the use of plastics and industrial processes. I believe this allowed for a shift in our aesthetic understanding of value that requires a showing of age, wear, and imperfection to assume worth. Modern plastic trophies will never take on the patina of the cast gold and silver figures from historical awards. Perhaps the visual presence and evidence of the effects of time is one of the value cues that modern manufacturing companies have not yet begun to employ. Modern popular trophies are designed using materials that are intended to look the same after years of storage as they did the moment their components rolled off the assembly line. My goal with this writing and body of work is to make the audience aware of how their perception of value is manipulated in the award industry

and, by extension, in other areas of contemporary life. I hope the viewer will begin to question their own desire to obtain and consume objects and how that desire is affected by and sustained through the manipulation of visual signifiers of value.

### **The Proliferation of Award Culture**

The modern trophy (Figure 1) is an illusion that can be destroyed by unscrewing the 1/4 inch nut that holds the golden toned plastic victory figure to its base with a threaded galvanized steel rod. Modern trophy parts are standardized to the degree that each manufacturer produces a product that is interchangeable with any other trophy part. Standardization starts with the base. The base must be heavy enough to give a low center of gravity, keeping it sturdy and upright. Bases are offered with different edge profile designs as a purely ornamental feature. Attached to the base is the engraving plate, a malleable sheet of metal, layered plastic, or printed sticker depending on the price range desired by the consumer. Between the bases are columns. These columns are extruded plastic, capped at both ends by small stamped metal lids that hide imperfections and add to the visual complexity of the object. The fancier of these lids perform the function of lifting the columns and add a significant profile change known as the column stem. The plastic columns come in standardized 48-inch lengths that can be cut down to the customer's specifications using simple tools. Even if the craftsmanship of the cut is poor, the connection is hidden by the function of the lids. The sculpted form at the top of the trophy is called the figure. It is commonly a simulation or replication of forms from historical awards. The figure of female

victory is the most common among the trophy figures and is used for everything from academics to sports to barbeque competitions. All other pieces of the trophy's anatomy are known as trim.<sup>1</sup>

The modern trophy is an object removed from its historical context. Today's trophies are given as prizes for victories, principally in sports. With roots in the silversmith crafts of the late 1700s, presentation pieces occurred primarily in anglophone countries. In his publication for the Canadian National Gallery's exhibition of presentation and trophy silver, Ross Fox writes "... silver offered a highly suitable means for honoring a person with a tribute that was tangible, durable, portable, relatively valuable, frequently serviceable, and bearing an appropriately inscribed epigraph or dedication."<sup>2</sup> While iconography and form are often recycled and appropriated, only a few historical attributes carry over to the modern popular trophy. White Carrara marble bases, for example, have not lost favor as a material for trophy bases. Perhaps this is because they are cut from remnants of larger marble cuts that otherwise would go unused. Or, perhaps the simplicity of marble continues to fulfill the function of a trophy base better than a faux finished hollow plastic casting filled with concrete.

There are many famous award objects that inform our visual vocabulary. Some of the most recognizable awards in American culture are the Heisman Trophy, Nobel Prize, Olympic medals, Kentucky Derby Cup, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Trophy, Stanley Cup, and the iconic Oscar. They are among the most accessible memorials to popular achievement, but often the primary objective of these awards is the promotion of commerce. Surrounded by spectacle,

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<sup>1</sup> Bachs Trophy. Basic Anatomy of a trophy. Bachs trophy online. Dec 1<sup>st</sup> 2009.  
<<http://www.bachstrophy.com/anatomy.htm>>

<sup>2</sup> Ross Allen C. Fox. Presentation Pieces and Trophies from the Hennerly Birks collection of Canadian Silver. National Gallery of Canada .1985. (2.)

ceremony, and ritual, these awards are heavily advertised to the public by popular media. There have been many articles and essays written about awards and their effects on the distribution, sale, and promotion of goods. This issue is discussed at length in Mary R. Watson and N. Anand's article from the Cambridge University Press entitled, "Award Ceremony as an Arbiter of Commerce and Canon in Popular Music." In their article, they show how the Grammy awards and ceremony influence the United States' music industry. Even though the Grammy awards are set up to be uninfluenced by commercial considerations, the awards are used as a gauge for merchandisers. Winners of Grammy awards are aggressively promoted and enjoy vast financial gains.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, sales of books are often increased by the addition of a stamped foil sticker adhered to the jacket of the publisher's product. Because of the noticeable increase in sales, there has been an influx of new awards in the literature and publication marketing industries. The foil stamp could say just about anything, or be awarded by any institution and still retain its sales value. For many consumers, the value comes from the visual signifier of the foil stamp more than the actual text written on the stamp or legitimacy of the award. It is the perception of value created by the imagery of the award, rather than what the award signifies, that becomes important to the buyer. No longer is the primary function of the award to be a memorial to achievement or prestige. Now it functions merely as a symbol of value. The first definition for trophy as found in the dictionary is "something gained or given in victory or conquest, especially when preserved or mounted as a memorial." The last and most recent listed definition is "one that is prized for

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<sup>3</sup> Mary R. Watson, N. Anand. *Popular Music*. "Award Ceremony as an Arbiter of Commerce and Canon in Popular Music"(2006) Volume 25/1. Cambridge University Press, (41–56)

qualities that enhance prestige or social status.”<sup>4</sup>

Trophy shops, catalogs, and websites are filled with approximations and exaggerations of historical award objects. Distilled signifiers of value have been singled out and mass-produced. New industrial technologies are to credit for bringing these trophies into mass appeal. At as low as eleven dollars for the average single tier 20-inch trophy, nearly every event can afford to recognize its participants with a physical object.<sup>5</sup> The same industrial technology has allowed for the standardization of parts allowing almost endless customization.

Modern trophies employ many formal elements that act as immediate visual signifiers of value for the viewer including: size, craftsmanship, form, and surface. One of the most easily recognized symbols of value is craftsmanship. As previously mentioned, the lids of the trophy hide imperfections and are designed to increase the tolerance for assembler error. Through modern industrial technology, all parts of the trophy are created with exacting precision. If the original design is pristine, then every production thereafter is guaranteed a certain quality. Industrial finishes have advanced to the point of being beyond perfect simulations of meticulously high polished metal. Ornate features such as wreaths, figures, scrolls, and cups can be attached with minimal expense and time to the manufacturer. The same features would fetch premium prices at the hands of a skilled artisan. Holographic foil imagery is becoming increasingly common in the design of modern awards. It offers incredibly detailed imagery of which the origin is difficult for the eye to detect.

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<sup>4</sup> "trophy." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2009.  
Merriam-Webster Online. 29 November 2009  
<<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trophy>>

<sup>5</sup> Trophy Kits Online. November 22. 2009  
<[www.trophykits.com](http://www.trophykits.com)>

At this point, it seems impossible to separate the award from the commodity. In fact, it could be said that the award acts as a commodity throughout each part of its existence. It starts as a catalog of purchasable objects. It is bought as a fabricated award, and later earned through some act of exemplary service or action. From there it is displayed as an object of prestige, and then often reenters the market through donation to a thrift store as the accomplishment it signifies could be very difficult to throw out with the trash. An object whose form is dictated by the necessities of its function over time, the modern trophy is perhaps understood better as a prop for a lasting photograph rather than a tangible object of worth. Its value has shifted from its form to its iconography.

### **An exhibition of award winning works...**

The exhibition of works associated with this writing intentionally walks the line between being an extended event or happening and an installation utilizing the context of the contemporary art gallery. The exhibition title, show cards, mailings, and business cards all work within the theme and concept of the work by utilizing materials from the exhibition. The audience is awarded participation ribbons, works are arbitrarily ranked with award ribbons, and certain awards have been made for real achievements in the local community. Along with the viewers' experience as they encounter a single work, the exhibition engages the audience in an overall sense of spectacle. Both the visuals and the content of the work are made approachable through the use of humor and popular forms. By removing or distorting different physical traits of the trophy, I began isolating and manipulating the elements of value that inform an audience that the trophy is an object of determined and desired worth.

The most immediate indication of value is scale. As a trophy progressively increases in size so does its signified accomplishment. First place trophies are the largest with subsequent places diminishing in scale. The first series of handmade trophies was extremely diminutive, but retained the surface design of much larger awards (Figure 2). The second and final incarnation (Figure 3) was a complete break down of everything outside the trophy's form, the surface and context of the object given over to a full range of manipulations. Without holographic film, gold foil, or faux marble, the viewer is left only with the object's mass and form. The image of the trophy is used as a sort of three-dimensional silhouette that, without the original surface treatment, retains much of its visual power and cultural significance.

As the viewer enters the exhibition, they are immediately confronted by the aforementioned signifiers of value. In the direct line of sight of the viewer is the show title cut into planks of raw pine reading "BEST OF... AN EXHIBITION OF AWARD WINNING WORKS." The title of the exhibition is intended as a cue for the viewer to be aware of both the theme and humor of the installation. On an opposing wall hangs a wood carving of a first place rosette ribbon. The carving of the award is the first cue that the title is purposefully misleading. Rather than an exhibition of works that have won awards, the exhibition is of works that are themselves awards and are concerned with the concept and act of award winning (Figure 4).

"First Place Ribbon" (Figure 5) uses the form and iconography of the popular rosette style award ribbons. Its scale is absurdly exaggerated as is its context as a work of art. The sculptural form of the rosette is interesting, but not so interesting that it warrants the efforts required to carve its likeness in wood and be presented as a new art object. The goal of the piece is to coax the viewer into questioning the artist's intent with this work and the body of work com-

prising the show as a whole. Throughout the gallery are true-to-scale representations of popular trophy forms. Made from ornately cut raw pine and rough plastic castings, they are displayed in a way that mimics the displays existing in trophy shops as well as trophy cases. They are in direct juxtaposition to preexisting ready-made trophies that have been collected and displayed in the gallery (Figure 6). By making a direct comparison to existing awards, the audience is set up to compare and draw upon the relationship between the objects in the exhibition and their own experiences in the real world.

In addition to freestanding work and collections of shelved awards, wall hanging work reinforce the theme of the exhibition. A series of paintings done in a variety of gold paints and pigments show empty silhouettes of the trophies' form (Figure 7). This coaxes the viewer to consider what has been removed, the effect of its removal, and the artist's intent. In "Photo Frames" (Figure 8) a series of digital screens run loops of images of people receiving awards in historical, pop culture, and personal contexts. Again, the emphasis is shifted from the physical object to the image of the award.

The goal of *Best of...* is to be accessible on multiple levels, enjoyable as an experience and as a spectacle and to lead the viewer toward a more cerebral consideration of trophies and award culture. This is epitomized by "Award for Best Trophy" (Figure 9), an eight-foot trophy made primarily from standardized trophy parts. Factory-direct green holographic tubes are used in conjunction with faux marbled wooden bases to create an extreme exaggeration of the popular trophy form. However, because it is fabricated from commercial trophy components, it could conceivably exist outside of the art gallery. Figures and trim have been chosen that individually would be used for specific events (swimming, weightlifting, rodeo, ect.). Within the context of



the overall work, the figures simply lend themselves as images of achievement and celebration. The plaque reading “BEST TROPHY” is likely to be understood as labeling the work as such. On another level, one could understand it as the award for best trophy, implying the existence of a still greater award object.

Larger objects are often perceived as more valuable than smaller objects. Size is commonly linked to power as a larger mass dominates that which is smaller. Larger masses also lend value to an object through an understanding of difficulty. An object’s difficulty to move, acquire, or be created often implies value. Similarly, a very small, yet intricate, object can impart value or prestige because of the rarity of the material or craftsmanship necessary to complete said object. Size and grandeur are often linked as any extreme in scale is typically associated with rank or social importance. Prestige and privilege are also often associated with one another. That prestige is enhanced through limitations on availability. The privilege of a certain individual or group to use an object separates them from those who do not hold such a privilege. Through the exaggeration or removal of one or more of these value manipulations, each work in this exhibition invites the viewer to question their understanding of worth.

Through my research, I have begun to identify three main ways in which the perception of value and prestige are signified and subverted. By utilizing the iconography of symbolic value, visually linking an object to that which is intrinsically valued, and drawing on historical precedent to imply value, I have attempted with this work to manipulate communal perception of value and power. Beyond the confines of award culture, I find size, grandeur, prestige, and privilege to play important roles in the understanding of value, both inherent and acquired in all cultures.

## Figures

### Basic Anatomy of a Trophy

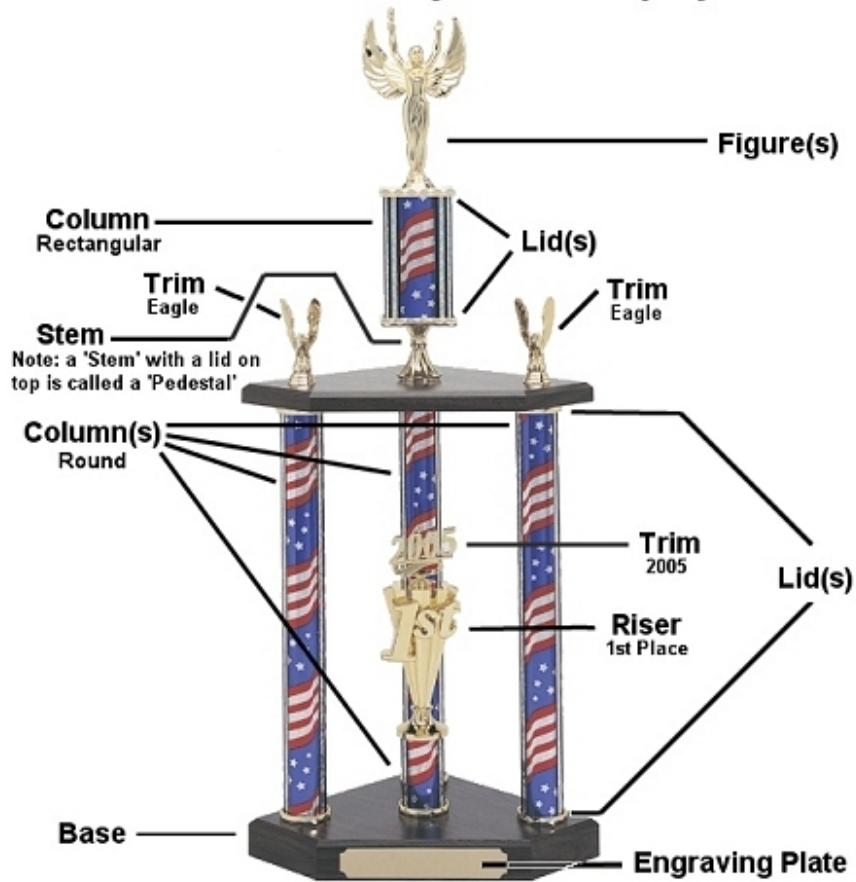


Figure 1. *Anatomy of a trophy*



Figure 2. *92nd Place*

Polychromed wood, holographic tape

5 1/2 in



Figure 3. *Ist*

Yellow pine.

22 in x 10 in x 5 1/2 in





Figure 4. *Best of...*

Yellow Pine

5 ft x 6 ft x 3/4 in



Figure 5. *1st Place Ribbon*

Laminated yellow pine





Figure 6. *Readymade Installation*

Collection of second-hand trophies



Figure 7. *Trophy Silhouettes*

Assorted gold paints, laminated plywood

Varied Sizes



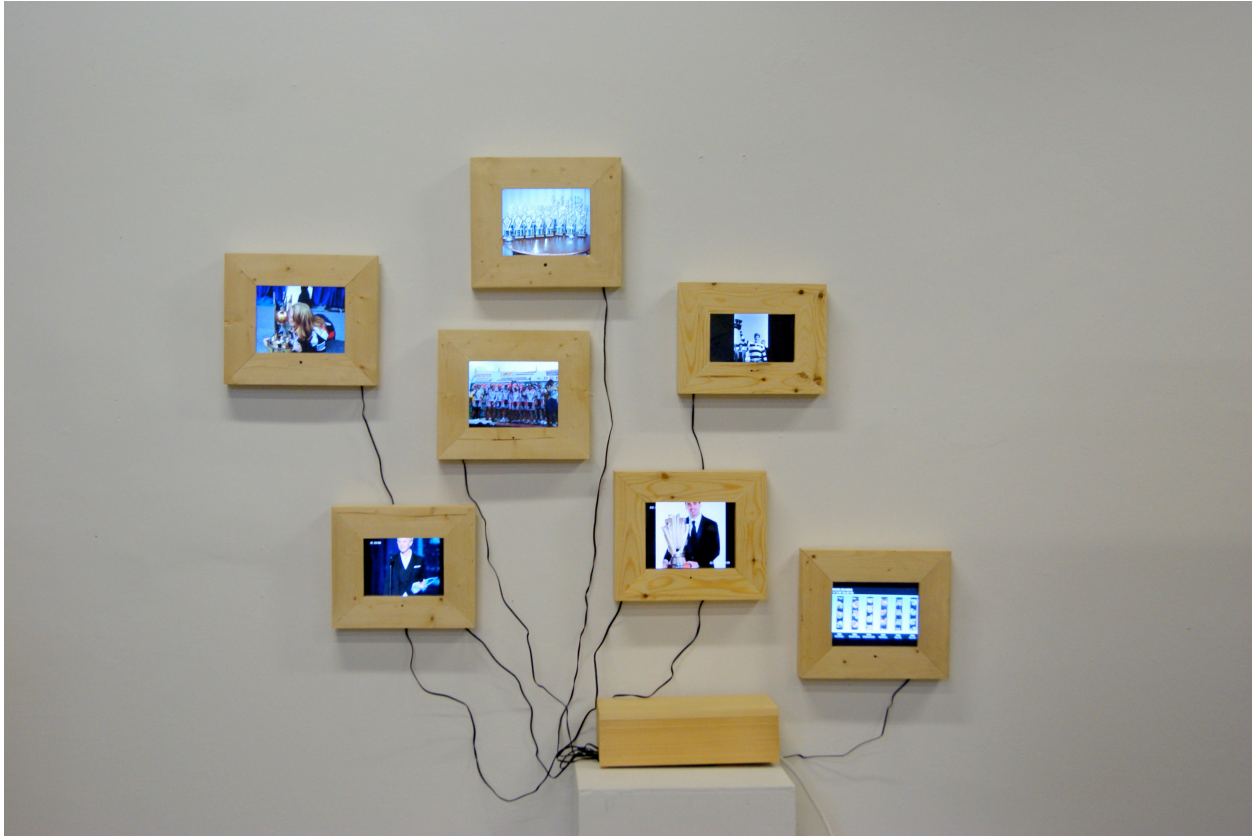


Figure 8. *Photo Frames*

Digital photo frames, Trophy images.



Figure 9. *Award for Best Trophy*

Polychromed wood, Commercial trophy parts





*Exhibition Installation 1*



*Exhibition Installation 2*





*Exhibition Installation 3*



*Exhibition Installation 4*

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