



**SAN FRANCISCO**  
**John Preus: "New Works"**  
**at Rena Bransten Gallery**

Despite what seems to be a sclerotic lack of will and imagination these days, Americans are generally strivers and optimists, and we try to make it new (to quote Ezra Pound) as a matter of existential self-declaration. That our self-improvement tradition nicely matches the current reuse/re-purpose/recycle aesthetic of postmodernism is confirmed in the work of artist and fabricator John Preus, who renovates and redesigns materials scavenged from torn-down public schools in Chicago, where he teaches and works with, among others, the social-activist artist Theaster Gates.

Preus' artworks are ingenious deconstructions and reconstructions of the schoolroom- and playground-scarred materials, the wood, steel, and plastic familiar to generations of American public school students, and redolent of Proustian memories long archived in our cortical attics. (Blond wood-grained Formica ring any bells? Steel-tube legs footed with rubber cups? Chewing-gum stalactites?) Preus' witty interventions, and his extraordinary craftsmanship, make them come newly alive as contemporary artworks filtering these materials charged with the associations of childhood through Minimalism, Dadaism and Conceptualism, and maybe Abstract Expressionism. The art retains traces of its nonart origins—the little wagging tail of human frailty, to quote Giacometti's observation (applicable to but not intended for his 1951 sculpture of an emaciated dog); the works are single and unitary, but their sources, multiple and composite. One can thus regard the sculpted, painted and sanded cubes from the *Chicago Archive Series*—

*Infinite Set* as sculptures (or six-sided square paintings) or as artistic, stackable, modular seating for Oshkosh-clad tots.

*Archival Framing Member* is a series of what appear to be three wall-mounted two-by-four studs (probably spaced a standard 16 inches apart); up close, you see that they resemble patchwork quilts, made of dozens of cut and shaped pieces, like a fieldstone fence. *Wall Piece I* (2015-16) is a eight-foot square of studs and joists, similarly composed of purpose-cut fragments, while *Incidental Panel* (2014) is a rectangular 'painting' in Cubist style of wooden scraps, cemented with Bondo (or the like) and sanded smooth and flush. Two *Oracle* (2014 and 2016) mixed-media paintings combine sheetrock and scraps of construction blueprints to create memorable abstractions, with institutional subtexts. Two swing-set sculptures use pairs of plastic seats as Duchampian found objects, to juxtapose movement and stasis, embodying the oscillation between subordination and freedom and back again.

—DEWITT CHENG

"INCIDENTAL PANEL," 2014

**John Preus**

MIXED MEDIA - SALVAGED MATERIALS

32½" x 18½"

PHOTO: COURTESY RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY