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Art review

Marcel Broodthaers

[Club of Chicago](#), through Dec 19.



Broodthaers, DÉCOR: A CONQUEST, XIXTH CENTURY (detail), 1975.
Photo: Courtesy of the Arts Club of Chicago

Marcel Broodthaers became an artist at 40 because he thought it would be more lucrative than his previous career as a poet and critic. You can guess how that turned out. During the next 12 years (until his death in 1976), the Belgian artist surely alienated potential patrons by pioneering what's now known as "institutional critique": Broodthaers questioned assumptions about art and the institutions, particularly museums, that promoted it.

The three projects on view at the Arts Club reflect this mission. Two rooms are devoted to DÉCOR: A CONQUEST (1975), in which Broodthaers assembles readymade objects to expose the violence that ensures our steady access to art and other consumer goods. DÉCOR'S XIXTH CENTURY room features a stuffed python, two cannons, potted palms and velvet-upholstered chairs. In the XXTH CENTURY room, Broodthaers arranges rows of guns and rifles near a cheerful set of contemporary garden furniture. Some of DÉCOR's context is missing: It debuted at London's Institute of Contemporary Art while a military ceremony for the queen took place outside. But as we watch the horrors of war from the safety of our living rooms—once again—DÉCOR'S bizarre mix of domestic furnishings and weapons becomes a timely reminder of what Broodthaers called "the relationship between war and comfort."

The artist's PLAQUES EN PLASTIQUES—experiments in plastic, which was then rarely used in art—seem dated in comparison. But BATEAU TABLEAU (1973) is a revelation that hints at how film would transform the field. Broodthaers projects 80 slides—details of a 19th-century amateur naval painting—on the wall, giving the static image a fluid narrative. If Broodthaers could exercise his medium-bending, cinematic imagination today, he wouldn't be broke. He'd be Matthew Barney.

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— LAUREN WEINBERG