

Maryam Jafri Recalls When Minimal Meant Cheap

Blake Gopnik, Thursday, March 17, 2016



THE DAILY PIC (#1513): The décor of my bathrooms took a dive somewhere around 1990, when supermarkets stopped offering their “No Name” products (aka “generic goods”). I had relied on them for utterly plain white boxes of Kleenex, marked only with the single word “TISSUES” in black Helvetica. Those went with my modernist interiors.

I hadn't thought of this until just the other day – I'd blocked out the pain of my loss – when I saw a lovely show of just such products, salvaged from the dustbin of history (and of dustbins) and put on display by the artist [Maryam Jafri at the gallery called P!](#) in New York.

On plinths and in photos, Jafri lets us contemplate such glories of design as a jar of peanut butter sold with a plain swath of Cooper Black letters on white, or a can of corned beef whose simple virtues are proclaimed in the pseudo-deco typeface called Bauhaus.

The gallery's excellent essay suggests that the products disappeared when supermarkets developed in-house budget brands whose look was a closer match to established products. That's no doubt right, but I'd like to add a footnote to that explanation: I have a sneaking suspicion that the pared-down design of No Name lines, for all its visual economy and no-nonsense approach, in fact reeked of elite tastes descended from the Bauhaus – and of the high prices associated with such tastes. To really communicate your intent to offer bargains, you had to go for low-end overdesign. I remember the day that my type-on-white “TISSUES” were replaced by a box bearing a sunset in pastels, floated onto a fake wicker background. I wept. *(Photo by Sebastian Bach)*