

finding the shape of the overlap

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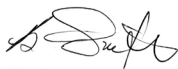
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Abstract

The exhibition *finding the shape of the overlap* and its documents present a methodology to eliminate binaries between fine art and craft, stereotypes of masculine and feminine, and distinctions between excessive and necessary. This methodology is formed through a new feminist framework in which to view the history of abstract sculpture through the combination of Material Engagement Theory and Queer Phenomenology, which emphasizes the body as a point of reference, and alternative ways of knowing and learning.

Keywords

sculpture, embodied perception, hierarchy, queer phenomenology, failure, material engagement theory, craft, feminist lens, misuse



INTRODUCTION



My research is centered on questions of art, craft, gender stereotypes and alternative ways of knowing. By collapsing boundaries separating fine art and craft, masculine and feminine stereotypes, and distinctions between excessive and necessary, how can I dismantle assumptions about materials and how they are used? What methods can be implemented as a feminist framework to view and make sculpture? What is revealed when embodied perception and the misuse of materials collide during the process of making?

The idea that fine art is superior to craft is based on centuries-old misconceptions that conceptual knowledge is a characteristic of fine art, and technical skill is a characteristic of craft. These misconceptions have led to a hierarchical division based on gender lines which equated masculinity to conceptually driven fine art, and femininity to handwork and craft. The differences between masculine and feminine have long been defined by societal norms that gender behavior, style, choices, and preference. These norms have not only limited and restricted everyday choices in our day to day but have proved to be the basis of misogyny that has led to sexism and inequality in the art world and



fig. 1. Erin McKenna, *finding the shape of the overlap*, installation view, 2020

world at large. The words *feminine* and *craft* have long been associated with excessive, decorative, and ornamental and also with the criminal, degenerate and childish. Architect Adolf Loos argued ornamental suppression was necessary to regulate modern society, suggesting that handwork and the decorative is subpar to fine art.¹ Assigning characteristics to gender is incorrect and imperative to unlearn. By eliminating these hierarchies, a new form of knowing and thinking can be revealed, allowing for a broader range of knowledge. Eliminating hierarchical and gendered approaches to material allows for reconsideration of formal qualities, and to use materials for unintended purposes, therefore opening up opportunities for new use and insights.

In addition to eliminating the above hierarchies and binaries, I propose a more feminist framework of viewing and making abstract sculpture through embodied perception and principals of Queer Theory. Through experimentation, misuse of material and objects, and the unlearning of processes and associations, we can discover new and exciting perceptions of what we once thought of as familiar. These principals can reframe our ideas of hierarchical structure, gender associations, and notions of use.

Essentially, my research aims to create a more feminist future not only for the art world, but the world in general. The dismantling of hierarchies ultimately eliminates oppressive power structures, opening the world to more freedom, possibilities, joy, and knowledge. My work is not only dismantling conceptually, but materially as well by building physical versions of these new possible worlds with my hands and body.

The following chapters will address my thesis work, *finding the shape of the overlap*, through historical, theoretical and art contexts. The contextual discussion will address three major components: 1) Material Engagement Theory and embodied perception, 2) queer phenomenology and the necessity of failure, and 3) a brief history of abstract sculpture from the 1950s to today viewed

1 Adolf Loos. Ornament and Crime (PDF). Innsbruck, reprint Vienna, 1930

through a feminist lens including the through line of processes and techniques used throughout the decades. Next, the methodology section will discuss my “rules for making,” including the elimination of hierarchy, subversion of expectations and assumptions, allowance for variable arrangements, and commitment to always let the construction visible. The subsequent section will describe each work from my thesis exhibition, highlighting form and process along with how my work addresses my research questions. The conclusion will discuss the impact of my thesis work and the resulting discoveries.



fig. 2. Erin McKenna, *finding the shape of the overlap*, installation view, 2020



CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

In this section, I will create a feminist framework through which to view the history of abstract sculpture. First, I discuss Lambros Malafouris' Material Engagement Theory, the radical reconceptualization of the mind and material culture which situates thinking in *action*. The theory suggests that the body and its interactions with the environment shape one's perception. Next, I discuss the idea of failure, misuse and queer theory, which challenges the perception of normal, how normal comes to exits and who is excluded or oppressed by those notions of



normal.² I will give examples of how the implementation of these ideas allow for a more feminist approach to making and learning. Last, I will discuss the history of abstract sculpture through a feminist lens using the above theories as a guide. I will examine how sculpture and process have changed over time and what qualities stay true through the decades.

² Hall, Donald E. (edited by). *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*. (Routledge Literature Readers. London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 3-16

THE MAKING BEGETS THE KNOWING

In the early modern period, a distinction in Western art had been made, categorizing fine art as intellectual knowledge and craft as technical knowledge. By the 18th century, distinctions between artist and artisan began to be drawn on gender lines, associating the cerebral and fine art with masculinity, and decorative and craft with femininity.³ However, many theorists, artists, and writers have aimed to prove this notion wrong, arguing there should not be a hierarchy between fine art and craft. The word craft means more than just making, it has an almost indefinable sense of knowledge, wisdom and power.

Octavio Paz defines craft as a mediation between design and art. He suggests that in craft, ornamentation does not compromise the efficiency of the object. The craft object acts as an in-between zone of usefulness and aesthetic contemplation.⁴ Therefore, craft aligns itself with pleasure and satisfies the need to take delight in the things that we see and touch every day- a “need no less imperative than hunger and thirst”.⁵ Handmade objects come from a place of necessity, care, and impermanence, encouraging use with an awareness of expiration. Since it is made by human hands the craft object is corporal and the body is always present.⁶ Paz suggests the handmade object, “expresses human society in a way all its own: not as work (technology) not as symbol (art, religion), but as a mutually shared physical life”.⁷ There is a sense of honesty present in the object because it exists with both a useful purpose and an intent that comes from patience, practice, and presence from the person making it.

3 Katz, Anna. *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art, 1972-1985*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 24

4 Paz, Octavio. *Use and Contemplation*, (*PsicoArt: Rivista online di Arte e Psicologia*. 4. 10.6092/issn.2038-6184/4217, 1973), 21

5 Paz, *Use and Contemplation*, 21

6 *Ibid*, 19-22.

7 *Ibid*, 21.



fig. 3. Artist unknown, Makapansgat Pebble, ca. 2.5 million, Jasperite, 3" x 2.5"

Arguably, one of the oldest forms of craft are hand axes, produced between 1.8 million - 35 thousand years ago. Hand axes are the first altered objects to implement both use and aesthetic intent including choice of color, patterning, emphasis, and framing.⁸ The tools are worked and re-worked pieces of stone that go beyond what was strictly functional. For example, the knapper would spend hours modifying a stone to be symmetrical, or framing a pattern or fossil embedded in the stone, which added nothing to the functionality of the tool. Seen in fig. 3 is the earliest known example of a hominin recognizing and collecting an object that looked like a face and turning it into a hand axe. These decorative tools show that humans have been interested in aesthetical augmentation for millennia.

Craft brings forth, enacts and re-creates the form of intelligence that drives human cognitive evolution.⁹ Thinking does not only occur in the mind or in the object, but occurs in between - the act of making itself,

8 Berlant, Anthony, and Thomas Grant Wynn. *First Sculpture: Handaxe to Figure Stone*, (Dallas, Texas: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2018), 6

9 Iliopoulos, Antonis. *Material Engagement Theory and Its Philosophical Ties to Pragmatism (Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, 2019)* 39–63

a unique form of handmade intelligence and imagination. Material Engagement Theory is the radical reconceptualization of the mind and material culture and “favors process ontology which situates thinking in action.”¹⁰ This prevailing school of thought in cognitive science postulates the mind is not brain-bound but rather embodied, extended and distributed. This adds the world of things, materials, and artifacts into the cognitive equation.¹¹ Embodied perception claims the “body, its movements, and the interaction with the environment fundamentally shape people’s perception of the world”.¹² Therefore, the body and its actions have an immense effect on how we learn.

In his book, *Embodiment as First Affordance: Tinkering, Tuning, Tracking*, Ben Spatz writes about embodied practice both as a pedagogy and choreography. From infancy, we tinker, tune and track motion and balance. Spatz writes, “this developmental process is sometimes mistakenly described as that of learning to ‘use’ our bodies, as if a separate mind made use of a separate body as a tool. More accurately, we encounter material reality first of all through embodiment as we discover movement itself.”¹³ Tinkering is a process of recombining bits and pieces (almost at random) to see what works.¹⁴ Jerry-rigging, a type of tinkering, relies more on ingenuity in objects and processes to solve a problem by creative improvisation rather than scientific and technological breakthroughs.¹⁵ Tuning is a more qualitative mode of engagement with embodiment, offering immediate positive and negative feedback than tinkering. Singing and finding the right pitch is an example of this. Not only is this technique mathematically precise, but it is sensually

10 Iliopoulos. Material Engagement Theory and Its Philosophical Ties to Pragmatism 39–63

11 Malafouris, Lambros. *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013)

12 Goldstein, E. Bruce. *Encyclopedia of Perception*. (SAGE, 2010), 387

13 Spatz, Ben. 2017. *Embodiment as First Affordance: Tinkering, Tuning, Tracking*. (*Performance Philosophy* 2 (2).2017), 262

14 Spatz, *Embodiment as First Affordance: Tinkering, Tuning, Tracking*, 262

15 Prabhu, Jaideep. *Solving Big Social Problems by Thinking Small*. (*Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2017)

resonant.¹⁶ Tracking is a way of seizing a singular goal, one that is out of reach, and then suddenly in our grasp.¹⁷ Sports are an example of tracking as one engages their goals with their body. All of these examples show embodied learning.

MISUSING, FAILING, QUEERING

Functional Fixedness is a form of cognitive bias in which a person is unable to think of other, more creative uses for an object or material aside from its traditional use. It arises when an object can potentially be used for many different things, but the brain can only perceive the conventionally prescribed use. Routines, patterns, and the way we use things become functionally fixed in our lives. To subvert that, there are methods and theories we can use to interrupt these deeply ingrained patterns of use to encourage curiosity and play.

Misusing materials and objects can shift perspective and, therefore, lend itself to new possibilities. Instead of failure being associated with a negative connotation, it should be considered positive and necessary for growth and learning. Queer Theory uses both of the above methods above to aim for a more feminist way of living, and to challenge what is perceived as normal.

Queer Theory is a diverse field of studies that involves many disparate ideas. It is constantly changing and expanding and aims to answer questions about what is normal, how normal comes to exist, and who is excluded or oppressed by those notions of normality. Queering is a technique that came out of Queer Theory in the late 1980s through the 1990s and is used to challenge heteronormativity.¹⁸ It is a method to look for places where things such as gender, sexuality, masculinity, and femininity can be challenged and questioned. In addition, queering

16 Spatz, *Embodiment as First Affordance: Tinkering, Tuning, Tracking*, 263

17 Spatz, *Embodiment as First Affordance: Tinkering, Tuning, Tracking*, 264

18 Hall, Donald E. (edited by). *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*. (Routledge Literature Readers. London ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 3-16

also addresses a range of systems of oppression and identity politics. Queer Theory works to fight against normalization, even within its own definition, therefore the term “queer” can itself be queered.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, writer and scholar of queer studies, defines queering as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps...and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”¹⁹ Thelathia “Nikki” Young describes queering as a way to “[deconstruct] the logics and frameworks operating within old and new theological and ethical concepts.” In addition to these deconstructions, she argues that queering “dismantles the dynamics of power and privilege persisting among diverse subjectivities.”²⁰

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sarah Ahmed explains the idea of being “oriented” and how queerness disrupts and reorders these relations.²¹ To be oriented means to have recognition of objects, where and how they belong. Orientations shape not only “how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitants, as well as “who” or “what” we direct our energy and attention toward”.²² Ahmed suggests by not following accepted paths and politics of disorientation, queer phenomenology redirects our attention toward different, less proximate, deviant objects.²³ She explains that familiarity is shaped by the feel of space and by actions that reach out toward objects that are already within reach.²⁴ To make things queer is to disturb the order of things. In the day to day, habit operates as a choreographic tool by directing our movement, organizing our time, and making experiences

19 Hall, Donald E. (edited by). *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*. (Routledge Literature Readers. London ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 3-16

20 Young, Thelathia “Nikki.” ‘Queering ‘The Human Situation.’ (Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 28 (1), 2012), 126–31.

21 Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008)

22 Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology*, 3

23 Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology*, 3

24 Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology*, 7-8

predictable.²⁵ These habits keep us in our comfort zone and deprive us of the experiences of experimentation, invention, and surprise. Through subtle orientational shifts, or changes to minor tendencies, habits can be revealed, and their stability questioned.

Philosopher Merleau-Ponty emphasized embodied perception, claiming the body as the primary site of knowing, whereby the body and perception could not be disentangled from each other. In his book, *Phenomenology of Perception*, he points out moments where the world appears “slantwise.” These queer moments make the world re-oriented. Moments of disorientation are vital because it shows another way to perceive something, giving us hope and possibilities.²⁶

In their book *Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam discusses “Low theory”, a term borrowed from cultural theorist Stuart Hall, using it to undermine heteronormative definitions of success and to argue that failure to live up to societal standards can open up more creative ways of thinking and being in the world. They argue failure as a performance of dissent and refusal. Halberstam points out that the negative connotation associated with the word failure limits our ways of knowing and perpetuates the hierarchical structures that be.

Being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours. Indeed terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or

25 Manning, Erin. *The Minor Gesture*. (Durham: Duke University Press., 2016), 89

26 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. (London : New York :Routledge & K. Paul; Humanities Press, 1974), 223

flights of fancy.²⁷

Halberstam is connecting the idea of failure and play to new ways of learning and making knowledge. Instead of staying in well-lit territories and following a set path, we should be prepared to get lost and embark into uncharted territories.

Quilt making exemplifies Material Engagement Theory and relates to the history of abstract art in relation to women's work and hierarchies between high and low art. Quiltmakers over the past centuries have produced patchwork quilts pieced in geometries made from worn-out clothes, and scraps of fabric, arguably both utilitarian objects and art

27 Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. (Durham: Duke University Press., 2011),



fig. 4. Mary Lee Bendolph, *Arrow*, 2005. fabric, including cotton and synthetic brocade, 84" x 79"

works.²⁸ The tradition of the patchwork quilt was born of scarcity and resourcefulness, calling for inventive salvaging of fabric scraps and remnants. This practice shows innovation, problem-solving, strong hand skills, and compassion for things. The adaptability of fabric as a material lent itself to possibility and reinventing. The utility of the quilt is obvious, yet, it goes beyond function and serves as an aesthetic gesture. The way the quilt was pieced - the color, shape, pattern and formal relationships- was not solely based on utility but an inventiveness with feeling and verve.²⁹ The quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, a community of slave descendants in rural Alabama, resist the codification of art versus craft. They do not see their work as deviant or an alternative to the norm of the craft of quilt making. Mary Lee Bendolph, a quiltmaker from Gee's Bend, tells how the concepts of art and artistry fit into her experience:

I didn't know anything about art. [...] All (my mother) would do was make quilts to keep us warm. [...] We didn't have no museum in Gee's Bend, but we would go from house to house looking at quilts and getting ideas about how I would like to lay mine out. People go from museum to museum checking out other people's work. Sometimes they like it, sometimes they don't. They go home and try to make it, too. I think that was the same thing we was doing back then. They have a name for it—art—and we didn't.³⁰

This memory and direct comparison of quilts and paintings, emphasizes not only the gender divide, but the socio economic and racial divide between craft and fine art. Bendolph's anecdote aims to break the hierarchy of high and low art, suggesting quilts and paintings have more

28 Gee's Bend Quiltmakers. (Souls Grown Deep Foundation)

29 Chave, Anna. Dis/Cover/ing the Quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama. (The Journal of Modern Craft, 1:2, 2015), 225-226

30 Sohan, Vanessa Kraemer. But a Quilt Is More: Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee's Bend Quilts. (College English 77, no. 4, 2015), 301.



fig. 5. Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *Site of Reversible Destiny*, 1993-95

in common than we think, and that a museum is not the only place for art to live.

Artist collaborative and partners, Arakawa and Madeline Gins thought humans should live in a perpetual state of instability. They suggested that buildings and structures could be built to sharpen the mind and stimulate the immune system through absence of symmetry, shifting elevations and elimination of right angles.³¹ In their work, they made environments with the intention to encourage the viewer to become aware of their own bodily perception which would ideally lead to changes in consciousness (fig. 5). The spaces are structured so that one feels like a toddler moving through space with their perception of first knowing the world.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ABSTRACT SCULPTURE (through a feminist lens)

In her essay, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* Linda Nochlin exposes institutionalized sexism and racism as a barrier to the visual arts that women and people of color have historically faced. She explains that no matter their potency in talent or genius, the institution has made it impossible for women to achieve the same footing as men:

The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals. The miracle is, in fact, that given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, that so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in those bailiwicks of white masculine pre-

31 Doezema, Marie. *Could Architecture Help You Live Forever?* (The New York Times, 2019)

rogative like science, politics, or the arts.³²

She highlights women's barriers, lack of art education, and the nature of 'artistic genius' which was related to "unquestioned, often unconscious, meta-historical premises".³³ Citing many examples of artists and works that go against the binary framework of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', Nochlin suggests there is not a "feminine style".

By citing examples from the first two sections, this section will analyze the history of abstract sculpture by dismantling perceived hierarchies of fine art and craft, stereotypes of masculine and feminine, and distinctions between excessive and necessary. The history of abstract sculpture—seen through a feminist lens—shows examples of a self-consistent language of form and freedom of defined conventions learned through long periods of individual experimentation. Women artists have invented radically new forms and processes that benefit from studio practice, tactility, and the peculiarity of the individual artist's own hand, continually transforming the language of sculpture. The works are characterized by abstraction and repetition and reject the monolith as exemplar. Women played a major role in influencing elements that are central to art today including executing expressive and "impure" methods, using unconventional recycled and found materials, embracing experiment and unstructured play as well as imperfection and happenstance.

UNCHARTED TERRITORIES: 1950's

In the 1950's, artists such as Ruth Asawa, Lee Bontecou, Louise Bourgeois, Claire Falkenstein, and Louise Nevelson were making abstract sculpture using unconventional objects and materials such as wood, wire, canvas, glass, and paint with processes such as stacking, cutting, twisting, weaving and creating ensembles. Instead of making work about the heroic and mythic, their work spoke to the essence

32 Nochlin, Linda, and Maura Reilly. *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*. (New York, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 46

33 Nochlin and Reilly. *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, 47

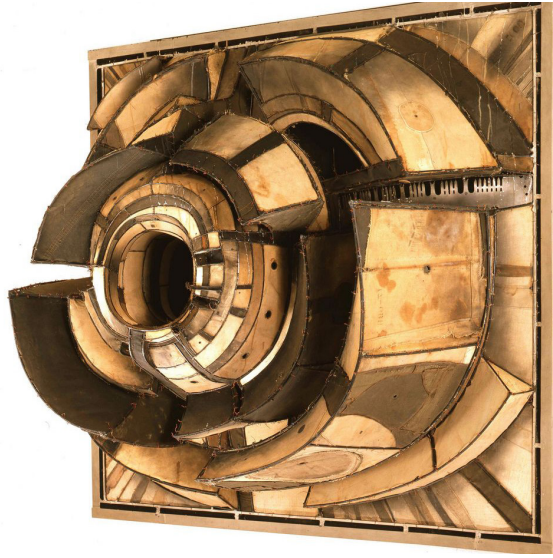


fig. 6. Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1962, welded steel and canvas. 68 x 72 x 30 in.

of the body and the self in relationship to others and the physical world.³⁴ They were identified by Donald Judd throughout their careers as “designer craftsmen” - considered lower in hierarchy to those who made “pure” sculpture - because of the repetitive nature of their work, like weaving; lack of discernible subject matter, and engagement with jewelry.³⁵

Claire Falkenstein and Lee Bontecou approached welding differently than male artists who dominated the sculpture scene at the time. Falkenstein used expressive and “impure” methods by incorporating beads and glass into her work. Bontecou made work by welding lightweight steel frameworks and then inserted fragments of canvas and cloth securing the fabric to the armature with twisted wire- an interplay of soft and hard materials. Donald Judd described her work as “neither painting nor sculpture. The image cannot be contemplated; it has to be dealt with as an object, at least viewed with puzzlement and wariness... The image extends from something as social as war to

34 Rothrum, Emily, and Anne Middleton Wagner. *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016*. (Milan: Skira, 2016), 31

35 Judd, Donald. Lee Bontecou. *Arts Magazine* 39, no. 7. April 1965: 20

something as private as sex, making one an aspect of the other”.³⁶ By using “impure” methods, mixing materials and playing with similarities between painting and sculpture, Bontecou was investigating the notion of an overlap of social issues and intimate spaces, bringing together two seemingly disparate ideas.

MATERIAL EXPLORATION: 1960's - 1970's

In the following decades of the 1960's and 1970's, artists such as Jackie Winsor, Gertrud Goldschmidt (Gego), Eva Hesse, Sheila Hicks and Francoise Grossen were a handful of women artists making work which emphasized exploration in materials and the notion of expanded sculpture. The aesthetic practice of sculpture was physically and conceptually transformed. The materials they used ranged from brick, twine, trees, wire, thread, wool, paper and latex. The concerns and themes ranged from repetition, weightiness, fragility, scale, nature, and obsessiveness. The artists from this period cannot simply be categorized by making specifically muscular or mutable sculpture. For example, Winsor made unruly, brawny sculptures of logs bound with hemp, and Gego made intricate, methodical geometric wire sculptures that were suspended from the ceiling, giving them a weightless quality.

A common denominator with above mentioned artists is their sustained engagement with a forever widening range of materials and processes which lent itself to the understanding that sculpture could now enact its own transformational capacities rather than simply depict.³⁷ Another key take away from these two decades is the fact that these women were not making permanent monuments. Nevertheless, their influence outlasted the permanence of their materials. Their embrace of both muscularity and delicacy, and their use of everyday, small items ushered a change that has been received and amplified in the decades that followed.

36 Rothrum and Middleton Wagner, *Revolution in the Making*, 31

37 Rothrum and Middleton Wagner, *Revolution in the Making*, 80

MORE IS MORE: PATTERN & DECORATION MOVEMENT 1975-1985

As mentioned in the previous section, in the early modern period, a distinction in Western art had been made, categorizing fine art as intellectual knowledge and applied art as technical knowledge. Distinctions between artist and artisan began to be drawn on gender lines, associating craft with femininity. The Pattern & Decoration Movement (P&D), started in America in the mid 1970's, aimed to raise and question this notion of women's work as less than, and distinctions between high and low art.

Strongly grounded in feminism, the P&D movement chronologically straddles the end of modernism and the beginning of postmodernism. Artists of this movement rejected the rigid tenets of formalism, and embraced forms traditionally coded as feminine, domestic, ornamental, or craft-based and thought to be categorically inferior to fine art. They aimed to revive an interest in pattern and ornamentation which at that point was equated with the trivial, impure, cosmetic and falsifying. Influenced by non-male, non-western pattern and design like quilting, tapestry and sewing, the work from this movement references Islamic tile work; Mexican, Roman, and Byzantine mosaics; Turkish embroidery; Japanese woodblocks; and Iranian and Indian carpets. The movement was a reaction against minimalism and conceptualism which valued austerity and demeaned ornamentation and craft.

In their publication, *Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture*, Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff reveal the prejudice against decoration, ornament, and embellishment in Western Art History which is based on hierarchies of fine art above craft, Western art above non-Western art, men's art above women's art. In this text they write about how language has been used to communicate moral superiority in art. They criticize words that have been handed down from generation after generation and taken for truth without examination. A few examples of recurring themes they criticize are 1) racism and sexism in the art world,

2) hierarchy of low and high art, and 3) the assumption that the decorative symbolizes failed humanism.³⁸ Jaudon and Kozloff suggest, “The antithesis of the violence and destruction idolized by Modern Art is the visual enhancement of the domestic environment. (If humanism is equated with dynamism, the decorative is seen to be synonymous with the static.)”³⁹ In order to criticize the decorative, ‘modernism’ would associate their opponents’ work with carpets and wallpaper which lack engagement with human form or the “real world”. Art critic, Holland Cotter describes the artist of the P&D movement:

They all asked the same basic question: When faced with a big, blank, obstructing Minimalist wall, too tall, wide and firmly in place to get over or around, what do you do? And they answered: You paint it in bright patterns, or hang pretty pictures on it, or drape it with spangled light-catching fabrics. The wall may eventually collapse under the accumulated decorative weight. But at least it will look great. And where do you find your patterns and pictures and fabrics? In places where Modernism had rarely looked before: in quilts and wallpapers and printed fabrics; in Art Deco glassware and Victorian valentines.”⁴⁰

Cotter describes the uncharted territories these artists traveled to gain inspiration and references - all of which Modernism would ridicule. Art critic John Perreault described the P&D movement as “non-minimalists, non-sexist, historically conscious, sensuous, romantic, rational, decorative.” It is structured by positivity, celebration, honor to relationships of sources and aesthetics and the abundance of visual pleasure in the world.⁴¹

38 Jaudon, Valerie and Joyce Kozloff. *Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture*. (Heresies. A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics, vol.1, no.4, Winter 1977/78), 38-42

39 Jaudon and Kozloff. *Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture*, 38-42

40 Cotter, Holland. “Scaling a Minimalist Wall With Bright, Shiny Colors.” (The New York Times, 2008)

41 Katz. *With Pleasure*, 19-21



fig. 7. Miriam Schapiro, *Again Sixteen Windows*, 1973, enamel, watercolor, fabric paper, 30.5" x 22.5"

The P&D movement is often defined by what it is not. The movement was in opposition to Adolf Loos' essay *Ornament and Crime*. In his publication Loos stated, "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects." He equated ornament to the criminal, degenerate and childish and that its suppression was necessary to regulate modern society. "Ornament does not heighten my joy in life or the joy in life of any cultivated person." However, in such statements, Loos failed to acknowledge that ornament, decoration and embellishment can also be seen as acts of care reflecting time, dedication and intention, or that material itself is a type of ornamentation. Ornamentation comes from fine craftsmanship, which takes years of practice to master.⁴²

Miriam Schapiro is considered a leader of the P&D movement and is known for her work that blurs the line between fine art and craft. She is known best for her *femmagés* - a play on the words *female* and *homage*, which allude to the anonymous handicraft of workers and designers - an interplay of order and chaos with elements of grids made of color and fabric, repeatedly disrupted by organic forms. *Again Six-*

42 Adolf Loos *Ornament and Crime* (PDF). (Innsbruck, reprint Vienna, 1930)



fig. 8. Alan Shields, *A Different Kind of Painting*, exhibition view

teen Windows, (fig.7) references a quilt. Such works elevated pattern and decorative traditions and confronted opposing abstract languages set in hierarchical relation to each other in Western Art history.⁴³

The P&D movement did not discriminate amongst genders. Alan Shields made work with fluidity between sculpture, drawing and painting, using a wide variety of material, most commonly fabric, thread, paint, rope and beads. He was often criticized for being too craft oriented. His work had a direct connection between art and life as he referenced his joy of being outdoors, fishing, gardening. He often “mis-used” materials. In his 1975 artist statement, he wrote, “I learned that canvas was a material before I learned that it was stretched and put on stretcher bars.... I like to manipulate canvas the same way I would manipulate clay.”⁴⁴ In order to make his work easier to travel and store, he let the canvas be soft and flexible, opposing a rigid and fixed form. Also visible in his work is the obvious inspiration from quilting, embroidery and sewing, traditionally a vernacular of craft and the feminine. These methods challenged the formal considerations associated with modernism.

ABSTRACTION AS POSSIBILITY: 1990's, 2000's

Following the P&D movement, in the 1990's conversations about race, sexuality, class and gender gained a foothold in the art world, prompting viewers to engage with new perspectives and narratives. Because of quickly evolving technologies becoming more affordable and user friendly, artists gravitated towards lens-based media, and paintings and sculpture quickly receded to the background. Despite the efforts of the previous decades, once again “women's work”, excessive decoration and overly refined handwork was damned with the term “precious”, a gendered term used to belittle abstraction. Even though object-based

43 Katz. *With Pleasure*, 76

44 Halbreich, Kathy and Carter Ratcliff. *Alan Shields: Protracted Simplicity (1944-2005)*. (Aspen: Aspen Art Museum, 2016), 123



fig. 9. Lara Schnitger, *Snoop Snap*, 2007, nylon, fur, cotton, wood, 93.7 x 53.9 x 46.5 inches



fig. 10. Phyllida Barlow's *TIP*, 2013 installed next to Richard Serra's *Carnegie*, 1985

work was being dismissed, many women such as Lara Schnitger, Shinique Smith, Ann Hamilton, Phyllida Barlow and Jessica Stockholder continued to make abstract sculpture. Characteristics which defined this time were processes of material discovery and experimentation, the use of recycled materials, an affinity for the in-between spaces to be revealed, and the idea that abstraction offers the possibilities for ideas to be reframed and objects to be reformed.

As a continuous through line from the 1950's, experimentation reigned in the studio. Led by the rigor of the hand, the experimentation of trial and error with material was crucial. Lara Schnitger's work is studio driven and relies on the constant process of experimentation, testing out and playing. She explains, "I love it when sculpture tells me what to do. I start with one thing - and then you deal with gravity, things are ripping, and when you actually come to the materials, they have a life of their own- for me, this is the most exciting part. Together with the material, we create something else."⁴⁵ Schnitger is aware that failure is a necessity in the studio and the only way to move forward. This is demonstrated through the use of forms that could only manifest with openness, irrelevance and play.

As a result of institutionalized sexism and gender imbalance in the art world, many women lacked financial resources, and as a result many turned to reclaimed materials. Not only did reclaimed materials cut cost but allowed their work to be increased in size and scale. Phyllida Barlow's work is made from an accumulation of reclaimed materials with a brand of purposeful gaudiness. Not only does she use recycled materials, she keeps reusing them by breaking down older works. Instead of putting them in storage she rebuilds them into new works when opportunities arise. Repurposing materials is a feminist project – a practice that not only surfaces in the commercial art world, but one that the quilters from Gee's Bend have been working on for decades. It shows repurposing shows awareness of the history of materials, how they were made, who made them, how they got from point of manufacturing to point of sale, and what their cost is- literally and metaphorically. This mentality is far different than that of minimalist

45 Rothrum and Middleton Wagner, *Revolution in the Making*, 143



fig. 11. Rachel Harrison, *Pretty Discreet*, 2004

sculptors like Richard Serra, whose work is specifically designed, manufactured and permanent. Seen in fig. 10 is the work of Barlow and Serra at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

In 2007, two exhibitions, *Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent sculpture* at the Hirshhorn Museum and *Unmonumental* at New Museum 2007 attempted to chart a history of sculpture in the new century. Some of the artists included Rachel Harrison, Isa Genzken, Mindy Shapero, and Rebecca Warren. Both exhibitions referenced the influence of minimalism, impermanence, sorting and use of found objects and material in bizarre and novel combinations. These free standing and self-contained objects emphasize materials and labor-intensive processes (oftentimes combining handmade and mass-produced consumer goods) over illusions. The works are of smaller scale, made of

familiar everyday material, making the encounter with the work a more personal and specific experience, grounding the viewer in the here and now. The artists from these exhibitions engage with formal concerns of modern sculpture but also build upon numerous allusions to other art movements and the world in general. There is a sense of open-endedness and resistance to the notion of “purity”, arguing there is no end point for sculpture in the foreseeable future. These shows encapsulate not so much a style, but more of an attitude of the direction of sculpture - one that defies, and challenges expectations of what art can be.

Rachel Harrison’s work, *Pretty Discreet*, (fig. 10) is neither pretty nor discreet. The cumbersome sculpture is made up of scrap wood screwed together at various angles with black sheet rock screws, culminating in a largely transparent screen precariously resting on two dollies. Like her predecessors, she is using recycled material, revealing spaces in between and amorphous shapes. This work references histories of abstraction, and the readymade.

SHIFTING VALUES: 2010’s - PRESENT

As a result of larger cultural shifts, works by artists with greater diversity in gender, ethnicity and worldview are becoming a priority in galleries and museums. This is a change from the past. Many museums and galleries have had all women shows in the recent years including: *Women of Abstract Expressionism* at Denver Art Museum in 2016, *Revolution in the Making* at Hauser & Wirth in 2016, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* at the Hammer Museum in 2017. Many museums and galleries have had solo shows of women, people of color and older artists who are past due for a solo show including Joan Jonas at Tate Modern, Kerry James Marshall at LA MoCA, and touring retrospectives of Alice Neel and Yayoi Kusama. Overlooked artists in their 70’s and 80’s are just now getting representation from blue chip galleries including Howardena Pindell and Carmen Herrera.

In terms of object making, the art world is starting to embrace craft and influences from the P&D movement are surfacing. The Whitney



fig. 12. Polly Apfelbaum, *Blow-Up*, 1997, crushed synthetic velvet, fabric dye, 187 x 88 inches (detail, as installed)

Museum's current exhibition, *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019*, reiterates the importance of many women artists who implemented craft-based skills in their process. Such exhibitions are essential to the leveling out of hierarchies that falsely separate “fine art” and “craft”.

Along with the return of craft, the P&D movement is having an influence on contemporary artists, and it is evolving. Recent shows including *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985* at LA MoCA, and *Pattern and Decoration: Ornament as Promise*, at the Museum of Modern Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien have shown the importance of this movement. There is a re-emerging kind of women's work and expansive vision focused on pleasure, optimism, and joy. The revival of the sensory, visually stimulating and tactile work can be attributed to artists such as Eric N. Mack, Polly Apfelbaum, Rebecca Morris, and Sarah Cain. Often, the work references the domestic and the everyday by optimistically making something out of nothing.

Polly Apfelbaum is known for her “fallen paintings” - floor installations of hand dyed and cut pieces of cotton velvet (fig. 12). The location of the floor is important because it emphasizes the horizontal form, a structural flattening of hierarchy that can also be found in music like funk and punk rock.⁴⁶ The pieces are individually placed and not fixed, engaging the viewer in the process of making as opposed to simply looking. Similar to her predecessors of the P&D movement, Apfelbaum uses fabric, complex color, non-repeating patterns, and her work lends itself to variable and non-fixed arrangements. She uses experimentation and unpredictability in her process, but color, line and form keep an organized rhythm.

Sarah Cain makes paintings on anything – walls (fig. 13), canvas, furniture, buildings (fig. 14), and even dollar bills. She also incorporates objects with her paintings such as beads, potholders, thread, dried flowers, seashells, brooms and glitter. Generally feminine connotations have historically been assigned to those objects. Just like her P&D predecessors, she attempts to reclaim and revise these socially defined associations by using them in her abstract paintings with the

46 “Polly Apfelbaum: Flatterland: Funkytown - Exhibitions - D'Amelio Gallery.” 2012.

history of generally masculine connotations.⁴⁷ The friction between these two creates an unapologetic energy and joy.

Throughout the decades, there have been numerous artists making abstract sculpture through a feminist lens. A through line throughout these decades can be found in an emphasis on the individual artist's hand, abstraction and repetition, rejection of the monolith, use of impure methods, use of recycled and found materials, and implementation of experimentation, play and happenstance. All of these characteristics can relate directly to Material Engagement Theory, embodied making, and Queer Theory.

In order to describe a feminist lens through which to view the history of abstract sculpture, I cite embodied perception and Queer Phenomenology as methods to interpret abstract sculpture. The two theories overlap in their emphasis on the body as a point of reference, and celebration of alternative ways of learning. Referring back to Nochlin's essay, institutional sexism and racism has had and still has a profound impact on the people who are represented in the artworld and beyond. By dissolving binaries, suppressive barriers can be broken down.

47 Knight, Christopher. "Grand Flourishes of Paint" L.A. Times, June 20, 2015



fig. 13. Sarah Cain, *Work on Site*, 2013, paint spray paint, canvas, flowers, vase on wall

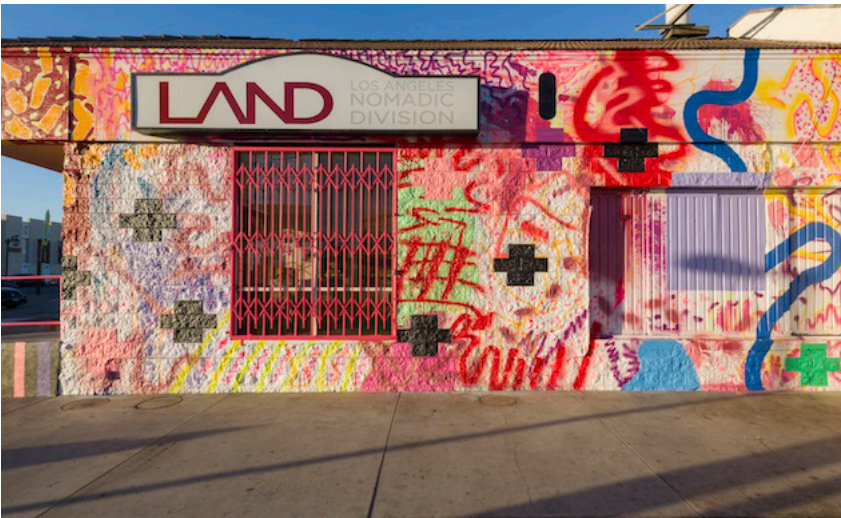


fig. 14. Sarah Cain, *Hey Babe Take a Walk on the Wild Side*, 2014, spray paint, enamel paint



METHODOLOGY

RULES FOR MAKING (in no particular order)

Although my work looks chaotic, my decision-making process is considered and repeatable. I made a set of rules, which also appear as my statement for the exhibition. These rules include:



- no hierarchy of materials
- subvert expected use
- misuse, misapply, misunderstand
- complicate binaries, stereotypes and associations
- allow for variable arrangements

- repeat, reiterate, reuse
- be aware of hand and body
- consider the subversive possibilities of the excessive, fantastic, and necessary
- always let the construction be visible

The methodology section explains each rule, gives an example of where it appears in the work, and an analysis of its importance in the context of my research. Similar to the discussion of context, materials and process, there are similarities that occur between many of the rules which further highlight the theme of overlap in this discussion.

NO HIERARCHY OF MATERIALS

With the absence of a ranking order comes more freedom, more possibilities and the complication of stereotypes and associations. My sculptures engage materials ranging from sequined fabric and fringe to lumber and grommets- all of which are considered with the same attention and focus on formal qualities- bringing the languages of embellishment and function into an unexpected dialogue. This method highlights the politics of the act of making itself, and calls into question the arbitrary, gendered and hierarchical assignments to different processes and materials. Eliminating hierarchy is important for collapsing the boundaries between high and low art, masculine and feminine stereotypes, and distinctions between excessive and necessary.

My work physically combines, pierces, intersects, supports, and weaves together materials that have either decorative or sculptural connotations. In this work, I complicate these binaries through spheres of activities and materials coming together in unexpected ways. For example, I use varying sizes of link chain and ball chain ranging from 1,300 load capacity to dainty jewelry chain and many sizes in between. This range blurs the line between using chain for structural integrity or for embellishment. By making physical and metaphorical overlaps, I



fig. 15. Erin McKenna, *detail of brick stitch*, 2020

seek to unlearn their seemingly assumed purposes and to shape a new conversation for the future of material language.

SUBVERT EXPECTED USE: MISUSE, MISAPPLY, MISUNDERSTAND

Through playful 'misuse', humor, celebration and enthusiasm, the work complicates associations of the excessive and the necessary. In regard to construction and deconstruction in the process of making, I ask myself, what characteristics emphasize an object's or material's associations? How can I use aesthetic logic and what one recognizes as functional logic and then blur the meaning of both? The title of the exhibition, *finding the shape of the overlap*, refers to teetering on the line between the excessive/necessary, masculine/feminine, and structural/decorative; sometimes falling to one side or the other, but most often occupying the overlap. In the process of making, materials are used for their intended function, or exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness,



fig. 16. Erin McKenna, detail of *cowgirl and the dandy*, 2020

or used in ways they were never intended by the manufacturer.

In this body of work, I not only use house paint to apply to the gallery wall, but I turn the paint into a malleable material with multiple applications. In order to do this, I lay plastic on the floor, then pour multiple colors of paint directly on the plastic. Sometimes, I let the paint dry completely, and after a few days, it is dry enough to peel off the plastic. I then cut it up into smaller puzzle pieces and apply them to wood using small screws.

Another way I make house paint into a material is by pouring the paint onto plastic, and while it's still wet, I embed fabric, sequins, beads, washers, and or nuts, literally merging different materials to become one. Once dry, the paint peels off the plastic, I flip it over and repeat the same process on the back of the new paint material. When both sides are dry, I treat the finished product the same way I would treat fabric: I cut it into pieces, and collage them together, attaching them with bolts or sewing with thread. I punch holes and add multiple grommets around the edge to prepare each piece to be added to a sculptural configuration. This method subverts the expected use of

paint through the creation of a malleable material that can be manipulated like leather or fabric. Through the misuse of material, it becomes something it is not “supposed” to be, further dismantling assumptions and allowing for more possibilities. This notion also lends itself to the multiplicitous nature of the works, allowing there to be many meanings of materials at the same time. These meanings can shift and change experientially whether it’s through making, observing, time of day, mood, current association or familiarity with objects.

COMPLICATE BINARIES, STEREOTYPES, AND ASSOCIATIONS

During the process of making, I ask myself, how is material gendered, what stereotypes are associated with materials, and how can I complicate those? In order to complicate these binaries and associations, I mash up seemingly opposite materials. I use heavy hardware that has masculine connotations and complicate these connotations by showing its similarities to faceted gemstone beads, dainty jewelry chains, or glittering sequins (fig. 17). Heavy bolts, nuts and washers are used to attach delicate fabric. Thin machine screws, tiny nuts and washers that could be mistaken for jewelry are used to attach heavier fabrics with paint material. Sequins are either used as functional washers or to accentuate. Faceted nuts are strung alongside gemstone beads on thin ball chains, mimicking beads on a string. This rule shows how objects hold their aesthetic qualities based on their gender associations.

Taking cues from the rules of ‘no hierarchy’ and ‘misusing material’, this rule combines unlikely materials and objects. This mix and mash-up of material complicates binaries as it puts material in a continuum between practical function and embellishment or somewhere in between. This rule exposes the flaws in the way we gender materials and their use. By complicating binaries, I seek to collapse these confining and divisive boundaries altogether.

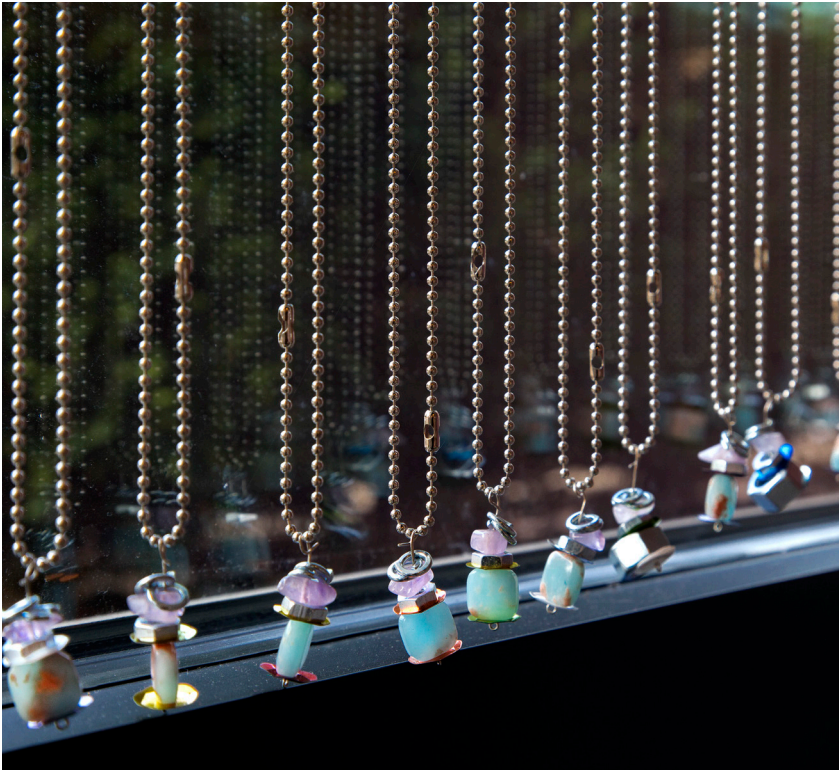


fig. 17. Erin McKenna, detail of *we sang in the sunshine, we laughed every day, we sang in the sunshine, then I went on my way*

ALLOW FOR VARIABLE ARRANGEMENTS

The work is not fixed, allowing for variable arrangements. Pieces can be taken apart and reconfigured with ease, similar to the way jazz music is riffed, improvisational dance is performed, or an outfit is layered. Something that is fixed is tight, immovable and therefore does not lend itself to multiple or unexpected possibilities. Therefore, the ability to add, remove, and rearrange highlights the importance of the potential to shift materials around physically, but also to shift our perspective on associations and uses.

There are many examples of this. The silk elements in *we sang in the*

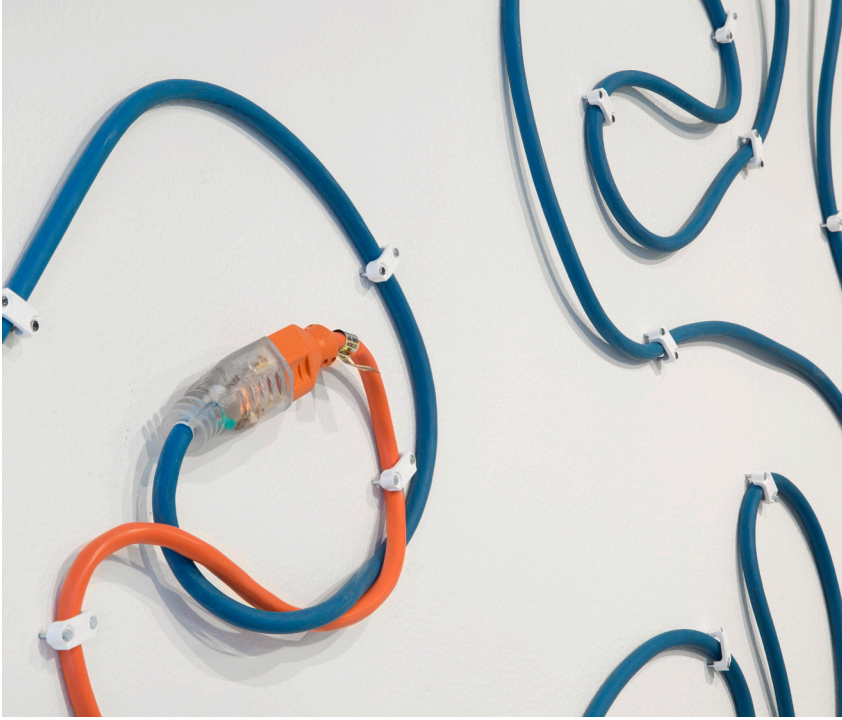


fig. 18. Erin McKenna, detail of *daisy chain* showing extension cord drawing using plastic staples

sunshine, we laughed every day, we sang in the sunshine, then I went on my way, are attached with book rings that can open and close with ease, therefore can be switched out with other pieces. The extension cord drawing from *daisy chain* (fig. 18) is made with plastic staples holding the cord in place, hence, each time the work is installed, the drawing will change. Multiple grommet holes around the edges of the paintings in mid-afternoon moon allow for each piece to be hung in a different way.

Allowing for variable arrangements goes against expectations for a fixed and monolithic art object, similar to the approach of artists of the P&D movement. This rule suggests the work is always in flux, begging to be edited, learned from and revised. The shifting of elements in a piece exemplifies embodied making and learning through the process of doing.

REPEAT, REITERATE, REUSE

The prefix “re” means “again and again”. This is where failure comes in as a necessity in my process of making as a way to move forward. As with other aspects of my methods, each term has its own definition, but there are overlaps between the three applications. Repetition, reiteration and reusing are all about keeping a momentum, moving forward and inevitable growth. Processes, techniques, materials, patterns and formal elements are all executed “again and again”, but always with slight variations so as to not form a habit, which is what I am arguing against.

While making, I repeat processes and patterns. Pattern is a way to evoke a sensation of abundance and a chance to awaken a frenetic energy. At the same time, I am drawn to and make non-repeating patterns such as shapes that puzzle piece together, marbled surfaces, fields of form, and texture and color that come together but consist of



fig. 19. Erin McKenna, detail of *mid-afternoon moon*

unique elements. These kinds of patterns become more about rhythm, that is based on the offbeat, staggering the tension and emphasis.

I reiterate the same techniques as a nod to craft and the knowledge we acquire from learning through doing. Every time I reiterate, I discover something new, allowing the work to constantly evolve. In the realm of repetition and reiteration comes routine, which is synonymous with the everyday, a language that can acknowledge differences while still allowing recognition of familiar things. The materials and processes I use do not declare themselves to be a work of art first, but something more familiar.

Mottainai, or “a regret to waste” is a Japanese philosophy containing metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic connotations. The practice attempts to define the inherent value in a thing and to encourage using objects beyond the end of their perceived lifespan, repair when broken, or to find a new use for it.⁴⁸ Reusing materials such as scraps from past work or studio experiments is present in all my work. I always save scraps of materials like remnants of fabric, scrap lumber, fringe from an old jacket, beads from a broken necklace and other odds and ends. I only use mis-tint paints (returned house paint at a discounted price) from the hardware store, limiting my color palette. These materials with their pre-existing shapes, colors, textures and patterns lend themselves to unique and specific compositions.

The notion of “again and again” emphasizes a deeper understanding of material and process. It allows the rules to be learned and then an allowance to break them. Breaking rules opens possibilities and makes room for alternative ways of knowing.

AWARENESS OF BODY AND HAND

Embodied perception reveals the body as the source of knowing, and the mind as a place for interpretation. During the process of making,

⁴⁸ Kevin Taylor. “Mottainai: Can We Save the Planet with Ancient Japanese Philosophy?” (ABC News, 2017)

I implement handmade objects by sewing, hand dyeing and marbling fabric, hand routing, making patterns and assembling. The hand is present in the work to evoke a joy for making, inventing, and a visual way of learning. Alexander Langlands suggests we should “once again start to use our own bodies - our own kinesthetic sensibility - to support our existence. We may regain a literacy of power and rediscover the knowledge of cræft.”⁴⁹ The practice of making things by hand and doing physical labor promotes slowing down and encourages one to form a physical and metaphysical relationship with the material and get a better understanding of how things are made and the labor involved. The handmade object exists with both a useful purpose and an intent that comes from the patience, practice, and presence of the person making it. Such objects help us become aware of being aware, which in essence is the act of mindfulness: seeing things as they are, enjoying and relating directly to materials and experiences.

When I make the paintings on the floor, or assemble parts of a sculpture, I am aware of my body from the top of my head, to my teeth and through my fingertips, all the way to the ground below my feet. It’s the whole of me, the ground I walk on, and gravity that limits my actions. Therefore, making is just as much about thinking as it is about the physicality of my body-body memory, and the realities of the day, and the moment. Have I been exercising and stretching? Is the weather dictating my clothing choices? Am I hungry or tired? It’s the muscle memory of repeated craft based skills and knowing how materials work. My body is a tool for making the work, therefore, the implications of the body being present in the work is important.

The installation is not complete or active until there is someone walking through it - spinning around, crouching to look underneath, cautiously moving around the corner. When the viewer steps in, the work is transformed into a dynamic environment as they move through it. I want the viewer experiencing the work to become aware of their body, how they move through space, and the similarities they share with the

49 Alex Langlands. *Cræft: An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017)

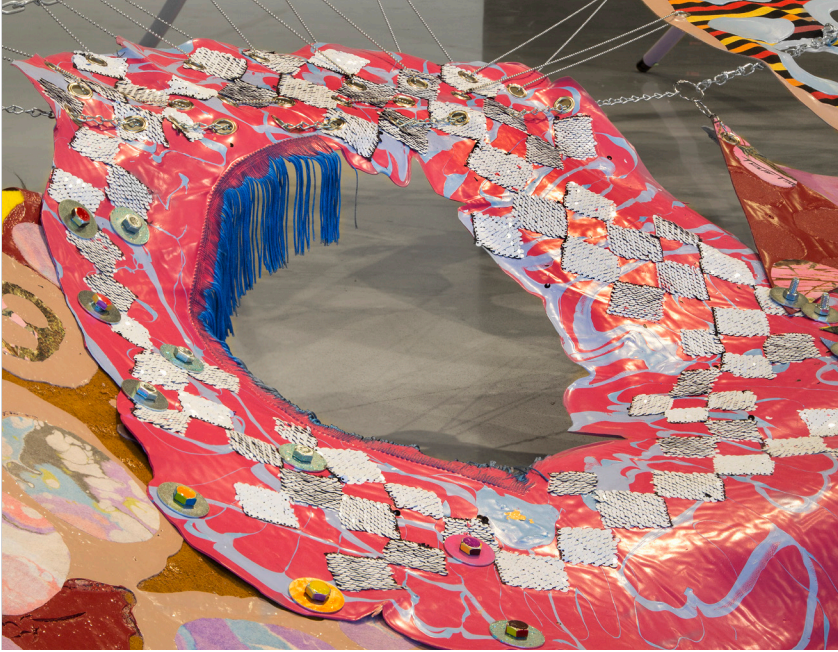


fig. 20. Erin McKenna, detail of *mid-afternoon moon*

materials. The work is not on a pedestal or elevated. It is in direct conversation with the ground we share, the walls that confine us, and the limitations of the ceilings. The work is situated by the windows to feel the warmth of the sunshine. It stretches to the point of almost ripping. It spreads out and takes up space. Other parts slump, sag and relax, just like us.

In addition to the work itself, and the viewer who encounters the work, there is the experience of space and proximity. The work is an installation which means the viewer literally enters the work and will experience it from varying distances. From afar, the structure and overall installation is understood as an ensemble of forms in close relationships. The space that the viewer travels to get closer provides room for a choreography of experiencing. The work becomes context for the body or the frame that receives the body. Up close, the details and enlivened surfaces are discovered by way of marbled paint, dozens of grommet holes, or the intricate and time intensive beadwork that amplify the

entropic forms.

The awareness of body and hand, both by the artist and the viewer, reveals embodied perception and a deeper understanding of materials, their use and how to misuse them. By strengthening this relationship, we can start to unlearn habitual ways of thinking about materials.

ALWAYS LET THE CONSTRUCTION BE VISIBLE

When making, I do not hide how things are constructed- seams are exposed, there is no front or back, heads of bolts are painted with bright nail polish, holes in lumber are filled with colorful putty, the armature is visible, and the hardware to display the work is obvious to the point where it becomes part of the piece. This rule emphasizes what is usually invisible.

In contrast to common exhibition practice I choose to show the process of making, structural armature, and installation hardware. By revealing how things are made and installed, the work becomes more accessible. It's like letting someone in on a joke, revealing a magic trick, but more importantly, it's an example of *radical honesty*. The process is available for everyone to see, lending itself to vulnerability and generosity. Revealing the labor of what is often invisible is a feminist project. With the efforts to remove smoke and mirrors, I am trying to make every component that contributes to a thing become present -a task that is impossible, but the effort matters.

When the construction is visible, it allows the viewer into the process of problem solving. Jerry-rigged decision making is a flexible approach to problem-solving that uses limited resources in an innovative way. While making this work, I set up constraints by using materials at hand, improvising and altering existing objects to better fit my needs. I react to my environment in real time and respond to the immediacy of the moment and tools at hand which keeps me aware, alert and observant.

By showing the decision-making process and the labor involved, I am highlighting embodied making and misusing materials to emphasize what is usually overlooked. For example, in *mid-afternoon moon*, I connect a pipe to a 2x4, attaching it with oversized bolts and adorning it with a 12" yellow fringe. This exaggeration assures the viewer will notice how the frame is put together. By demystifying the process of making, I hope to offer an access point for any viewer.

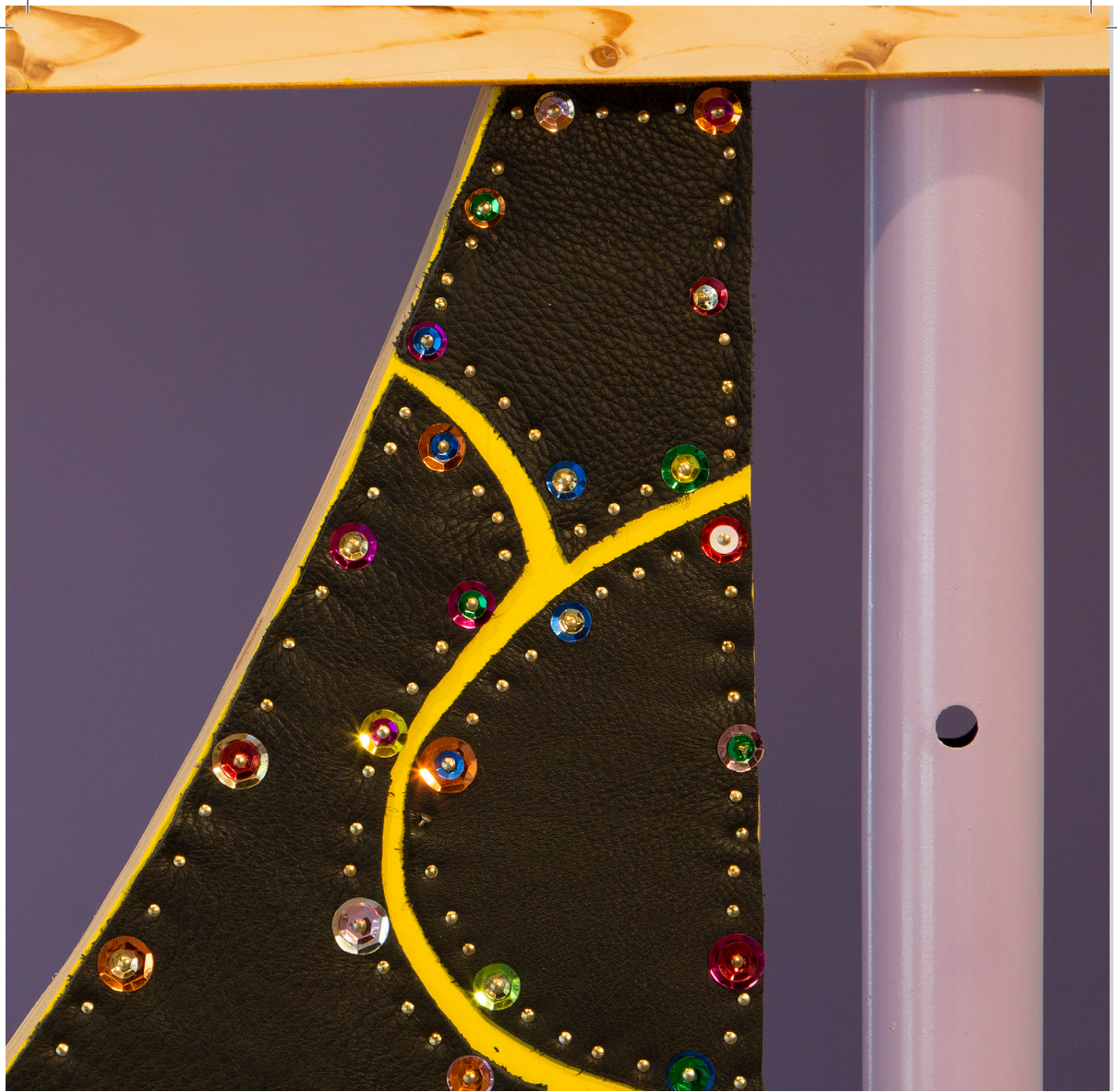


fig. 21. Erin McKenna, detail of *mid-afternoon moon*



CREATIVE WORK

My thesis work is an installation that wanders between media (sculpture, drawing, painting, textiles, and dance), genres (art, craft, and design), and from process to object. Marbled paint, hand-routed drawings, seemingly functional doors or barriers, and jewelry like embellishments amalgamate into sculptures with painterly surfaces which beg for closer viewing from all angles. Whether working with textiles, paint, lumber, or hardware, the idea of misusing materials acts as a focal point throughout the work, pointing to our habitual way of



thinking about materials, and their use, as well as hierarchical structures and the societal binaries encoded in them. The work maintains a strong emphasis on the artist's hand and visual language of color, form and texture, all of which coincides with honesty and a profound joy of making. The title of the exhibition, *finding the shape of the overlap*, refers to the moment when a material can no longer be categorized by societal norms, and instead is placed in a gray area between excessive/necessary, masculine/feminine, and structural/decorative. Materials

are used as conventionally intended, exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness, or used in ways they were never intended, thereby, blurring boundaries of what is the right or wrong way to use a material.

The work is very much an installation more so than a collection of sculptures. The relationships between pieces are carefully considered in the layout of the exhibition. The interdependence and conversation between pieces is a major element of what not only invites the viewer into the work, but also makes the viewer part of the work. The negative space frames the sculptures that lie beyond, constantly giving the viewer something to discover and make their way toward. The installation is also in conversation with and reliant upon the architecture as it clings to the walls, rests on the floor, hangs from the ceiling, and illuminates from the windows. If the work was to travel to a different site, the layout would be reconfigured as a response to the new architecture. This shows the work is contingent to the site, relational to itself, and its meaning is dependent on context in ways that modernist universalism would like to wish away.

mid-afternoon moon

The first piece the viewer encounters in my thesis exhibition is *mid-afternoon moon* (fig. 22). The work consists of two separate metal arcs. One is suspended from the ceiling and hovers an inch off the floor. The second, smaller arc stands on three long, slightly curved and uneven legs and resists gravity's wishes by being chained to a flocked cinder block. If joined, the arcs would create a whole circle. With no front or back, the piece teeters between a painting and sculpture, with a web of chain, paint, bolts, velvet, washers, nuts, sequins, nail polish, and fringe. This work is a result of experiments, impure methods and failures with material. The paintings suspended by chain in the center are made of house paint with textiles, sequins, nuts, washers and beads embedded in the paint while still wet, then left for days to dry. Once dry, I cut up these paintings and collage them using bolts or sew them together with string or thin ball chain. In the final piece, the paintings become more synonymous with fabric as they are stretched and sus-

pended in the center of the arcs. This misuse and experimentation with paint led me to discover a new textile/paint hybrid.

The negative space between the stretched paint and textiles allows the viewer to see beyond the piece, activating the architecture, people and other pieces of the installation to be part of its visual information. Layered shadows fall beneath the work, making a drawing on the floor as complex as the paintings above it.

The title refers to the moment of seeing the moon, a signifier of night, in the middle of the day. When this overlap of day and night occurs, the moon is never full, hence the partial circle shapes of the arc. Similar to the surprise of seeing the moon during the day, this piece offers a surprise of liquid paint turning into a flexible and versatile material.



fig. 22. Erin McKenna, *mid-afternoon moon*, 2020, paint, bolts, velvet, washers, nuts, sequins, nail polish, fringe, trampoline frame, lumber, chain, carabiners, gromets, silk, synthetic fur, patches, turquoise beads, springs, cinderblock, flocking, steel O ring, ball chain.

daisy chain

Three extension cords connected to each other, amounting to over 200 feet, start at an outlet and wiggle their way up and over a door, across a wall, and around a corner. The winding cords are held to the wall with plastic staples, creating a drawing with orange and blue lines. Around the corner, the cords lead to a three-foot LED light on the wall, revealing that the cord drawing is not only a drawing, but is functional as well. The light illuminates the interior of a stretched and suspended textile sculpture, making the sequins and faceted nuts glisten. The textile piece is made from various materials such as tulle, felt, sequined fabric, gold lycra, corduroy, and a knitted square. These materials are all held together with latex paint, similar to the way bricks are held together with mortar. Pieces are added using bolts and nuts or delicate ball chain. Sometimes, a section of fabric is cut out, revealing the lavender wall in the distance, or the hand dyed fabric on the other side. The piece is stretched and suspended with chains reaching across the small room, attached to the ceiling and wall. The bottom of the piece gracefully bends and gently rests on the floor.

The title of this piece refers to a term used for multiple cords plugged



fig. 23. Erin McKenna, *daisy chain*, 2020, electrical cords, LED light, paint, bolts, nuts, washers, sequins, ball chain, grommets, chain, s hooks, carabiners, lycra and polyester, amethyst

into each other in a sequence, similar to a garland of daisy flowers. This term indicates the overlap of functionality and embellishment. This piece offers many moments or reference to the same overlap. The cord is both a drawing and a functional cord. The textile piece references a quilt which is both a utilitarian and aesthetic object. Necklaces are used to add ornament to the work but also hold fabric together at the same time.

***we sang in the sunshine, we laughed every
day, we sang in the sunshine, then I went
on my way***

Hanging in multiple windows are hand dyed segments of silk and velvet held together with binder rings and chain, alluding to curtains. The textile works are obviously suspended with bright red C clamps. Each piece of silk is marbled by hand. Some pieces have a black grid, which was created with a shibori dyeing technique of folding and clamping. The orderly grid mimics the black metal frame of the windows. The grid provides a predictable pattern juxtaposed with the non-repeating pattern of the marble. Both patterns are made using only dye and the hand. Some of the silk has a grid of grommets with a thin ball chain woven in and out, mimicking a thread. Dangling from the edge of some silk strips are looped ball chains holding gemstone beads, washers, nuts, and sequins.

The title of this piece is the final chorus from the Dolly Parton song, We'll Sing in the Sunshine. Dolly Parton is one of the ultimate overlaps in pop culture with a fan base that spans Evangelical Christians to Drag Queens. The song is about a love that didn't last, although each party gave what they had. Similarly, this piece is temporary, just like the sunshine in southeast Michigan. This work is complete with the overlap of colorful silk and sunshine, which not only illuminates the work, but sends a cascade of slow shifting shadows of a grid onto the floor and lavender wall beyond.



fig. 24. Erin McKenna, *we sang in the sunshine, we laughed every day, we sang in the sunshine, then I went on my way*, 2020, hand dyed silk, velvet, ball chain, c clamps, paint, nail polish, washers, grommets, jasper, sequins, nuts, washers, dowel rods, chain, sunlight

cowgirl and the dandy

In the center of the exhibition stands *cowgirl and the dandy* (fig. 25). Lavender pipe, akin to what is used in *mid-afternoon moon*, stands over eight feet tall, threaded through two pieces of embellished lumber, graces the floor with a slight curve, and ends with a chunk of 4x4 that has been tinted pink with fabric dye. The two pieces of lumber near the top are covered in fuzzy flocking and tiled paint. Sandwiched between the lumber is a curved piece of plywood with one side marbled with spray paint (mimicking the marbled silk), and the other side tiled with pieced leather, brads and sequins (mimicking the tiled paint). Dangling above is an S hook with a cascade of dangling rings holding washers and nuts, similar to an earring. The chunk of 4x4 at the end of the pipe is secured with a 10-inch bolt and 7 too many nuts, all painted with red and pink nail polish. Attached with two hinges is a round piece of plywood with a congruent curve to its counterpart above. One side is tiled with marbled paint adhered with screws, and the other side is a spiraling drawing made with a hand router. The piece of wood is held up with a functional, oversized red caster, allowing the sculpture to have various positions. Around the corner is a cushioned upholstered staple drawing that is attached to the wall with a similar set of gold hinges. On one side is a set of cushioned shapes pieced together and finished with pleather. The other side shows how the fabric was pulled, stapled, and held together with mending plates which are painted with nail polish.

This piece is named after a Dolly Parton song about an unfolding love story between an unlikely pair: a cowgirl and a dandy. Despite their physical appearance and opposing stereotypes, the couple finds common ground and delight in each other's company. The overlap in the song occurs when Dolly tells us, "Now there's a little bit of class in this ol' cowgirl/ An' there's a little bit of country in the dandy". Similar to the pair in the song, the overlap occurs when the materials rejoice together in the same way-defying stereotypes and delightfully surprising onlookers.



fig. 25. Erin McKenna, *cowgirl and the dandy*, 2020, leather, sequins, plywood, nails, spray paint, metal pipes, paint, screws, 4x4, hinges, s hook, nuts, washers, pleather, staples, mending plates, nail polish, caster, fabric dye



fig. 26. Erin McKenna, *cowgirl and the dandy* (detail)

brick stitch

Sharing a wall with the exhibition title and 'rules for making' hangs *brick stitch* (fig. 27). Two five-foot chains with a load capacity of 1,300 pounds, are suspended from porch swing hooks in the wall. Strung between the chain, like rungs on a ladder are 18" sections of #30 ball chain. By doing this, I am trying to blur the logic of aesthetics and function. The glistening silver of the chain mimics a necklace, while the shape refers to a functional ladder. At the end of the chain, a painting is attached with U bolts. The chain exaggerates the hanging of a painting. The painting is double sided and embedded with sequins, pom poms and blue faux fur. The end of the painting is either in the process of rolling out like a red carpet or defying gravity and rolling up the wall.

The title of this piece refers to a type of bead weaving stitch in which individual beads are stacked horizontally in the same pattern as bricks are stacked in a wall. This type of beading technique is also called "beaded ladder". The title offers a direct comparison to a type of jewelry making practice, and a functional ladder.



fig. 27. Erin McKenna, *brick stitch*, 2020, chain, paint, faux fur, ball chain, sequins, fringe, hooks

was It a car or a cat I saw?

Reaching towards the center of the room, stands *was It a car or a cat I saw?* (fig. 28) precariously balancing on a thin plywood semicircle. The work is a rectangle made of varying sizes of lumber and a dowel rod. The lumber is treated with the same paint tiling technique as seen in *cowgirl* and *the dandy*. A curved piece of plywood rests in the bottom corner with one side covered in paint, and the other side covered in spray painted felt. The top is adorned with lavender and red fringe with a custom haircut, yellow pom poms and size #30 ball chain. A 24" LED light is attached on the interior of the work, and illuminates a series of different sized chains, some of which are covered in Plasti-Dip. Hanging from the end of the chain are varying sizes of what look like necklaces or bracelets with amethyst and jasper dangling at the end, just about to kiss the exposed edge of cut plywood. A black extension cord that gives life to the light is attached to the wall with plastic staples, uniformly making its way towards the top of the wall, and then breaks out into a curvy dance.

The title of this piece is a palindrome, a phrase that reads the same backwards as it does forwards, hence the two capital "I"s. Just like a palindrome, the overlap in the work occurs via directionality, looking very similar on each side, but with slight differences.



fig. 28. Erin McKenna, *was It a car or a cat I saw?*, 2020, plywood, amethyst, paint, composite jasper, screws, chain, Plasti Dip, eye hooks, LED light, cable clips, felt, spray paint, ball chain



Looking at art is often promoted as a learning experience, but I want to make it an unlearning experience. My work is not simply about conceptually dismantling hierarchies, but about dismantling hierarchies through making. Concepts are materially manifested through the various sculptures I build with my hands and body. Words and theories are important, but I want to point back to my work as the site of my contribution to knowledge. My methodology allows materials to go off-track and upside down which leads to delight and surprise. I am able to



shift associations, emphasize failure as a necessity, locate the body as a point of knowledge, and show more potential through flexibility.

I began this thesis with a set of questions as a way to form a feminist framework to engage abstract sculpture historically and presently. By collapsing boundaries separating fine art and craft, masculine and feminine stereotypes, and distinctions between excessive and necessary, how can I dismantle assumptions about materials and how they

are used? What is revealed when embodied perception and misusing materials collide during the process of making? These questions have been the basis on which I have chosen to complicate associations and biases which lead to habitual ways of thinking not only about materials, but of people, places, politics and power. If we continue our fixed ways of knowledge production it will only confirm what is already known according to historical methods of learning, formed from a sliver of a narrow perspective.

Is there a difference between artists of different genders? Of course not, and obviously yes. Anyone of any gender can make anything - materials, subject matter and context can all overlap. But everyone inhabits their own body and moves through the world in a unique way. By creating a feminist framework to assess abstract sculpture, I am highlighting the fact that much of what we understand to be the inherent quality of materials, subject matter and context are culturally constructed. This disintegration of cultural constructs also chips away at the modernist sculpture dogmas of form follows function, truth to materials, and what you see is what you get - all of which are tiresome rumors that emphasize normality.

Circling back to the making itself, I am able to identify multiple discoveries and developments in my practice. The theories above wouldn't mean anything without the concrete decisions I made. Through my methodology, I learned to let my materials lead the process of making by paying closer attention and responding to the physicality of the materials. This manifested in my use of objects and materials such as paint, light, grommets, and extension cords. For example, I had to solve the problem of how to plug in a light, and at the same time make it more than just functional. I let the memory of the wire dictate the curves as it moved across the wall. Additionally, I developed my interaction with architecture through the use of windows, ceiling height, and fixed walls. Using the architecture as a key element in my installation gave me the opportunity to guide viewers through and among objects, not just to the work. I have also discovered the benefit of learning from trial and error. This has led me to confidently approach embodying an idea without being afraid if my hypothesis is

incorrect. These discoveries have led me to understand that playing is synonymous with risk taking because it is knowledge building. I tested the boundaries and dismantled what I thought I knew. I reordered my material world to accommodate this new knowledge.

After making this work and thinking about the future of my practice, I have to pause and reflect on my past. I uncovered a link to the place where I grew up which informed my understanding of the material world- Appalachian Ohio. Appalachia has become synonymous with illiteracy and poverty and other unflattering stereotypes. However, my understanding of this region is one of intense connection to the material world, the realities of the environment, an emphasis on problem solving, and unapologetic lawlessness. This is where I witnessed people improvising with materials for both functional and decorative purposes, all of which took place in a non-art context. By returning to Appalachian Ohio I can ground my work in that geographical and cultural environment by investigating knowledge production from this region through craft, botanical knowledge, work ethic and reliance on community. Similar to my thesis work, I believe there are biases to dismantle such as assumptions about people based on place, and biases against alternative forms of knowledge production outside of academia. I can foster my sensibility with materials and engage with the community and place that is rich in ingenuity. I imagine this manifesting through engagement with community centers, volunteering with non-profit organizations, and starting a artist residency program for people from or interested in the region.

My thesis exhibition, *finding the shape of the overlap*, highlights the politics of the act of making itself, and calls into question the arbitrary, gendered and hierarchical assignments to different processes and materials. Rather than choosing a position, these pieces make their impact in the sometimes awkward, hybrid amalgamation of objects, materials and acts from either side of the many binaries we assign to things in the world. In this way the work is implicitly political as well as playful, inventing and contributing new art processes and object categories to contemporary art.

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