

SUSTAINABILITY AND CRAFT

Opinion Piece

by Rebecca Hutchinson

A bit of background on my work

I have been influenced by the natural world – by the use of earthen materials and inspired from species' form. My work is shaped by ecosystem observation and researched historical botanical motifs found in historical craft (domestic handcrafted items such as Persian rugs and Victorian lace). The sculptural work is made for the wall and floor, and connects site specifically to architecture. It focuses, formally and structurally, on the respect for process. My interest is in the details: quality of craft, connections, and structure. Conceptually, I explore sustainable relationships within the ecosystem through craft to gain an understanding of all physical parts to the whole. These site-responsive clay and fibrous sculptural works

are made from recycled 100% natural fiber clothing or harvested garden materials beat down to pulp and formed into handmade sheets and shapes. I also use industrial castoff surplus materials, like cotton thread from the bedding industry, sisal from the burlap bag industry, or upcycled off-line currency, combined and attached with clay. Like a bird or squirrel that uses the vernacular from place, I, too, upcycle humble materials and remake them into what I hope to be exquisite sculptural forms, utilizing the vernacular-harvest as content and, through craft, a refined formal quality.

My early work was an exploration in gathering materials and developing form. The forms acted as both a vessel, with reference to



Left: Warehouse Installation at The Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, Montana. **Right:** Installation at Perlman Teaching Museum for exhibition *Swing Low*, Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, 99" x 96" x 14'4"



safety and home, and a reflection on communal existence. I made form next to form, investigating the charged space and proximity among the forms, as well as the space available to the viewer to walk among the works. Presently, I am referencing observed plant behavior; the work is more engaged with the theme of thriving and productivity. I continue, through observation, to look at diverse states: structure of nature, the interaction of various and competing forces of nature, biological diversity, and the resilience of life itself manifested as the struggle to grow, expand, reproduce and nurture.

The sculptures, some of which sit on the floor, some that are suspended from the wall, all- connect to architecture. Like the growth of weeds, they connect and grow around something that may have lost its purpose. Like new life moving in, quietly repurposing space, they are nestled in amongst the layers of history. Working on site has always been a process of listening to space and then, after listening, connecting and interacting to offer new insights to the architectural reality. Materially, I combine my knowledge of two specialties: ceramics and hand-made paper. Clay and fiber, like a species' choice for animal architecture or like architecture made by indigenous cultures. It is a perfect fit structurally and conceptually.

Don Wilkinson, author of *Diverse States of Existence: Instinctive Formations at Shattuck*, writes about my current work:

Her work is largely botanical in appearance. There is a common tendency to create great divides between big disciplines such as art and science. But Hutchinson is having none of that. As the daughter of

scientists, she has a raging curiosity and a learned point of view. Her sculptures are the result of careful observation, informed decisions and a meticulous handling of materials. She digs into the muck, both figuratively and literally, physically and spiritually embracing nature as her muse. In works collectively called the "Determinate Growth" series, she takes inspiration from root systems, rock outcroppings, moss, the forest floor, invasive species and the species that fight against them, the strength and fragility of small- and large-scale ecosystems, floral beauty and ferocity, and plant formations of all kinds, ecophysiology, the biological discipline that studies the adaptation of an organism's physiology to environmental conditions. Hutchinson constructs the sculptures by combining the clay and paper elements in such a manner that they seem to have always coexisted. The individual components are brought together in a composite harmony with the application of a mixture of paper pulp and clay, seemingly as thick as peanut butter, which acts as a near-indestructible bonding agent as it hardens. They are tatterdemalions transformed into something that manages to be both earth bound and ethereal!

Craft

When reflecting about the act of making, I acknowledge that craft is about connection, the intimacy of connection. Literally hand to material and hand to a tool, or when needed, hand to equipment. In addition, intimacy of connection occurs formally. Formal devices such as color, line, pattern, and space guide form until aesthetics begin to work in a syncretic way. Looking good, looking masterful, requires all visual parts working together towards beauty. Also, in my work, the crafted object has a connection to place. I respect



Left: Installation view from *Form and Nature*, Turman Larison Contemporary, Helena, Montana **Right:** *Orange Burst*, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material 60" x 60" x 12"

¹ Wilkson, Don. "Diverse States of Existence: Instinctive Formations at Shattuck". *Artscope Magazine*, May/June 2016. Print.



and enjoy the various organizations I must interact with or specific departments within the museum organization. I have roles with curatorial, marketing, and preparatory staff, engaging with them all as the large site works find "home". The act of making employs literal touch connection, aesthetic connection and, in my work, a physical connection for the viewer to (hopefully) visually enjoy.

Craft requires interaction and respect for the "other" to make this connection. It is through the connection of hand to tool, that a sensitive mark results. It places the maker as the listener, the negotiator, the requester, then the engager. The respect for this connection to the tool or to the material completes the desired end result. The completion of task is an act of collaboration. The maker is the humbled requester for this interaction. The act of making connection is collaboration. The maker moves from the "I" did it role to the "we" committed to this to gain a result. Whether it is hand in tool, hand on material, or formal visual mastery through part of object to parts of object working together, the role of making craft is an active

Sustainability

Making and craft is a micro model for sustainability. The making takes more than the "I," it proceeds into the "we", engaging in respect for the parts to the whole. Craft functions in participating in the "whole," which in turn encourages the most fundamental role for sustaining on the earth: participation in multiple components, upholding respect beyond one entity or one motion for completion. It celebrates that all components are essential and important.

In nature (spider web or fungus growth, for example) there is intimate, if not instinctual, knowledge of all aspects to a decision of how things are built knowing what is connected to what. The craft of nature, the craft of humans, offers the model for transformative behavior, to change human approach to existence. It can move our decisions to researched responsible connection directions. Understanding all parts to the whole means respect for everyone and respect for everything. We have the ability to render new progressive thinking.



Tranquil Bloom with detail, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, 12' x 17' x 13'