

Editorial

“Modern and Contemporary Art: Topical Abstraction in Contemporary Sculpture” Special Issue Introduction

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The essays gathered in this Special Issue of *Arts* concern artists working in the United States and Europe since the 1960s who have leveraged sculptural abstraction to address topical issues without ceding to the classical framework of figuration. Although modernist abstraction is conventionally associated with aesthetic transcendence and withdrawal from the world, its material processes have always depended on the embodied rhythms, conditions, and values of the everyday. As such, artists have long used abstraction to redescribe social configurations (such as class, gender, and race) that have historically served to delimit particular aesthetic, social, or political possibilities.

A recent spate of scholarship and museum exhibitions has pressed this point. In the United States, David Gettsy has used transgender theory to reassess abstraction's indeterminate material configurations and physical allusions. His influential work has inspired a broader call for art history to abandon binary thinking whole cloth (Gettsy 2015). Julia Bryan-Wilson's inventive monograph on Louise Nevelson, which solicits critical studies on gender, race, and queer sexuality, engages speculatively and auto-theoretically with the art and archive, modeling insightful assessments about abstract art that are personally associative and socially expansive (Bryan-Wilson 2023). More overtly political in its stakes, Lex Morgan Lancaster's work on contemporary queer artists registers their use of sensual formal and material processes as strategic refusals of visibility politics. Abstraction, Lancaster argues, represents “an important exploratory site for politically invested artists from historically oppressed groups” (Lancaster 2022, p. 16).

In tackling similar themes, museum exhibitions have likewise contributed to significant re-evaluations of the topical in sculptural abstraction. Conceived by Paul Schimmel and Jenni Sorkin, *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016* was a groundbreaking survey and catalogue demonstrating the long trajectory of women artists' influence in pioneering novel materials, processes, and abstract forms, often with social and political overtures (Schimmel and Sorkin 2016). Handmade processes likewise featured in *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the curators employing an expansive concept of craft to bring together a range of media and types of artworks featuring diverse techniques. Among them, sculptural works by Nick Cave, Simone Leigh, Ree Morton, and Marie Watt engaged with histories of making as positions of resistance to entrenched cultural and institutional hierarchies. Combining handicraft and sculptural abstraction, these and other artists in the exhibition materialized a complex politics of labor that questioned the conventions and norms on which they drew.

The Museum of Modern Art's 2022–23 exhibition, *Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces*, curated by Thomas (T.) Jean Lax, illuminated the importance of the alternative gallery Just Above Midtown (JAM) founded in 1974 by Linda Goode Bryant in supporting artists of color shut out from the mainstream New York art world for favoring abstract idioms. As the exhibition and accompanying catalogue attest, figures such as Senga Nengudi, Maren Hassinger, and David Hammons found a community through JAM with which to create



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work powerfully resistant to aesthetic and cultural pigeonholing (Lax and Taboada 2022). By foregrounding material constructions, often in tandem with performance or dance, these artists suffused their abstraction with the textures of Black life, producing what Uri McMillan calls the “grounds for a new grammar of feeling and being” (McMillan 2017, p. 115).

Our Special Issue aims to expand this terrain of recent scholarship by asking how we might more thoroughly conceive of the political, social, and cultural specificities of abstraction in sculpture. One answer lies in attending closely to issues of materiality and process. As the examples above indicate, contemporary sculptors have adopted and adapted materials and methods to inventive and experimental ends that compellingly engage with social, historical, environmental, and aesthetic formations. At once allusive and open, such practices draw together disparate frameworks ranging from the vernacular and ethnographic to the phenomenological and commemorative. The overt conceptualizations that ensue cultivate trenchant conversations that foreground the critical terrain that artmaking and materials occupy.

Nevertheless, abstraction still faces some of the same biases that dog broader instances of materially driven forms of artmaking, leaving it under-studied as a political vehicle. Perhaps because it operates as an overt instance in which the process of making aims to preoccupy the viewer’s encounter with the work, we tend not to attribute a political position to this class of aesthetic experiences. It is as if “too much process” excludes the social or the political through its palpability and sensuous address. Upending such biases and locating a tenable theoretical language for such maneuvers has become more pressing with the current expansion of inventive processes and forms that engage topical issues. Artists have marshaled frameworks ranging from the amateur, vernacular, and ethnographic to the traditional, functional, and daily as newly repurposed conduits of expression. That is, increasingly, the rhetoric of abstraction is approached through questions of process and materiality in ways that expand and open possibilities for how art might posit relational positions or frameworks through which to solicit and engage different audiences. The papers here consider these issues via questions of affect, temporality, replication, interiority, and liberation. Each engages the matter of art—its materials and processes—to demonstrate how the works raise pressing intersectional questions and urgent politics.

Several of the essays included in this Special Issue complicate the story of modernism’s detachment from topical concerns through case studies of artists for whom high modernist tenets continued to hold sway into the later part of the twentieth century. Mel Edwards’s welded sculptures from the 1960s are the subject of Elise Archias’s essay. Archias proposes that the racialized trauma alluded to in the artist’s choice of mangled and scarred materials and underscored in the titling of his sculptures (notably the *Lynch Fragments*) marks a beginning rather than an endpoint to the works’ aesthetic and political significance. Her critical framework for thinking about Edwards’s sculptures turns on the capacity for the materiality of modernist abstraction to function as a unifying structure affirming how we experience interiority and bodily inhabit the world in common. Undergirding her analysis are trenchant questions concerning the nature of the work of art within late capitalism, the rise of the professional managerial class (PMC) alongside liberal manifestations of “deference politics”, the postmodern skepticism of subjecthood, and the contemporary art world’s solicitation of easily categorized identity groups. For Archias, the inner workings of Edwards’s sculptural syntax—its labor-intensive moments of coupling, binding, and suspension—generate a productive aesthetic tension between private and public and abstraction and physicality that may yet serve as a compelling model for the kinds of intentional reciprocities across human differences needed for meaningful social and political interventions in the contemporary era.

Becky Biven’s essay takes Lynda Benglis’s last-minute withdrawal of her latex pour *Contraband* from the 1969 exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art as a point of departure for thinking anew about the artist’s feminist commitment to abstract expressionism. A notable moment in the artist’s early

career, the decision to remove her sculpture from the show has generated much speculation over the decades, as has the “anti-formal” characterization of the work itself. Biven argues that despite its ostensible reliance on impersonal material process, Benglis’s colorful latex sculpture is better understood as a gendered declaration of authorial intention, feeling, and voice conveyed through an abstract expressionist commitment to material transformation. Bivens finds value in Benglis’s insistence on staking out a subject position through a material engagement, the artist’s aggressive act of saying “something personal” making comfortable bedfellows of high modernism and second-wave feminism.

For Sarah Cowan, writing on works by Black women artists produced in the 1970s and 1980s, popular conceptions of modernist temporality as either transcendent or future-oriented fail to account for practitioners who mobilized the aesthetic language of late modernism to express the rhythms of their own racial and gendered experiences. Finding connective threads between the work of Beverly Buchanan, Senga Nengudi, and Betye Saar, Cowan argues that in their respective attention to intergenerational knowledge, accumulative material labor, and haptic modes of making, the three artists created durational temporalities attendant to the historical contours of Black women’s lives. By materially reanimating personal and collective perspectives actively suppressed by mainstream institutional aesthetics, Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar claimed abstraction as an embodied and intellectual framework for Black feminist modernism.

Elyse Speaks’s essay attends to the material juxtapositions in Barbara Chase-Riboud’s early bronze and fiber work *The Albino* (1972), proposing that the artist established a series of reciprocities, translations, and even antagonisms between divergent histories of making. She contends that Chase-Riboud’s treatment of bronze and fiber generates a palpable tension with modernist sculptural protocols by staking claim on previously marginalized formal possibilities. By connecting disparate artistic traditions, the “material intimacies” of the work, Speaks argues, reinvents the past and forges new aesthetic propositions for the future. In turn, the racial and gendered themes imparted by *The Albino* grow more complex when the artwork’s expansive material exchanges come into focus.

The last two essays in this Special Issue by Catherine Spencer and Tiffany Johnson Bidler turn to more contemporary works by Simone Leigh and Veronica Ryan, respectively. Both artists garnered global attention in 2022, Leigh for representing the United States at the Venice Biennale and Ryan for earning Tate Britain’s Turner Prize. Sharing an interest in Black female subjectivity and women’s labor as care, the two utilize the capacity for abstraction to manifest what Spencer usefully terms “associative instability”. Focusing on Ryan’s sculptural series *Infection* (2020–21), Spencer attends to the artist’s formal and material references to institutionalized care practices. Ryan’s enigmatic sculptural configurations suggestive of votive offerings, food containers, and hospital equipment set in motion contradictory responses for the viewer, their bodily connotations by turns comforting and anxiety inducing. In considering how the artist alludes to forms of ministration that may be enacted in service to power, control, and violence, Spencer posits thoughtful connections between Ryan’s artwork and contemporary curatorial care efforts to rectify the legacy of theft and expropriation carried out by Western museums under colonial rule.

Bidler’s novel reading of Simone Leigh’s multivalent references to cowries and hybrid, cowrie-like forms draws on David Griffith’s call to read “ecologically”, which is to say, to combine ecocriticism and formalism. Bidler notes that as objects saturated with human histories of Africa and the transatlantic slave trade, cowries are also complex living organisms with a natural history beyond the Anthropocene. Registering the forms and processes of their life cycle yields alternative analogies to the dehumanizing, colonialist taxonomies with which Black subjectivity is conventionally defined. As such, Bidler reads the glossy, enfolded, and tactile clay interiors of Leigh’s hybrid cowries as reproducing protective spaces for racialized and gendered selfhood to metamorphize differently. In combination with figurative and architectural armatures relating to Cameroon and the Africa diaspora, the cowries invite viewers to reimagine Black female subjectivity as a space of evolving possibilities.

The essays in this Special Issue demonstrate how contemporary artists, particularly women and artists of color, have leveraged the materiality of sculptural abstraction to register a rhetoric of dissent, a path that does not square entirely with mainstream values or, at the least, room to maneuver within the modernist project along less regimented terrain. Challenging received ideas about the historical exclusivity of abstraction, our contributors model new ways of apprehending the artworks' formal complexity, affective dimensions, and sociality. The implications of each author's assessments vary. In common with the artists on which they write, however, they regard sculptural abstractions as sites of negotiation, engendering possibilities about what it means to inhabit the world differently.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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