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Unmaking as Making

Viola Bordon

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Abstract

Artist Viola Bordon examines the processes of touch, unmaking, and materially dictated aesthetics regarding her studio practice. The philosophical ideas of absence are used to establish a purpose for undoing, which is then explored as a learning process. This process is complicated by the sense of touch, resulting in formal aesthetics that are materially inspired.

Unmaking as Making

“If I keep my mind on the process of making, and keep that clean, and evolving, and spontaneous, the object will look after itself. The aesthetics are born out of the medium and the way of working and my inherent qualities.” -David Nash (Hutto)

David Nash’s words sum up many of the ideas that I grapple with in my practice currently. The aesthetics of the object will fall in line if I maintain an awareness of the process of making. The material itself will speak to the sculpture’s form and shape. However, unlike Nash, I feel the need to move backwards before I move forwards. There is an ‘unmaking’ in which I must engage before the making begins. In this text I will explore the following ideas of process in unmaking, touch, and aesthetics dictated by materials in relation to my own work.

Unmaking

Process inevitably begins with destruction, although arguably that may be too strong a word. Unmaking may be more apt. Destruction carries with it a violence, impulsivity, and recklessness, whereas my approach is more calculated. The slow deconstruction of a material or object opens the door for an understanding of my work.

Unmaking, with the goal of exploration, is at the center of my practice and is where my obsession with the material begins. My desire is not to destroy, but to clean the slate in order to begin with nothing. Although many painters consider the blank canvas empty, the wood, fabric, weave, color, texture, and tension of a stretched canvas would suggest otherwise. It is by no means empty. If an object is the standard for absence, like a blank canvas, we negate its presence. I initiated my unmaking experience in my first painting class. I was told to paint, to work additively and I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Instead I felt compelled to remove threads from the canvas. Holes appeared that were flanked by the weave of the canvas. This weave

dictates the shape, and structure of the void I created. In order to understand that void, hole, absence or lack, the framework must be reduced. When material is removed, what is left behind speaks to the removal. Scratched, frayed, cut, and ripped edges all point as much to the construction of the material as to the hole within it. We cannot acknowledge the hole and ignore the imposing canvas. Therefore, exploration of a hole or a void becomes an exploration of the substance that surrounds the void. In this way, the absence and presence of a material are reliant on each other, creating a complex symbiotic relationship. My search for an isolated void is futile, but it has revealed a complexity surrounding the substance.

The initial doing is preceded by undoing. Slow, methodical deconstruction of fabric, wood, metal, and other objects reveals the way each was constructed or in other words the unmaking reveals their formation. This stripped back simplicity of formation is the closest experience I have to pure creation. Looking inside of a material and tracking its formation, therefore, must be the first step toward understanding, which then leads to making. Before something can be manipulated, it must be understood.



Fig 1. Woodwork #3, wood, 2018

My desire to dig into the materials that surround the emptiness is an existential search within myself. The emptiness I explore in my work parallels an emptiness within myself, and my efforts to fill that emptiness with God. In a

way this personal battle can be universalized in a basic human exploration of God, the creator, and human origins. Genesis 1:2 describes the act of God in the moments before creation. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." (New American Standard Version) God was hovering over a void, God experienced it; the Divine took time to engage the emptiness before a form could come into being.

My idea of investigating a void is current and personal as well as abstract and ancient. Creation, according to Christianity, grew out of an understanding of the void. Angela Miller in a lecture about Abstract Expressionism, a movement famous for rejecting the idea of God, said that artists were trying to "express mastery over formlessness and the accidental" (Miller). According to Miller, Abstract Expressionism was attempting to understand the same formlessness that God created in Genesis 1. The irony of attempting to play God while simultaneously rejecting him has not been lost on me. Exploring formlessness in my practice exposes an understanding of 'what isn't' as a foundation for understanding 'what is'.

When I think of a void, I know that I am grappling with an unattainable philosophical subject. I start thinking of 'nothing', but will inevitably be frustrated that 'nothing' is a lack of 'something' as a concept. It is not autonomous, as I imagine a void to be. The closest thing I can relate it to is absence, which physically is a hole. My work is covered in holes, gaps, and breaks and in many ways the holes I create will inevitably render an object functionless. In my piece *Crush*, I slowly increase the pressure on an etching press with every pass of a woodblock print. This pressure squishes and degrades the plate, which eventually cracks and breaks apart according to the structure within the wood. Broken pieces fall away leaving holes in the plate itself. In investigating the strength of the woodblock, I break it. The piece of wood then becomes

useless in any constructive setting it can no longer serve its purpose. The utility is lost due to the hole, and the inner identity of the material is exposed.

Alberto Moravia is an Italian post-war novelist, who embraces this undoing. "My destruction of the canvas meant that I had reached the conclusion of a long discourse which I had



Fig 2. Crush, woodblock print, 2018

been holding with myself for an interminable time."

(Moravia 3) This idea of an internal dialogue between the blank substrate and the artist is one that hits home for me. Nicholas Cullinan refers to that quote in the introduction to his essay *The Empty Canvas*. His ideas support my assertion that the empty canvas is not simply one that has not been used. Instead he considers it an "aesthetic of boredom, obliterations and vacuousness"

(Cullinan 224). The empty canvas is full of opportunities. I deal with these ideas in my *Canvas* series. The boredom and monotony of repetitive actions, obliteration of picture plane, and emptiness allow me to utilize vacuousness to bring a minimal approach to my materiality. Tom Freedman created a work called *1,000 Hours of Staring*, in which he looked at this canvas for 1,000 hours. He makes fun of the history of this discourse, which further emphasizes its dialogue with contemporary work.

The empty canvas holds within it as many assumptions as the word “emptiness” does. If emptiness is simply something waiting to be filled, then it is something that is lacking. But if as a viewer we can see beyond the need to fill, we can begin to embrace the lack. The void, deficiency, hole, or absence are all forms of this emptiness and can complicate ideas of anything that is present.

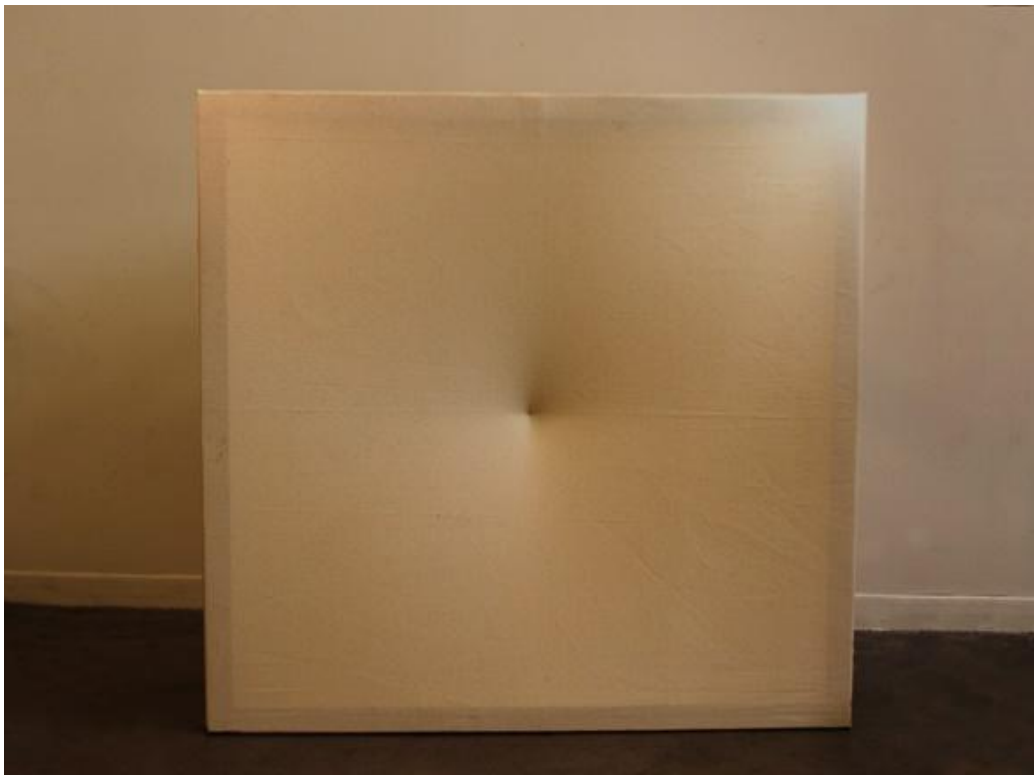


Fig 3. Pinch, 2016, Tension and Canvas

Learning Material

The process of unmaking is a learning process. The *Canvas* series laid this foundation for learning as a vital part of my practice. It is the work I refer to most often as I investigate new ideas. Canvas is a fibrous, strong, versatile, tense, mobile, stretchy, woven, and tan material with its own unique character. I felt that the way I was being asked to apply gesso and paint to it completely disregarded the complexity of its being. The understanding of material that I was seeking came, not from application to the surface, but rather an undoing of the surface.

The linen canvas has a vertical, straight warp thread, and a horizontal, zig-zagging weft thread woven between. The weft threads travel over, under, over, under, while the warp threads travel in twos over, over, under, under. This causes the tightness of the warp thread to be greater than the weft. The fabric will stretch significantly more if the warp threads are removed than if the weft threads are. These easily overlooked observations, will significantly affect any painting done on the surface. In *Canvas and Brick*, I removed the weft threads, and used the extra stretch of the warp threads to hold pieces of a brick in place. I utilized my new-found knowledge to



Fig 4. Canvas & Brick, canvas, brick and pencil, 2017

create a natural pocket in the canvas to hold a heavy object.

This system of controlled, methodical deconstruction acknowledges inherent material qualities which then begin to dictate forms within my work. My work focuses on a reconfiguration of the found qualities to begin a new conversation rather than

composing an unseen image. The material remains a primary concern as I shift viewers' basic assumptions about what is through this reconfiguration.

My material-consciousness is exemplified in my newest exploration, *Wood*. Trees contain growth rings and every year, as the tree grows new layers, the exterior becomes internalized. A ring of xylem and phloem is grown and the older sap-filled layers are covered with new bark. These rings form the wood grain which holds a record of the history of that piece of wood. Looking at wide rings can reveal abundant years with great growth. Thin rings were more difficult years, with less rain and nutrients. The rings will have a record of insect and fungus activity, rain or fire, as well as new branches or knots. Younger versions of the plant can be traced through the lines of these growth rings. The grain, composed of rings of the wood, is such a common sight that we are almost trained to overlook it. This is a shame. In doing so we miss the history, shape, and beauty of the material. In a recent piece, *Mountain*, I meticulously carved a younger year of a tree out of a 2x12 inch plank. The organic movement of the crevasse became



Fig 5. Mountain detail, wood and steel, 2018

the silhouette of the missing tree, while the wood that remained still had the exterior dimensions of a standard construction plank. The organic movement within the grain creates lines that are as evocative as those created by Georgia O’Keeffe in *Grey Lines with Black, Blue and Yellow*.

Giuseppe Penone worked through the implications of wood in his practice demonstrated in Laurent Busine’s essay about memory. Busine mentions Penone’s implications by writing, “Trees, as we have seen, contain within their current appearance the successive forms they have had at one, two, five, twenty, or fifty years old. The growing plant preserves deep within itself, in every detail, the precise shape it once had. By taking a beam cut from a tree trunk and removing a section along a growth ring to bring light to what it contains, Giuseppe Penone reveals the memory of time as the tree’s former shape emerges” (Busine 227).

When I first thought about rings within a tree being a visualization of the tree’s memory, I was awestruck. This realization led to an interesting paradoxical position. The visual record of the plant’s identity can only be seen by killing the plant. In considering its memory we arrest its ability to create more memories. We can only see a living tree in one iteration, its entirety is hidden until it is dead. There is a poetic nature to the action of tracing the life of a tree through its death and this thought has challenged me to think of the ringed, memory-preserving nature of a living tree as an artwork in itself.

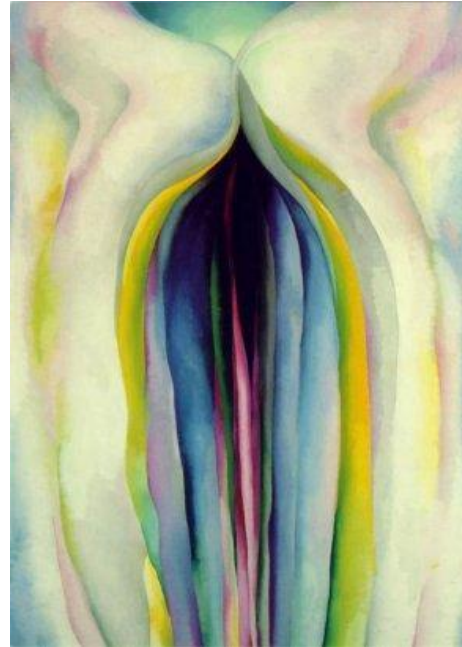


Fig 6. Grey line with Black, Blue and Yellow, Georgia O’Keeffe, 1923

Touching as Understanding

In the earlier part of the 20th Century there was a sculptural movement called direct carving. The movement had two basic premises each emerging from the respect these sculptors had for the material they worked with. The first was that the natural limitations, qualities, and characters of the material influence the form of the sculpture. The second is that physical contact between the sculptor and material were crucial.

John B. Flanagan was one of the major sculptors in this movement. After a show at MoMA, his works were described in a catalogue, "As design, the eventual carving involuntarily evolves from the eternal nature of the stone itself, an abstract linear and cubical fantasy out of the fluctuating sequence of consciousness... to that

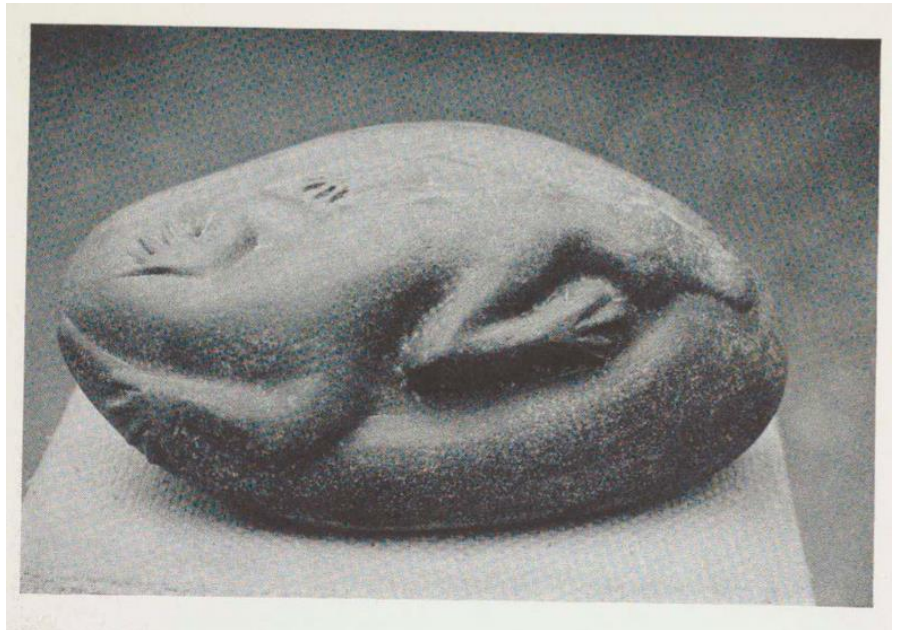


Fig 7. Dragon Motif, John B. Flanagan, 1941, Bluestone

instrument of the subconscious, the hand of a sculptor, there exists an image within every rock. The creative act of realization merely frees it." (Museum of Modern Art 7). This "freeing" hand of the sculptor is a sentiment that is seen across the work of artists like John B. Flanagan, Giuseppe Penone, and David Nash. Regardless of whether the sculpture is made of stone, metal, wood, rock, or fabric, the internal nature of that material influences even dictates the form that comes out of it. The nature of a stone, for Flanagan contained within it, the image. He argues

that, "the shape of stone does not determine the design; more often the design dictates the choice of stone". (Museum of Modern Art 7)

The natural veins in marble, grain of wood, soft spots in stone, and shiny textures in metal dictate the way they can be manipulated. Working against the nature of a substance rather than with it adds excessive complications to simple work. Those complications increase exponentially with a work as complex as *Stone Cairn*. Andy Goldsworthy expressed this idea concerning this sculpture of balancing rocks saying, "The moment something collapses is intensely disappointing. This is the fourth time it's fallen, and each time I got to know the stone a little bit more. It got higher each time, so it grew in proportion to my understanding of the stone. And that really is one of the things my art is trying to do, it is trying to understand the stone." (Riedelsheimer) Goldsworthy and Flanagan share a similar reactionary construction. They allowed the stone to communicate what it wanted and they would conform to it, rather than force it into their mold. Although the artist still maintained complete control, a conversational situation occurred where the material would show the artist what it could do and the artist would expose that to the world.



Fig 8. Three Cairns, Andy Goldsworthy, 2001

At the core of Abstract Expressionism (AbEx) is autonomy. This is a belief that an artwork does not need to reference anything outside of itself. Art does not need to refer to, or receive explanation from, any other outside source to validate that work. Autonomy became the hallmark of AbEx. Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Franz Klein, among others, fought for. This autonomy clearly demonstrated in Pollock's drip paintings. The subject of the drip paintings was the paint. The common premise between AbEx and direct carving is that the material can influence the form of a work. The shift from materially influenced work to materially dictated work has been subtle but significant. This evolving idea of materially driven, self-referential art is intricately connected to my practice.

I cannot separate my work from my relationship with my body. Typically, I hang my work 'too high' on a wall, because I am tall, and that feels right to me. My thin fingers dictate how detailed I can work. The proportions, sizes, shapes, and presence of my work are all results of my physical reach, strength, sight, and dexterity. No matter what work it is, aesthetic constraints will always come from my own form. This means that the greatest limiting factor in my learning of material is myself. I can only unmake something to the degree that my body allows. As well as a natural constraint, my physicality becomes the platform by which my work is created. I affect the materials as much as materials affects me and my understanding.

This brings me to the second premise of direct carving. The relationship between the artist's hand and the material coaxes out a unique character in sculpted works. The process of direct carving is to carve by hand, Flanagan did not use any mechanical tools during the Industrial Revolution. He discovered that physical contact with a material created a new exploration. He said "The stone cutter, worker of metal, painter, those who think and feel by hand, are timeless... The artist remembers, or else is fated by cosmic destiny to serve as the

instrument for realizing in visible form the profound subterranean urges of the human spirit."

(Museum of Modern Art 8) Although his language is ethereal, he argues that something occurs when hands are connected to objects. Physical connection of skin on material promotes learning.

When a hand meets a foreign body, it learns, controls, and experiences that body. Any action that the hand exacts, is in turn exacted on the hand by the body. When a thumb is pushed into clay, the same amount of force pushes back on the thumb. The thumb also learns the density, wetness, coldness, texture, and impurities of the clay. Repeatedly working in a single medium leads to an intuitive understanding of it – a sort of ‘thinking’ with hands. I think with my hands. I start doing, then I begin to understand. I identify with David Nash when he says that he comes to a material and "wakes it up" by touching (Hutto).



Fig 9. Stones, ceramic pigmented with burning wood, 2018

Nash admits to practicing the idea of direct carving, although he did not use those exact words. He could not afford electric tools for the first ten years of his practice and as a result used hand tools which afforded him the benefit of heightened sensitivity to the resistance of wood. I use electrical tools, yet I often choose to spend a long time working materials by hand.

Rudimentary tools still hold a strong attraction for me luring me into a journey to discover the dialogue between fingers, tool, and substance without the interference of a motor confusing the touch.

In the *Rivers and Tides* documentary, Andy Goldsworthy works on an ice sculpture. He complains about the cold and then proceeds to explain his refusal to wear gloves. "I have to work with my bare hands because my gloves stick and I don't have the sensitivity to do it with gloves. I lose feel of it. I always like to touch. You don't shake someone's hand with your glove on."



Fig 10. Tower, Polished Brick, 2017

(Riedelsheimer) Goldsworthy understands the

sensitivity of touch, that delicate moment between water and ice, is the hinge upon which many of his works depend. His ability to feel the temperature and changing state of water allows him to freeze icicles in impossible figurations. Goldsworthy demonstrates that for his work to be viable, he must fully understand the relationship of the solid and liquid to temperature and surroundings. Over the years his sensitive touch has created a reactive intuition teaching him to think subconsciously through his hands.

Conclusion

My practice has begun with an open approach where I think with my hands learning to unmake materials. This provides a foundation for a stimulating material-based practice. My expertise comes from my hands. The ability to observe, consider, evaluate, and manipulate a material will inherently grow my practice. My work has barely skimmed the surface of the depths of materiality. Whether it is in canvas, wood, metal, ceramic, printmaking, or a material still unknown to me, I am learning. Fifty years from now I may still be working the same material and learning. May I never come to the point where I can say I fully know.

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