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Fabrication of the Unknown

by

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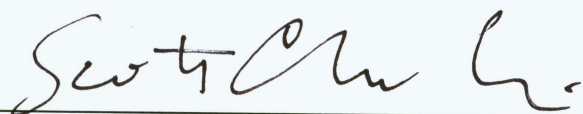
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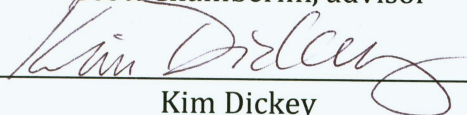


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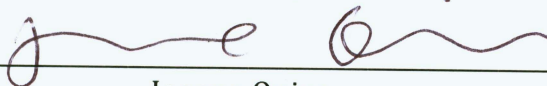
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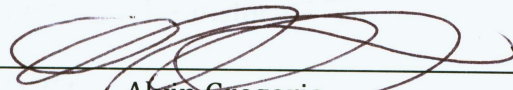
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## **Abstract**

Powell, Joanna (M.F.A., Department of Art and Art History)

Fabrication of the Unknown

Thesis directed by Professor Scott Chamberlin

This thesis is a written supplement to the work presented in the 2012 MFA Thesis Exhibition. The paper addresses topics that drive and contextualize the work.

## **Artist Statement**

In fire there is passion, possibility and transformation.

I find beauty in my embarrassment.

I welcome the silly.

If the objects I make want a rat-tail, like a boy, I let them have it.

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*“Craftsmanship is often equated with precision but I think there is more to it. I feel it is more important to have a long and sympathetic hands-on relationship with materials. A relaxed, humble, ever curious love of stuff is central to my idea of being an artist. An important quality of great art of the past was the pure skill in the artist’s use of materials. In celebrating craftsmanship I also salute artists, well, most of them.”*

*-Grayson Perry<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Perry, Grayson. *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. London: British Museum, 2011, 169.

## Why

I have found throughout my life that what I resist the most persists. The more I pushed away from making vessels, the more prominent they became in my practice. They are important to me and I am not really sure why, being that when I was growing up handmade objects were not revered. I have certain obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I like to repeat myself. With this notion declared I feel like I have found a bit of understanding in why I make functional objects. Through repetition I make formal inquiries into familiar things. I have an intimate relationship to objects of all kinds.

My dad is a collector of sorts and as a result of being his daughter I collect and form emotional attachments to inanimate objects too. I remember the day our microwave died. It felt like a pet dying. I felt that deep ache in my heart and insisted on taking pictures with it as it sat on the curb to be taken away by the junk men. This brings me to a very important point about when things are out of sight and die; essentially we can forget them but the memory is what makes the ache come back.

The physical act of painting brings up memories that I have forgotten a long time ago like a fight with my sister or walking home with freezing cold feet from playing in the creek in January. Sometimes I just think of smells like the smell of my Mom's perfume or the way the old Minyards grocery store smelled just up the street from my house growing up. I long for moments in the past even though it puts me in a somber mood. As a maker of objects, I am making the impermanent, permanent.



*“For me beauty is a struggle, a stretching of what is comfortable aesthetically.”*

*–Jessica Stockholder*

.....

*“Taste is a word that has been approached so negatively. But I see it in a positive way now. It is something as an artist you create for yourself, so that you can use it.”*

*- Charline Von Heyls<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Garrels, Gary. *Oranges and Sardines: Conversations on Abstract Painting : Mark Grotjahn, Wade Guyton, Mary Heilmann, Amy Sillman, Charline Von Heyl, Christopher Wool*. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2008, 85.

## What I think is Beautiful

*“Being a visual junkie, I am always looking for the next fix, and the dose has to be higher and higher. It is about the feeling that a painting, or any work of art, can give when you can’t stop looking because there is something that you want to find out, that you want to understand. The moment of looking is the most stretched moment possible—the aftertaste of the moment before and a future in which you want to go back to see what you have just seen. I got addicted to the beautiful possibility of being in the moment. Good paintings have this tantalizing quality. And once you turn around, you absolutely cannot recapture them. They leave a hole in the mind, a longing.”*

*-Charline Von Heyls<sup>3</sup>*

Beauty is integral to the meaning of the work and not in any way separate. I feel beauty is in the generosity of material, the awkward and the irregular. I do not think about things being beautiful necessarily, it is about how can I find truth through the action of making and what shapes result out of that. For me, what is beautiful causes mental and physical sensations, be they good or bad. I am attracted to things that are casual and unpretentious. I am not interested in perfection. In the perfect there is a finalization that destroys a work's ability to live. Beauty lies in the irregularities that I find within people and objects. My touch is a visual record of the way I make things. I let the material find its destiny and through a series of accidents the work is born.

“Post Minimalism was often identified as ‘process art’ for its emphasis on and revelation of the means by which a piece is executed, such means becoming so primary as to be inseparable from the very meaning of the work.”<sup>4</sup> I am not meaning to be the

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<sup>3</sup> Garrels, *Oranges and Sardines*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Tuttle, Richard, and Madeleine Grynsztejn. *The Art of Richard Tuttle*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in Association with D.A.P./Distributed Art, New York, 2005, 37.

hero of the underdogs or the socially unacceptable by finding beauty in the “ugly.” I chose my bathroom rug specifically because it was irregular; I sought out the absence of perfection. What I see as flawless perfection is in fact lopsided and distasteful in coloration to the majority of the population. I refuse to subscribe to the normative social and cultural hierarchies of beauty and value.

In aesthetics, the sublime is “greatness beyond all calculation”<sup>5</sup>. According to Immanuel Kant, the sublime exists in three categories: the noble, the splendid and the terrifying. He determined that there are vast differences between the beautiful and the sublime, saying that, “beauty is connected with the form of the object, having boundaries, while the sublime is to be found in a formless object, represented by boundlessness or without limitations.”<sup>6</sup> The sublime surpasses even our senses. When I work I do not “think”. All my energy travels from my brain down into my hands and into the work. I am interested in this transference of energy from myself into the objects. Objects have an innate ability to hold onto this energy and give it to others. I make utensils out of clay to transfer energy. On select utensils, parts are gilded with gold luster like the belly of a spoon and the handle of a knife, where a person would touch with their hands or mouth. I want to know what that transference physically feels like from the inside of an object out.

In an article by Mark Cousins on *The Ugly*, Cousins says, “the ugly object belongs to a world of inescapable individuality with a resistance to the ideal.”<sup>7</sup> If we can

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<sup>5</sup> "Sublime (philosophy)." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 19 Nov. 2012. Web. 03 Dec. 2012. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime\\_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sublime_(philosophy))>.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, Immanuel, and James Creed. Meredith. *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1952, subdivision 23.

<sup>7</sup> Acconci, Vito, Theodor W. Adorno, Alexander Alberro, Rasheed Araeen, &. Language. Art, *Beauty*. London: Whitechapel, 2009, 146.

find truth in beauty then an ugly object is a negation not just of beauty but also of truth. In my search for beauty in the peculiar, I question what is sublime. Work that lies in the space of being unresolved or incomplete lives in the realm where potential exists. It is when my vessels can contain the struggle that goes into making them that they become independent of me. Furthermore when they can elicit this struggle from the viewer, they come full circle. When it comes down to it, I think there is no way to measure or quantify something that is beautiful other than through the experience of looking and paying attention to the physical world that surrounds us. In looking over time, the objects I make reveal themselves with all their idiosyncrasies much like getting to know a person and that is beautiful.

### **On Function and Abstraction**

I have always been attracted to abstraction. Through abstraction I feel like I can fully illustrate the essence of an object in mind whereas I cannot with a realistic approach. Abstraction creates a place to get lost in the material be it clay, paint etc.

Function is one and the same as abstraction to me. My functional vessels address the body and exist as a means to convey color and experience. In the use of the term “function” I do not wish to address the domestic, nutrition or the act of eating. All the objects I make lie in between. The utensils reference forks, knives, spoons and combs, but they clearly are not for use. I am asking the viewer to challenge their rules of engagement with so-called familiar objects. The meaning of the vessels is created through an individual’s experience with the object. I struggle with this in a fine art

context because in that setting engagement is prohibited and restricted to only the fantasy of an experience rather than an actual one.

Through the arrangement of objects, I am setting up a situation or narrative where the viewer can forget about an objects function and call attention to its possibilities as pure matter with its own intentions. My work is about "...creating a place for experience rather than illustrating an idea..."<sup>8</sup> With the work in the show I did not have the intention of setting up a spectacle. The work came out of a personal notion that I was making relics from my own tribe, transforming objects of routine into precious objects of ritual. I want to engage questions about what is happening with the objects and the narrative being peculiar and unclear welcomes this conversation.

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<sup>8</sup>Richards, Judith Olch. *Inside the Studio: Two Decades of Talks with Artists in New York*. New York: Independent Curators International (ICI), 2004, 168.

*“When you feel you understand something and have it thoroughly explained, in some sense you’ve limited it; the explanation defeats the fullness of the experience.”*

*-Jessica Stockholder<sup>9</sup>*

.....

*“If a piece gets too located, too specific, it’s too much like the facts. I would rather something dreamed or remembered...a sensation of something coming into focus. Feelings have more layers and fewer facts.”*

*-Judy Pfaff<sup>10</sup>*

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*“Intuitive vision is not governed by the selective powers of the intellect, but rather ‘sympathy’ with the thing considered, where one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible.”*

*-Henri Bergson*

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<sup>9</sup> Richards, *Inside the Studio*, 168.

<sup>10</sup> Richards, *Inside the Studio*, 17.

## **On Intuition and Transformation**

Imitation is as close to real as we can get to something that is not our reality. I have owned the black wig in the exhibition for probably five years now. I bought it at a Halloween store to be a drunken old lady for Halloween. Buying that wig was like buying freedom. Years later it became a talisman that provided protection. The wig allows me to be someone else that is not quiet and polite. I will never know the feeling of whipping long straight hair back and forth but with the wig on I can synthetically have this experience. Often when I'm painting I wear the black wig. Insecurity is also a part of wig wearing...having the knowledge that the hair is not your own and could potentially fall off resulting in embarrassment.

This past summer I was tired of allowing my curly brown hair to identify me so I cut it all off in hopes to free myself from a burden. After I chopped it off I felt more shame than freedom, I felt ugly and exposed. In retrospect I wanted to feel undesirable in some way. Previously, I had a skin cancer cut off my face and had similar feelings about what beauty is and what is it to feel beautiful. I felt like a monster every time I looked into the mirror and saw the giant scar centered on my face next to my nose. I asked myself was it selfish and vain to be feeling this way? Is feeling beautiful a conceited way to feel?

## On Painting

*“ In the studio, and ultimately in the paintings, it is about desire, not satisfaction. ”*  
-Charline Von Heyls<sup>11</sup>

Charlotte De Mille defines painting as ‘experienced Phenomenology’<sup>12</sup>  
Phenomenology is defined in philosophy as “attempting to create conditions for the objective study of topics usually regarded as subjective consciousness and the content of conscious experience such as judgment, perceptions and emotions.”<sup>13</sup> Both intuition and perception are insights taken from within. Using your intuition requires a certain mental process. We must leave aside all pragmatic consequences. Bergson classified the immediate moment of intuitive insight as “knowledge of the mind of what there is essential to matter.”<sup>14</sup>

For me painting is about sensation and gratification, I can mix and lay down color in no time. Finding color in ceramic glazes is very abstract and sometimes a painfully long process. It may be days, weeks, or months until I find the right hue that I have been searching for. Painting gives me an outlet for quick ideas and keeps me sane. I do not know what I am doing all of the time and struggle with this feeling of not knowing. I take comfort in the following words. “ If you take care of your ignorance, your ignorance will take care of you. There are hunks of nonsense in the world, tricky bits of cruel delusion in a thousand masks. Facing that, people with knowledge are helpless, only people with

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<sup>11</sup> Garrels, “Oranges and Sardines”, 85.

<sup>12</sup> de Mille, Charlotte. "'Sudden Gleams of (f)light': 'Intuition as Method?'" *Art History* 34.2 (2011): 370-86. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 12 Nov. 2012, 374.

<sup>13</sup> de Mille, “Sudden Gleams of (f)light”, 374.

<sup>14</sup> de Mille, “Sudden Gleams of (f)light:”, 373.



carefully nurtured ignorance offer hope”<sup>15</sup>. Being okay with not knowing allows for investigation and questioning to occur.

A friend of mine once told me that painting is my lover and ceramics is my spouse. I believe this to be true. As time has gone by I feel that all my work has become about painting, color and experience. The monochromatic coloring of the vessels and specificity of the palette was a natural attraction. I find in pure color there is pure sensation.

### **On Color**

I am not interested in color theory. From mixing color I gather information about its interaction. I am constantly looking at the natural world around me for color. I traveled to Yellowstone National Park in July and ended up finding a fresh palette for the glazed work in the show. There is a slow constant evolution of color within my work. The palette is very specific consisting of flesh, white, pale teal green, pale almost white lavender, macaroni and cheese orange, a puke-like chartreuse green that comes in and out of circulation, and gold. Gold to me is the epitome of fancy and something important, it guarantees value. Gilding the terracotta transforms a humble material into something elegant, something otherworldly, something to covet. Color for me is a feeling and is something I want to make tangible through coating objects in glaze. Color is personal and specific and has the ability to evoke feeling and I am not sure why. I desire color that I want to touch my tongue to and taste.

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<sup>15</sup> Carroll, Jon. “On Not Knowing.” From Speech to UCB Graduates, 1993.

## **A Note on Materials and Process**

There is a pluralism happening in art in the twenty first century, an anything goes mentality when it comes to material and ideas. I don't feel that one material is better than another in terms of value and think this notion in the art world is fading. In making "functional" ware, clay is the only material that makes sense to me. Red clay is honest and does not try to be anything other than itself. I feel I have a kinship to the material. I know its moods and what it desires, which gives me great freedom to push against it, have presence in my touch and not be tender. I do not draw or paint ideas for my ceramic work. I must flush out ideas with my hands through excavation, digging and pinching forms out of solid blocks of clay. The process has become the primary aspect to the work in terms of surface and content.

In my studio practice painting and drawing supports my vessels and helps frame them in a different context. The paintings are objects in themselves having weight and texture. This notion of objectification of the two-dimensional has drawn me to paint on unconventional surfaces such as carpet and synthetic grass whereby they are transformed into tapestries, fur, or pure color. The black monochrome in my thesis exhibition references color field painting and the monochrome. Abstract painter Ad Reinhardt best known for his "black" paintings said that they would end all painting, stating that in black, one can find an absolute. With my black monochrome on synthetic grass I challenge his dictum and ask the viewer to look into infinity.

## The Exhibition



*Installation View*

In my exhibition *The Night was like Fire* (2012), a 7' by 11' black painting hangs from the wall like a tapestry, framing six tall slender bare white pine "tables" that contain an odd collection of ceramic objects. In the pieces there is emptiness and a longing for interaction. On one pedestal a strange assortment of oversized terracotta utensils sit as if they are awaiting the arrival of guests. Forks, knives, spoons, saws and combs are fashioned with elongated dimensions and pinched texture.



They sit in relation to two large serving basins; one is flesh colored and the other white.

Oversized, the bowls act more like washbasins for a ritual cleansing or purification.

Directly to the right of the basins, a tall chartreuse green jar sits strangely proud. The dirty hue of green glows like a reflection of a neon sign on foggy glass. The pinched



surface speaks of immediacy but not production.

Specificity in its function is unsure. It could serve as storage of food, water or even a body. Hung on the wall to the right of the jar hang two wigs; one a black straight shoulder length wig with straight bangs and the other a bulbous helmet shaped blond wig made of human hair.

The objects appear to be at rest as if they are in storage.

The wigs act as a stand-in for two makers or alternate

egos. The black hair is wild and impulsive while the blond is reserved and stoic.



The composition is about a time of day specifically the night, where possibility seems infinite. The glow of streetlights is sometimes better than the sun. On the wall hanging behind the objects is a large

black painting on synthetic grass, preserved and transformed by layers of glossy black latex paint. The substantial stain of the black painting shimmers, looking as if it was dipped in a vat of oil and the surface is still dripping wet. There is a toxic elegance and infinity to the slick black surface. It is like the elephant in the room.

On the left side of the composition is a tower-like vase structure. There is a gold lustered gob or “rat-tail” attached to the lower portion of the exterior. The gridded vase is made of two parts having an internal and an external cavity. The interior piece has a crown like structure with a lightning rod appendage capped in gold like a rotting tooth. The interior penetrates the exterior when they are put together.



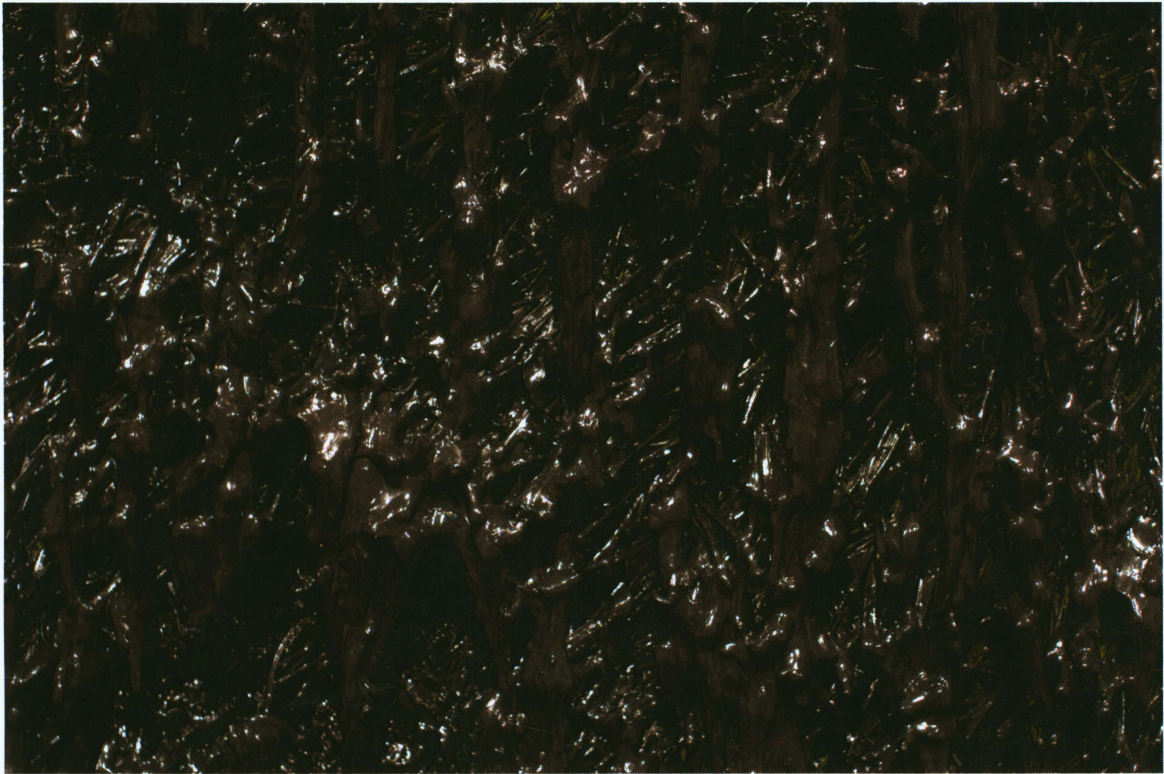
This action of penetration that is usually a choice, is made into a co-dependent action of necessity. Specifically, the exterior cannot exist without the interior. To the far left of the vase outside of the frame of the painting exists a stack of colorful plates in pastel colors perched atop a modest square pedestal. Their generous smooshed tactile surface when stacked allows them to transcend their plateness and become tongues nested into one another. A golden goblet sits on a



pedestal alone in front of the plates, its surface appears as if it is impermanent and malleable. The singular goblet in relation to the stack of plates alludes to an offering for one. I liken my installation of disparate objects to Miss Havisham's decayed table setting in *Great Expectations*, the result of humiliation and embarrassment. By memorializing the event of being left at the altar, she chose to eternally punish herself. The installation of vessels in the exhibition speaks about a catharsis; a cleansing of humiliation and embarrassment and of letting go.



*View of Plate Stack, Goblet, and Vase from installation The Night was Like Fire (2012)*

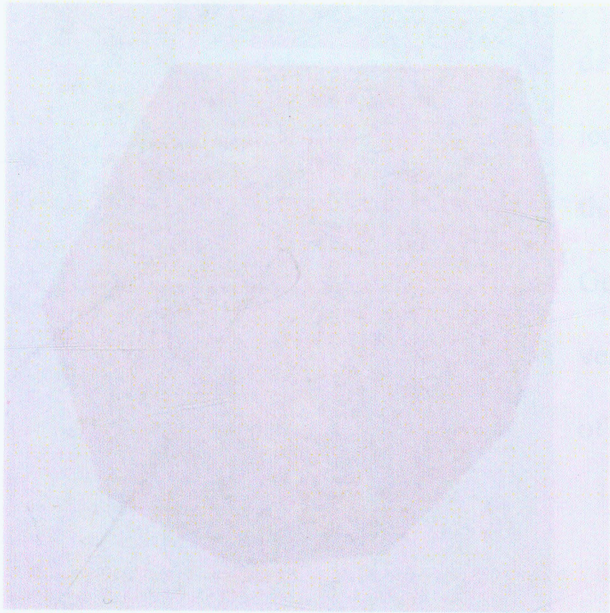


*detail of painting from installation The Night was Like Fire (2012)*

## Influences

### Richard Tuttle

Richard Tuttle is a post-minimalist painter and sculptor and he is my art hero. His work transcends time and space and is not bound by any particular movement. Tuttle is a great proponent of looking and paying attention. If you want “see” a work spend time with it. I recall the time in the year 2006 when I first saw his work in person at the Dallas Museum of Art. I remember being awestruck by his White Paper Octagonals. I had to really



investigate the surface of the wall to notice them at first. After I recognized their presence I remember thinking he was a genius to allow for the possibility in the invisible. Tuttle says, “painting and sculpture exist between what it is and what it is not.” For Tuttle art speaks the truth and gives definition of matter in form.

Tuttle on Beauty:

*“I’ve felt this way for a long time—for someone to ask me what is beauty—I really don’t have any idea. Trying to do what it is I want to do, I think, eliminates, or tries to eliminate, beauty as much as possible. If it comes back or it happens naturally—the way you put a coffee cup on a table . . . beauty is somehow a trail you create through your work that’s left behind like a snail leaves its ooze.” - Richard Tuttle<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> Holman, Bob. "Richard Tuttle", Interview. *BOMB* Fall 1992: Web. <<http://bombsite.com/issues/41/articles/1580>>.



## Beatrice Wood

Wood's decorative gilded vessels appear to be from another time containing long histories. I envy her socialite life and love affairs with artists and thinkers during the turn of the century. Perhaps I am in love with the idea of her. Wood's touch and sensibilities about form are unique and unapologetically wondrous. Her work looks like relics excavated from an ancient civilization. She was inspired by Persian lusterware and spent



the whole latter part of her life dedicated to developing her own luster glazes. She learned to see the functional vessel as fine art through briefly studying with master potters Gertrude and Otto Natzler. Her embellished vessels communicate her lust for life and love of people.

Wood's thoughts about becoming

*"I think that acting is fascinating because you can forget your own sorrow as you act and become somebody else."*

On creating

*"A great artist can only be great if he has suffered because I think its getting away from our agony that makes us want to produce, to create, to say something."*

## Jessica Stockholder

Jessica Stockholder is a painter and installation artist that challenges the boundaries of painting, sculpture and environment. She has the innate ability to use color and material in a playful but serious way. Stockholder began as a painter and then became interested in the canvas as material itself. In graduate school she became curious about the space in front of the wall and began investigating how a viewer could have an



experience moving through space accumulating different views of a piece.

Her work isn't rectangular but relies on rectangular framing. Stockholder's work is concerned with how to present color and

make it physically and spatially significant. She is drawn to using ready-made plastic objects in her installations to maintain the hard edge color of an object. She wants the color to feel object-like. In my work I want the objects I make to feel color-like.

Stockholder's ideas about color, framing and use of space resonate with me. While my work differs in material and ideas, there is relationship to painting and color. I admire her playful and fresh use of material.

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