At the Risk of Enchantment

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At the Risk of Enchantment

by

Amy Butowicz

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Nari Ward
Signature of Second Reader
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I am a maker. I laugh. I think: What happens when sex finds a hiding place, yet its secrets don’t behave? My answer: that unruly arousal generates expansion. What if we want to be what we are not? What if our bodies betray us? What if we fill the cracks with unfit materials?

I arrived in the Hunter MFA Program deeply immersed in a painting practice built on an abstract language of color, pattern and shape. My lexicon of painted shapes related to bodily forms and the patterns depicted referenced both clothing and interior spaces. Color was chosen as a catalyst for expression: Sensuously saturated or muted, harmonious or dissonant, the utilization of color gave my paintings voice.

The inspiration to explore the body and interiority as subject matter is connected to my personal experiences negotiating the connection between physical and mental states. As an athlete I have experienced a battle between mind and body where an expansion of the mind must override the limits the body is trying to insist upon itself and just keep going. As an equestrian I understand how thought creates bodily movement that a horse can register before the rider. In relationships with animals, the physical is the basis of communication. As a caregiver I have watched a battle between mind and body and have wiped clean aged and sagging skin. My experiences with the physical body and with animals have been selected from want, need and from love and responsibility.

Early in my graduate studies I came across William Dunning’s text, Changing Images of Pictorial Space. Dunning’s premise — in the development of perspective, spatial and aesthetic preferences are derived from cultural beliefs — prompted a pivotal moment in my work. For example, the pagan, Greco-Roman society based its aesthetic on direct observation and
immediacy thereby valuing mimesis over pictorial unity. Medieval thinkers placed emphasis on
the theoretical over empirical observation. Thus, a pictorial space that was generated by direct
observation disappeared by the Romanesque period of the Middle Ages. Mathematical
developments in the Renaissance lead to an understanding of space as something measurable and
unified. Thus, the resulting development of linear perspective achieved a desire to create
pictorial unity and allowed the viewer to enter the painting through being part of the scene in
front of them.

As I learned about the changing concepts of space, I realized that I was not interested in
the modes of perspective used build a pictorial space. In fact, I was more akin to a Medieval
painter and that my pictorial world does not concern itself with illusion or perspective. This
realization necessitated that my formal language push past the picture plane, into real space. In
my progression towards working in three dimensions, I fought the confinement of traditional
stretcher bars by working on unstretched canvas and cut-paper collages, often leaving the layers
of paper hanging free from each other. As a result, the finished collages shared space with the
viewer, producing actual shadows rather than illusionistic depictions. From this point forward, I
began to form a new lexicon consisting of painted soft sculptures and found objects deployed
together in a narrative dialogue.

My longstanding interest in color and pattern spills over from painting into sculpture.
For me, color is an exploration of relationships. How do colors influence each other to create
calibrated relationships between hue, value, and quantity? How does a very specific color spark
emotion? I often utilize a “family” of dirty pastels on forms of erotic ambiguity and punctuate
with a color that is chromatically-intense or subdued in value to contrast with the overall
coloration of the piece. Pattern is implemented to suggest structure and reinforce shape in reference to the body as well as relationships between bodies. The shapes of my canvas paintings are assembled from clothing patterns such as a sleeve or the panel of a bodice that are enlarged and abstracted into something new. The clothing patterns became both surface and form on which I can combine references to the body with actual patterns that one might find on textiles.

Fig. 1: (ca. 1810) No. 16 in the series of engravings, "Le Supreme Bon Ton" Caption: "Les Invisibles en Tête-a-Tête" by, Unknown artist, published by Aaron Marinet

While looking through Janet Arnold’s Patterns of Fashion: Englishwomen’s Dresses and Their Construction c. 1660 - 1860, I stumbled upon an illustration (Fig. 1) that seemed to speak directly to the heart of my subject. This illustration is by an unknown artist and was published around 1810. It is a French satire on the poke bonnet highlighting the bonnet’s exaggerated cones. In the 1800’s the style of the bonnet enlarged so much that the brim hid the wearer’s
profile from the side. The pronounced brim both protected her identity and identified her as a woman of propriety. In the humorous and overtly sexual caricature, the men are depicted pushing into the bonnet. Each male and female couple seems to be engaged in a duet of control, hiding, confinement, and autonomy. The upended top-hat held by the man in the foreground arcs phallically toward the woman’s lap. In turn, his companion responds flirtatiously, holding up her fan to suggest teasing and foreplay. During the Victorian period, a fan placed near the heart means “You have won my love.”iv

Fig. 2: Amy Butowicz, *Underwire*, 2017
Excited by my discovery, I created a library of shapes to sew together into new forms based on *Patterns of Fashion: Englishwomen’s Dresses and Their Construction, c. 1660 – 1860*. *Underwire* (Fig. 2), created from sewn canvas and acrylic paint, is a work from this ongoing series. The paired canvas panels are sewn together, leaving slits to peek into. The slits suggest notions of hiding as well as arousal and sexuality. The piece functions as a bonnet from the caricature, inviting the viewer to peer inside and “break” a threshold of privacy. And, should that happen, will the “propriety” of the work remain intact?

![Image of Underwire](image)

*Fig. 3: Amy Butowicz, *Under the Lily Pad*, 2017*
In a second piece from this series, *Under the Lily Pad* (Fig. 3), two leg-like appendages fall from the center of a symmetrical form that resembles the backside of a body. The triangle of saturated yellow on the left “limb” is a classic way a clown paints their eyes. Thus, this turns the object into a vaguely face-like image where one eye open and one eye closed. The work’s cartoon, clown, or circus sideshow reference is found through painting decision, color choices and the exaggerated form. The limbs extend from the wall and meet for floor with their function contingent upon a viewer’s body and what one might think the appendages are for. *Under the Lily Pad’s* breadth extends beyond the flat plane of the wall, taking up more space than its size should command. It is an erotic cartoon, it is the bonnet.

The use of pattern, either painted by me and found in ready-made fabric, is not about decoration but about structure. No matter what it looks like, pattern is based on a grid/net. It is able to define, obscure, and capture space. It can nail it down and then twist it askew. Employing pattern allows me to navigate the space of the work and find a way to unify across shapes or to dissect a single form. Pattern is similarly described in terms of the Pattern and Decoration (P&D) movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s: “… it fills the space and permits focus on structure”\(^{vii}\). The artists of the P&D movement created paintings that utilized the inherent grid structure of a pattern and found a way to move painting forward while rejecting the ties that the grid had to the “austerities of minimalism and conceptual art”\(^{viii}\) that dominated the art world during this time.

German painter Charline Von Heyl also uses pattern as a tool for structure. Von Heyl is quoted in a recent article by Tobias Grey: “I often employ stripes when a painting starts to lose its intensity and it needs to be called back to order. Then I can erase the stripes later, but it gives
me a structure.” Although Von Heyl comes chronologically much later than the P&D movement, her work might productively be seen in dialog with the painters of this group. She left an intellectually rigorous German art scene to live in New York where the art world culture was more open to explorations in paint. Her engagement with the decorative is a direct influence from wallpaper, fabric, Art Deco, and the use of line for its ability to unify a painting.

Fig. 4: Charline Von Heyl, *Corrido*, 2018

Von Heyl deploys these techniques in her work *Corrido*, 2018 (Fig. 4). She unifies space through the high-key pink and grey pattern which creates an atmospheric perspective throughout the entire background of the painting. The myriad forms that lay over the patterned background establish both the foreground and middle ground of the picture plane. This “space” is dissected.
by a bright yellow leaf or floral pattern; a dark twig-like form covered with a checkerboard pattern creates both volume and tension. Von Heyl’s title Corrido refers to a traditional form of Mexican ballad that typically narrates a historical event. The formal musicality of Von Heyl’s painting is located in a structure of patterning that moves the viewer between layers of visual information. The tree-like shape at the center of the painting serves as the “subject” of this ballad and it is seemingly oblivious to what flows behind it. Here the viewer’s head is already in the bonnet and the show is right in front of your eyes.

Notions of the physical through references to the body and its inseparable interiority are fundamental to my work in the studio. The physical body is the mind’s vehicle to experience the world. From Lacan’s mirror stage we understand that the formation of the Self and the Other is through a realization of the physical body – a physical body that is separate from the mother. Winnicott teaches us that the act of play is how the individual develops an understanding between internal and external realities and these acts of play are the origin to creativity\(^2\). Freud’s view is that our over-riding primitive need is to satisfy sexual desires. Since society prohibits these desires from being fully met, our repressed sexual desires are sublimated into other physical activities. These physical activities are connected to the pleasure-principle. In Wit and the Unconscious, Freud outlines that art must be a play activity as it functions as a return to both the pleasure-principle and a return to childhood. Freud, like Winnicott, links the act of play to the infantile and the unconscious. Both art and play make the unconscious, conscious.

The unconscious, sex, and the body were foundational interests of the Surrealists of the mid-20\(^{th}\) century. In her 1966 exhibition, “Eccentric Abstraction,” at Fischbach Gallery in New York City, writer and curator Lucy Lippard outlines the sensuous, surrealist undercurrent
running through the chosen work, relating it to *Object*, Meret Oppenheim’s fur-lined teacup, saucer, and spoon and Yayoi Kusama’s phallus-covered furniture. Lippard discusses Gaston Bachelard’s “body ego” or “muscular consciousness” as a defining characteristic of this work explaining that the viewer’s brain is provoked to experience physical sensations. These sensations are determined by a viewer’s identification of material and form and connecting it to their own knowledge of a sensorial experience. Lippard describes the works of this exhibition as sensuous, humorous, and a rejection of “the arbitrary in favor of a single form that unites image, shape, metaphor, and association, confronting the view as a whole, an undiluted aesthetic sensation, instead of as a bundle of conflicting or balanced parts.”

Eva Hesse was one of the artists included in “Eccentric Abstraction.” In her book, *Eva Hesse*, Lippard connects the labor Hesse expended in the process of making art to a “source of libidinal satisfaction.” Hesse’s labor results in artworks that reference the body through form, texture, and materials. Her sculptures, made from impermanent materials, teem with life or sag as they lie and lean for support. Hesse’s use of humor is more about being human through notions of absurdity and unexpectedness. Or, what Robert Smithson called a “funereal quality” and what Surrealists’ called “black humor.” Hesse’s sense of humor and eroticism merge in physical forms that manifest the absurdity of life.

In *Contingent*, 1969 (Fig. 5), Hesse used cheesecloth, latex and fiberglass to create a series of eight sheets hung like banners from the ceiling. The material’s translucent properties, texture, and color evoke human skin and the scale of the work references the body while the material’s instability and eventual deterioration speaks directly to the impermanence of the human body. The definition of *Contingent* — “Depending on or conditions by something else,
happening by chance or unforeseen causes”xvi — makes the work an allegory of human existence. The human race is forever reacting to situations that are beyond our control. A contingent is also a “representative group” or delegationxvii. Hesse’s work is a group of eight, a contingent, a voice for life that is contingent on one unforeseen situation after the next.

In a statement for Contingent, an exhibition at the Finch College Museum of Art, Eva Hesse wrote: “I wanted to get to non-art, non-connotative, non-anthropomorphic, non-geometric, non, nothing, everything, but of another kind, vision, sort.” xviii Lippard described Hesse’s quality of making as coming “out from a body identification into a physical identification with the sculpture itself, as though creating a counterpart of herself and the absurdity of her life was a way to survive it.”xix While my work differs greatly from that of Hesse, we both have a desire to transform materials in a way that evokes touch, physicality, eroticism, humor, and the
temporality of life. We both want to create a counterpart to ourselves as an effort to understand the absurdity of life in this world.

While Eva Hesse purposely avoided anthropomorphizing her work, I intuitively choose found objects and materials to extract their latent sense of “personality.” These found forms, marked with their histories of use, are ready-mades ripe for interrogation and repurposing. These random histories create places to insert my own story as the marks left on the discarded objects create a camouflage where I can hide in plain sight. Through works of art, “Hiding in plain sight” means the ability to control the immediate environment without calling attention to the self. And in a larger scope, it is about manipulating perception by remaining visible while at the same time unnoticeable.

Furniture is a fabricated object imbued with intimate histories as it is witness to our daily lives. Children utilize furniture as playground equipment and structural elements for private enclosures. We hide secrets in drawers and pass pieces of furniture through family lineage. Its surface scars hold our memories; like the nail polish remover blemish on the cedar chest my father gave me. Using elements of furniture allows me to shift between the tangible and intangible as furniture is both a simple object and part of a metaphysical world.

My memories and experiences become part of the sculptures that I create. These sculptures become characters that I bring into existence. I humanize these found objects with a haptic sensibility and reference the body with its complex set of contradictions.
The concept “sensual humanization” might be found in *Fillmore* (Fig. 6), a twisted body hung and strung between two supports. The piece is constructed of woven rush and wood. Its “torso” is a stretched-out and elongated form of woven rush that simultaneously folds into a center point, as if disappearing into itself. The vertical supports of collaged and plastered chair parts become the legs of this creature. One leg is cocked sideways at the “knee,” as if in motion. The feet on the “back” legs, painted pink and pushed up against the wall, are content in their supportive role. The overall bed-like structure speaks to intimacy and a preservation of sexuality while displaying a body in degeneration.

*My Winged Fighter* (Fig. 7), was created through the deconstruction of a found chair and its redressing. The chair suggests many metaphorical functions. A person can hold a seat of
honor and authority. Or seek out a chair for comfort and support. Or be strapped into and thereby imprisoned and/or liberated by a chair as a result of physical disabilities.

Fig 7: Amy Butowicz, *My Winged Fighter*, 2018

In *My Winged Fighter*, the chair has lost its function and has been anthropomorphized into a figure dressed in woven rush, a vinyl jacket, leather reins, and shiny feet as if ready to
prance into a show. Simultaneously domestic and feminine, the chair is dressed up with shiny shoes and outfitted with leather reins suggesting the arousing ability to both control and be control. The core or “torso” of the piece is formed by elaborately woven rush, a male-dominated craft tradition traditionally used in the creation of furniture. A striped breast-like form, functioning as a weight or a brake, literally keeps the feet of curvy, glamorous piece on the ground. *My Winged Fighter* appears cheerful and free despite being physically restrained and even stuck in one place.

Although my work has become sculptural, the wall continues to play an important role in my thinking. For a painter, the wall is the support structure. In my sculpture, the wall is a surface that objects rest against or hang from. Ideas surrounding domesticity in my work first arose through my use of pattern. Besides treating pattern as structure, the P&D movement also sought to validate the decorative as a form of art and challenge distinctions between art and craft. Members of this movement sought a “third category of art which is neither representational nor abstract – the art of ornament, pattern and decoration” that “contributes to human life.”\textsuperscript{xx} For me, the domestic space serves as a resonant framework because it connotes interiority, inherent intimacy and the physical, mental and emotional limitations associated with embodied being.

I also share sensibilities around physicality and pattern with Ree Morton, the late sculptor known for theatricalizing the domestic and mundane. Her installations are often frontally sited, causing them to be appear as allegorical theatre complete with pictorial language and sculpture personified into actors ready to perform.\textsuperscript{xxi} In her notebook “The Mating Habits of Lines,” the artist describes her interest in theatre because of its contentment with the present.\textsuperscript{xxii} Because of her emphasis on the handmade, craft materials, decorative arts, impermanent materials as well as
references to bodily sensations, Morton can be seen in relation to both the Pattern and Decoration movement and Eccentric Abstraction. Her installations play with the differences between the 2-D and 3-D work, painting and sculpture.

Morton’s approach with hobby or craft materials separates her work from other female artists of the 1970’s who were also interested in the reclamation of craft and decoration in a feminist effort to pressure art world hierarchies. In Morton’s work, she does not embrace craft as an essential form of female creativity and identity. Morton used craft in a “slapdash approach, its conspicuous imprecision and awkwardness”, As Susan Richmond writes, “falls just short of a complete fidelity to form”xxiii. This short fall gave Morton’s work the ability to utilize craft and sentimentality while making work that was loaded with personal content and at the same time undercutting female stereotypes.xxiv

There is an absurdity to life that cannot be rectified no matter how hard we try. There isn’t an equalizer for experiences of tragedy and fortune or suffering and pleasure. The body and the mind must negotiate these waters together. The mythical Penelope wove and unraveled the same shroud for three years. Her labor can be viewed as a ritual and the body’s repeated movements a catalyst in setting the mind free. The narrator in The Yellow Wallpaper peeled the wallpaper off the walls to free the woman insidexxv, her labor a source of freedom. Eva Hesse’s work incorporated the repeated labor of sewing, tying, knotting, and wrapping while transcending these actions as clichés of women’s workxxvi. The bodies that Hesse presents as the subject of her sculptures are autonomous from the labor that created them.
My physical body as a maker imprints my memories and experiences of the outside world onto the objects I create. The hand-made, craft, and haptic sensibility of my work humanizes my sculptures rendering them felt to contain an interiority. The use of found furniture and the domestic space serve as an entry point for my viewer. Here one finds the order of who or what has agency subverted. A deconstructed found chair resists its original intended use but through anthropomorphizing it has its own agency and idea of use. Ree Morton created a stage with sculptures both ready to act and to serve as a frame for her 2-D work. I create objects that have bodies with a sense of their own interiority and thus free will. These bodies are imprinted with my own physical and mental experiences. They confront the viewer as a character with their own agency and thus ask the viewer to consider the absurdity of life through a theatrical lens of enchantment.

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