

(March 5-August 6, 2017)

Craft & Folk Art Museum Material as Metaphor

(May 28-August 20, 2017)

Bricolage can be regarded as the ultimate modern/post-modern impulse, the collage aesthetic physically applied to everyday life. In the context of artmaking, bricolage is a form of assemblage, but one that disregards the fetishization of disuse we associate with typical assemblage practice. In bricolage, it does not matter whether any element has outlived its original function. In fact, bricolage gives some value to the relative newness, and associated usefulness, of its elements. This is not junk being recycled, but objects being repurposed. Duchamp's *Readymades* were the first bricolates (to coin a term).



Two, fortunately overlapping, exhibitions explore the breadth of bricolage and its powerful presence in the practice of so many (mostly) Los Angeles-area sculptors. Both *Interstitial* at the Pasadena Museum of California Art (PMCA) and *Material as Metaphor* at the Craft and Folk Art Museum (CAFAM) weave in and out of the core values of bricolage, exemplifying its relationship to parallel practices such as material abstraction (the funky flip-side of finish/fetish), junk sculpture (the “traditional” 1960s-street-art ethos of assemblage), and straight-ahead sculpture (defining space and mass through obdurate substance). *Interstitial* makes a virtue of domesticity and inferred intimacy. The “interstitial space,” according to curator John David O’Brien, exists, “between the worlds of everyday objects and a variety of artistic genres... where [the objects’] standard functions are suspended.” *Material as Metaphor* is less concerned with bricolage per se and more with the sculptural potential of fiber art, but the artists presented here largely incorporate, sometimes to the point of depending on, bricolaged material to bolster their adventures—or, in some cases, engage fiber as a bricolaged source.

Curatorially, perhaps, it’s unfair to place *Material as Metaphor* under the same rubric as *Interstitial*, given the latter show’s promulgation of bricolage and the former’s exploration of a different (if not altogether removed) practice. But all the artists represented in *Material* eschew any sort of mediumistic purity; each one recontextualizes fiber in a different way, at once questioning its purpose(s) while celebrating its native sensuousness. That recontextualization either employs non-fiber materials and, notably, objects, or it fashions fiber of some sort into provocative form—form that, again notably, fragments rather than blends three-dimensional shapes and thus puts the resulting jerry-built sculptures into the realm of the bricolated. Lisa Soto’s installation, for instance, pairs string and fishing line with shiny, ominous little things like bullet casings. Lloyd Hamrol and Kay Whitney rely on felt as a thing unto itself (rather than as a Beuysian poetic device or, like Robert Morris, a minimalist stand-in), positing a cascade of gray floes in Hamrol’s case

and strung-up webs or barriers in Whitney’s—both self-reflexive uses of the material that rely on association in order to return to “pure” materiality. Senga Nengudi, and, in a very different way, Victoria May, work similarly with a wider array of cloths: May ranging as far afield as fake fur, blankets, rubber and even hardware in her almost geologic piles, while Nengudi collects various objects and substances in her repurposed-pantyhose structures. Every artist in the CAFAM exhibit, including Miyoshi Barosh, Phyllis Green, May Wilson, Christy Matson, Mary Little and Joel Allen, has something different to contribute to the show’s form-follows-fabric discussion—and by extension, to the broader investigation of bricolage.

This is doubly true for the artists in *Interstitial* at PMCA, as the exhibition fairly preaches the bricolage gospel. Still, it does so with an eye to the poetic, finding its interstices in the region(s) where function drops off in favor of form. Certain of the participating artists, such as Jeff Colson, Kristin Morgen and Aili Schmeltz, include the trompe-l’oeil fashioning of ordinary objects out of extra-ordinary materials in their practices—although not to the exclusion of the found (or, if you would, chosen) object itself. In fact, there is a certain extravagance to the bricolaging going on here, exemplified by Shirley Tse’s recycled airplane trash receptacle stuffed with tubes which themselves contain interior lighting, or Joel Otterson’s faux wall of commercial pottery woven into a network of plumbing pipe, or Rebecca Ripple’s looming tree-like presence covered in vacuum-formed vinyl. But intimate gestures are also possible, for instance in the floor pile Renée Lotenero has conjured out of her own quotidian experience. The elements here are figuratively and literally taken from her neighborhood, and hug one another as if trying to reassemble into a reimagined personal landmark.

In 2005, the UCLA Hammer Museum mounted an important exhibition, *Thing*, which surveyed Southern California sculpture and landed often, and richly, on bricolage practice. *Interstitial* and *Material as Metaphor* follow in the wake of *Thing*, with their emphasis no less on the renewed than on the abject. This is a different kind of street art, one that goes into homes and stores at least as often as into gutters.



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