

# HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS

## Wondering About the Future of the Smithsonian's Craft Museum

Aaron McIntosh | December 31, 2015



The entrance to the Renwick Gallery (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

WASHINGTON, DC — As a professor at the [Maryland Institute College of Art](#) in Baltimore, I regularly bring my students to the museums in DC. The work presented at the [Renwick Gallery](#) was always a perfect counterpoint to the artifacts and antiquities, modernist painting, and contemporary sculpture and film on view at the various museums on the National Mall. My first

encounter with [Wonder](#), the inaugural exhibition of the newly renovated Renwick building, was with my students on such an excursion. Before we entered the museum, I gave my usual sidewalk spiel on the Renwick as the home of the craft collection of the Smithsonian museums. Upon leaving *Wonder*, I realized that it will not be so easy to contextualize this institution anymore, which made me equal parts giddy, goose-bumpy, sad, and relieved.

The exhibition features works by nine contemporary artists: Jennifer Angus, Chakaia Booker, Gabriel Dawe, Tara Donovan, Patrick Dougherty, Janet Echelman, John Grade, Maya Lin, and Leo Villareal. Each artist created a room-sized artwork for one of the nine galleries or spaces in the museum. While titled *Wonder*, alternative names like “Accumulated” or “Hoard” are also fitting, as the theme of small parts obsessively making up a whole is consistent across each artist’s contribution. And after fighting crowds to get inside the doors (a first at the Renwick), the mass of visitors swarming the works only magnified this idea.



Detail of Tara Donovan, "Untitled" (2014) (click to enlarge)

Unfortunately, many of the artworks don't talk to one another, and the visitor winds her way through room after room of discreet installations or monumental objects. The only pleasing transition is that between the earthly solidness of [Tara Donovan's](#) monolithic index card stalagmites and the ethereal diaphanous spray of rainbow threads by [Gabriel Dawe](#). Some artist inclusions feel like wanton star attractions. [Maya Lin's](#) work fails to deliver on her environmentalist preoccupations: What do her father's glass marbles from upstate New York have to do with the Chesapeake Bay? [Leo Villareal's](#) LED installation replaces an absent chandelier in the grand staircase with a flashing nightclub confection that feels glibly humorous but cold and stilted in the

Second Empire architecture. [Chakaia Booker](#) wins the prize for strangest inclusion; her rustic agglomeration of found auto tire scraps that wavily mimics a cattle chute, titled "Anonymous Donor" (2015), was totally lost on other reviewers of the show. It is the only artwork on view that both engages our olfactory senses and disorients those who enter its odd maze. Most visitors end at Jennifer Angus's "In the Midnight Garden" (2015), and fittingly so, as her work nails it with a fusion of architectural reverence, macabre decorative arts, and institutional critique. Since several decent features and survey reviews have been published in the [Washington Post](#), [Washington City Paper](#), and [New York Times](#), I am keeping my comments brief here, to instead focus on the public and personal reception of this show as it intersects with a craft community in transition.

Most visible in *Wonder* is the lack of craft as we have known it. Clearly the Renwick has revision on its mind, and this exhibition self-consciously attempts to offer a new definition of craft. Interviewed in the [New York Times](#), Elizabeth Broun, the Renwick's director, said "It's not enough to update the building. We have to rethink." She also stated that "in the past, the museum might have shown the work of highly skilled artists toiling in isolation to create some exquisite object ... The museum wanted art that 'looks out,' [and] engages the world in a broader way." The Renwick's physical and philosophical renovation is not without recent precedent. The former

Museum of American Craft in New York City moved locations and transformed into the [Museum of Arts and Design \(MAD\)](#) in 2008. Oddly, MAD opened its new space with an [exhibition about accumulated materials](#), too.



Gabriel Dawe, "Plexus A1" (2015)

Change is good though, right? So why is there such clamor every time a craft museum reopens with fresh vision and a new program? Perhaps because as these institutions strive toward an open, universalizing definition of craft, they don't necessarily involve the craft community: the crafters, the professional organizations, the patrons, and the next generation who have the biggest stake in craft's future. Even as we move toward an expanded

definition of craft, who will tell the story of craft as a movement? In the museum's educational history section, sandwiched between two artist installations, there was barely a whisper of the Renwick's past 40 years as a craft museum. Were I uninitiated, I would have no idea this museum had anything to do with craft.

Unsurprisingly, given this newly scrubbed version of the Renwick, reviews of *Wonder* contextualized the artworks with vague understandings of craft history or the background of the Renwick as an institution dedicated to the Studio Craft movement. The two local reviews of the show are so divergent that they seem to concern two separate exhibitions and, accordingly, they offer different trajectories for craft as a field. "It is a show about experiencing, about feeling, about living and engaging in the 21st century," offers Ari Post, writing in *The Georgetown*. "Its lifeblood is the sort of here-and-now splendor that is a hallmark of this generation — for better and for worse — and certainly an example of all that is right about those attitudes. So I won't play the usual game of art historical connect-the-dots, because in this context it really does not matter." Actually, connecting the historical dots is not a game, and his glib assessment masks many truths about art historical imperatives and institutional authority that have undervalued and disadvantaged craft artists. Post also doesn't understand what "generation" he is addressing — all of the artists in *Wonder* are old enough that the 21st century has occupied only a small portion of their lives. He imagines this group of artists to be millennials, but they are not.



John Grade, "Middle Fork" (2015)

On the other hand, Kriston Capps's review in the [Washington City Paper](#) flat out kills craft, saying multiple times that "craft is not a meaningful category for art." Capps lambastes the curators for a show that merely seeks to draw crowds by masquerading "Instagram-ready spectacles from the over-stock catalog for tepid post-minimalism" as works of art that embody craft ideals. Over on Facebook's [Critical Craft Forum](#), sparks flew over this

assessment by Capps. Commentators took him to task for holding an outmoded definition of craft and defended *Wonder* for its expansive view of craft. Their rebuttals tried to address Capps's loaded statement with craft context, but Capps (who surprisingly participated in the commentary) didn't budge on his truth that craft no longer deserves special distinction as a field, with this exhibition proving his point. And while I agree with Capps on a few points, his outsider status revealed his uneven knowledge. He got one thing totally backward, preposterously claiming that "*Wonder* does something subversive by breaking with a traditional understanding of craft, a label too often reserved for works made by women or non-whites (namely textiles, ceramics, glass, and woodwork and metalwork)." Not counting female textile artists, the [Studio Craft movement](#) was an almost exclusively white, male-dominated group of artists, and most of these disciplines have been criticized for years as exclusionary of women and persons of color (I'd add queer and disabled folks, too). Thankfully, *Wonder* does offer a shift away from the old Renwick with this multi-culti roster; the show is predominated by women, four of nine artists are not white, and a wide US geographical base is covered. True programmatic diversity is a long game, and I hope *Wonder* isn't merely a flash in the pan for the new Renwick.

Perhaps what few commentators realize is that the Renwick occupies a middle ground in Washington between the contemporary programs of the [Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden](#) and local art galleries, the modernist focus of the [National Gallery's East Wing](#), and the object-based historical collections of the [National Gallery's West Wing](#), the [Freer and Sackler Asian Art Galleries](#), the [National Museum of the American Indian](#), and the [African Art Museum](#). Built during the tenure of the Renwick's founding director Lloyd Herman in the 1970s, the exhibition program of ceramics, furniture, glass, metalwork, and fiber art highlighted how craft artists simultaneously use and change traditional media by infusing them with



modernist conceptualization and expanding the language of material culture. As a museum that has focused for the past 45 years on the display of crafted objects, the Renwick should be thought of as connective tissue between the city's other institutions.



A 3D-printed replica of "The Greek Slave" (1851) by Hiram Powers

As an outpost from the tidy row of museums on the National Mall, the Renwick's distance from these other art institutions is a perfect metaphor for the place of craft in our national conversations on artistic and cultural production. While craft (with a little "c") is everywhere in everyday culture, Craft (with a capital "C") as a distinct field of disciplines is losing ground in academic and institutional circles. Craft theorist (and MAD director) Glenn Adamson encourages us to rethink craft as a verb, and thus dissociate it from medium-specific fields. This might be handy in postmodern academic circles, but where handmaking is concerned, there have been stronger cultural forces at work responding to late capitalism's manufactured woes.

Consumer desire for 'handmade,' 'artisanal,' 'locally-sourced,' and 'custom-made' goods has forged an entire counter-market to the big box stores. Our devices are increasingly smart, owing to their complex technological craftsmanship. Maker spaces are cropping up all over the country, in Rust Belt cities and rural areas alike. Digital fabrication and 3D printing are redefining our relationship to objects and object-making. And while a 3D-printed copy of a Hiram Powers's "The Greek Slave" (1851) is on view at the Renwick (with no explanation as to why her chains are missing), it is only presented in the context of the gallery's small educational area. We're not invited to appreciate with wonder this new digital craft. And this is exactly why I think the Renwick might be shifting gears in the wrong direction if it chooses to accept a watered-down version of craft attached to art star appeal, instead of finding the pulse of craft in today's world. Whereas it once had a rather clear institutional identity, how does the Renwick distinguish itself now if it is just another art museum in a city and a country full of art museums?



Detail of Jennifer Angus, "In the Midnight Garden" (2015) (click to enlarge)

Admittedly, I am comfortable with ambiguity because as a queer person I revel in non-binary identities and complex communities. Questioning one's relationship to the status quo is crucial in self-actualization, and I get that the Renwick is 'coming out' a little. But I also know what it's like to belong to a user-defined community — and what it feels like to have community gathering places disappear or become co-opted by other communities. Just as I have mourned the recent closings of several of Baltimore's oldest gay bars, I know that an older generation of the craft community currently feels the pangs of another loss of a space they called their own. A smattering of remorseful comments on the Critical Craft Forum lays bare this sentiment.

"Unfortunately one of the most historically renowned expressive craft forms — pottery — has been left out of the new exhibition 'Wonder' that heralds the re-opening of the Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC," offers Kevin Hluch. "They aren't really throwing out the pots are they?" asks David Richardson. Bruce Metcalf, a craft writer, throws down with "it sounds like [Elizabeth Broun] wants the Renwick to be just like any other contemporary art museum on the planet, instead of fulfilling the original mandate of the museum. Is the craft community going to let her get away with this shit?"

Identity politics are real forces, and I can't help but draw connections to the identity crises many LGBTQ individuals in the US are now facing as queer lifestyles become mainstream and there is no hard line of otherness. So too must a craft community come to grips with the fact that they are no longer at the margins; their traditions are celebrated and have been co-opted by Etsy makers, urban homesteaders, design geeks, and contemporary artists. Craft is everywhere. Regardless of academic or institutional decrees, a craft community exists and it continues to evolve. It has old practitioners who've built lifelong careers in the craft world, along with new converts who have a deep appreciation for fastidious skill and materiality in a world of outsourced labor and ephemeral electronic experience. The Renwick should seek to embrace them all.



Janet Echelman, "1.8" (2015) (click to enlarge)

I'm tired of craft institutions replacing Studio Craft with contemporary art that sort of relates to craft themes, primarily those of material obsession and accumulation. In this regard I agree with Kriston Capps's assessment that "*Wonder* is clinical, anodyne, ordered, sterile, inoffensive, antiseptic, market-ready, and safe, safe, safe." If the Renwick wants art or craft that "looks out," why aren't they showing artists whose practices beautifully occupy the borderlands of art, craft, and design, such as [Frau Fiber](#), [Stephanie Syjuco](#), [Erik Scollon](#), [Andrea Zittel](#), [John Sims](#), [Liz Collins](#), [Theaster Gates](#), [Nick Dong](#), [Cat Mazza](#), or [Lauren Kalman](#), to name just a few? There are just too many

artists/crafters/makers in this world that embrace craft traditions to disregard them in favor of a few artists that one could just as easily find in Chelsea galleries. These are artists that are taking risks as makers and challenging the parameters of craft, and the Renwick, with its craft background, would be a perfect place to showcase their work. It's also time that the Renwick address globalization as a force in cultural production, and look beyond the US for makers who tackle challenging subjects in traditional materials. These are my hopes for the craft museum of the future.

*The portion of [Wonder](#) on the second floor of the [Renwick Gallery](#) (Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street, Washington, DC) closes May 8, 2016, while the portion on the first floor continues through July 10, 2016.*