

# The Meeting of Matter and Meaning





LEFT **Zimra Beiner**,  
*The Weight of Things*, 2017,  
Ceramic and painted MDF,  
183 cm h x 244 cm l x 365 cm w.  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

BY **MIREILLE PERRON**

Zimra Beiner's *The Weight of Things* and Sharon Hogg's *Tapestries in Space* open up material agency – they present new possibilities for understanding how materials mediate and transform human experience. In these two exhibitions, Beiner's ceramic still lifes and Hogg's textile installation reveal relationships between contemporary craft practices and knowledge production. In this era of significant human impact – the proposed 'Anthropocene Epoch' – ecological urgency is largely based on a material knowledge gap directly linked to humanity's most devastating habits of overproduction and overconsumption. The result is an imperative to better figure out materials and processes in the production of objects and behaviours. This rising awareness makes obsolescent the dichotomy of concept over materiality in the production, interpretation, and circulation of art/craft/design objects. Conceptual art, or art in which the concepts take precedence over material (and aesthetic) concerns, is no longer a viable option when meaning needs to be grounded in a renewed material agency and urgency. Beiner and Hogg, like many craft/art/design artists, have understood the necessity of material complicity. As Hogg says, "In my praxis, the materially disengaged observer is simply not on!".

Both Hogg and Beiner favour complex material agency, where they engage with their materials in 'intra-actions', a term coined by theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad: "where matter is understood as a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations rather than the property of things<sup>2</sup>". Ceramic and tapestry are treated as adaptive systems that have the ability to store, process, transform, and enact. Beiner lays out objects in stacks, while Hogg hangs her objects in space. In doing so, they invite everyone to consider how our personal experiences are embedded within the context of larger material forces.

### ***The Weight of Things***

*The Weight of Things* explores ways in which ceramic objects and quasi-plinths/stands accumulate in vertical stacks from the tops of which rise Beiner's interpretation of traditional Chinese Scholars' Rocks, playfully recoded as 'Suburban Rocks'. Each constituent quietly questions the others and interferes with norms. The scale of the modules remains familiar and domestic as they recall furniture and household objects. The predominantly pastel colours range from off-whites, beiges, pinks, and greens, with brown as the only dark colour. This tonal palette of natural and earthy colours could easily fit into a home environment. The result is that *The Weight of Things* is a suite of three-dimensional still lifes. The historic painting genre is renewed in these hybrid material formations.

The compositions are erected from adaptive modules, connecting notions of function (furniture) with contemplation (scholars' rocks) and domestic space (scale of objects and settings). Like their painted counterparts, Beiner's still lifes remain arrangements of commonplace objects, which are either natural or man-made. They stand as domestic encoders, the end points in long and specific networks of information that record their own circulation and adaptation. Beiner has developed a method of stacking objects vertically that produces horizontal effects. This approach articulates 'materialness' as put forward by craft/textile theorist Nithikul Nimkulrat. Materialness, Nimkulrat explains, is the expression of form, content, context and time through a chosen craft practice. In Beiner's work materialness articulates the experience of clay and ceramic where matter, material, materiality and materialness bond to renew the experience of domestic environments<sup>3</sup>.

Beiner's *The Weight of Things* is similar to some of Anton Reijnders' assemblages, for instance, *China Series 04*, 2011 or *Stack 10b*, 2009. The renowned Dutch artist explains that his works "create opportunities for reflection, concentration and stillness<sup>4</sup>." Reijnders wants to offer an alternative to images or objects that are subservient to quick, ephemeral "wow" effects. Both ceramic artists wish to slow down their viewers and make us ponder how we attribute meaning to objects and comprehend everyday life situations; they achieve this by focusing on how material mediates meaning. In previous series, both artists have used the power of the domestic sphere by employing furniture and furniture-like objects with ceramic objects hybridized in unusual three-dimensional still life compositions.

The recurring use of the motif of the Scholar Rock distinguishes Beiner's *The Weight of Things* however. He was introduced to this category of objects through the work of Gabriel Orozco. Noteworthy for Beiner was Orozco's *Thinking in Circles*, an exhibition at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York in 2013, where Orozco used eroded stones in his unusual photographic collages and three-dimensional assemblages<sup>5</sup>. Orozco is an acclaimed New York artist of Mexican descent. He was part of the 2011 opening exhibition of the White Cube Bermondsey Gallery in London, where the curator Craig Burnett paired scholars' rocks with contemporary artworks. Burnett saw the scholars' rocks as open-ended forms that provoke conversation. They make evident how the act of looking is always both a social and subjective experience. Stones that have been sculpted naturally by extreme processes are embodiments of the dynamic transformational processes of nature over vast time periods. Moreover, many scholars' stones are enhanced or augmented. The stones can suggest everything from tiny mountain ranges, caves or grottos, animals, human figures, or grotesque monsters. As Burnett says, their fascination resides in the ambiguity of their forms paired with some familiarity. In short these objects, much like some of Beiner, Reijnders, and Orozco's works, aim to slow down viewers, and trigger an awareness and concentration that lead to a shared inquiry about what, and how, we give meaning to an object and an experience.

The appreciation of these objects is also based on their unique combination of context and time. The immense extent of time responsible for the wearing away of the stones' intricate forms is somewhat suspended when recontextualized on display, or reinterpreted through ceramic facture. This act (Barad would

call it an 'agential cut') suspends time in an uncanny way. One lifetime is too brief to witness any transformations on this scale. Consequently, while on display, no significant variations can be witnessed in the work. The viewer's fascination is based on looking backwards at the effects of the past, while in the here and now one is at a relational standstill. We know simultaneously that time is passing, has passed, will pass, while looking at time so tightly enfolded into a natural formation rendered still.

Facture, the quality of execution as much as the form itself, reveals how Beiner's work is embodied in a network of conditions and circumstances of production and perception. How his work is made and what it is made of are important aspects of its significance. Beiner's permutations of materiality transcend fixed objects with fixed meanings. For example, his hand built *Suburban Rocks* are not only an adaptation of the scholar rock to a more mundane, closer-to-home context, they are also structures with complicated surfaces/glazes. In some areas, it is impossible to know if some agglomerations are thick dribbles of only glazes, or clay fused with thick glazes. Further observation of other areas make the rhyme between structure/bone and glaze/skin clearly visible. Furthermore, the stacks generate ambiguity between how a ceramic object is glazed and how a wooden plinth is painted. The artist carefully confounds the two by making the lines where one would customarily limit the glaze so it does not fuse with the kiln shelf, look the same as the painted lines on the plinths. Many of the stacked ceramic components that drift between stools, columns, cushions, plinths and other display devices are so intentionally thickly glazed that the flow of the fusing matter onto the kiln shelves necessitated careful and ingenious propping contraptions while firing, only to still need many post-firing grinding hours. Rules are defied, processes are translated at liberty between display, object, glaze, form, facture, painting, and ceramics, to draw out moments of recognition that make one anticipate with pleasure the discovery of another quizzical version. Meaning is fused to the appreciation of ceramic studio gestures, materials and processes encoded through the stacked objects and their combinations.

Such encounters are the expression of 'materialness', where context and time are articulated through matter and materiality. In Beiner's work, materialness articulates his wide-ranging experiential knowledge of clay/ceramic to become the model for viewing and being in the world. The emphasis on specific ceramic processes communicates the tacit part of experiential knowledge. Imagine looking at a scholar rock, handmade but also domestic, suburban; at furniture, columns, stands, and cushions but formed in ceramic; at sculpture in mundane stacks; at wood plinths but painted as if glazed; at still lifes but in three dimensional ceramic compositions. These arrangements emphasize what Derrick de Kerchove defines as having a point of being that explains "the psycho-physiological dimensions of the ways people experience their presence in the world and the world's presence in them<sup>6</sup>."

Beiner, like the other artists discussed, makes arrangements that enfold the visual point of view and the sensorial point of being. They offer an embodied sensation of the world through materialness, a renewed sense of our relationship to spatial and material domestic environments. Their works mark the reunion of form, content, context, concept, time, sensation, cognition, body, and self with the world.



### ***Tapestries In Space***

*"This project is about how an installation of tapestry in three-dimensional space might deliver a solution through material exploration<sup>7</sup>."*

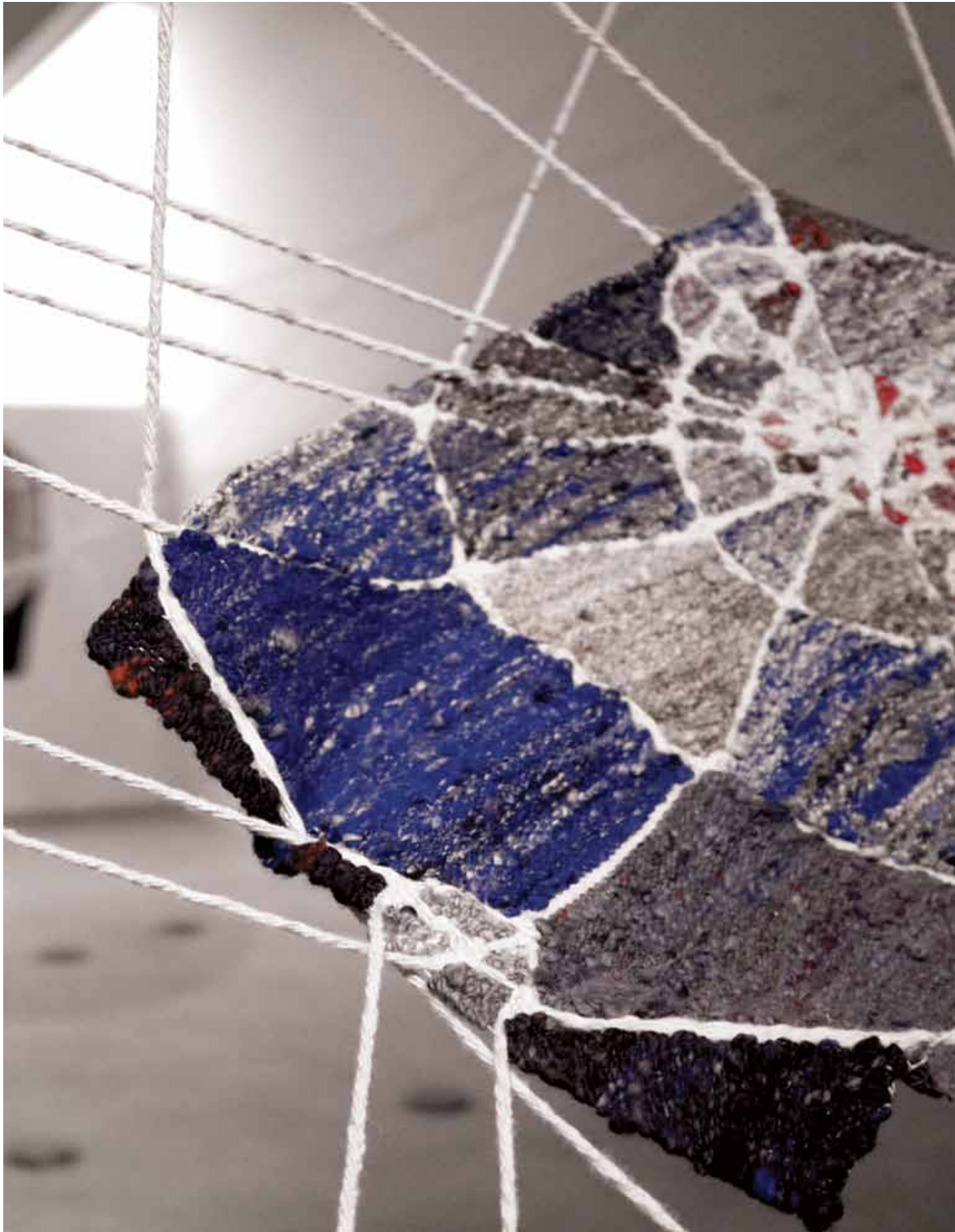
Sharon Hogg's tapestries entangle their audience in a web of connections. Hogg considers, along with Karen Barad, the entanglement of matter and meaning. In Hogg's *Tapestries in Space*, the role of materiality is to meet the universe half-way in an attempt to expand notions of time, space, process, and participation<sup>8</sup>.

*Tapestries in Space* was Sharon Hogg's MFA thesis exhibition project at ACAD. The artist, a former civil field engineer, credits her past life for her boundless interest in the "underpinnings of things", "underlying structures", and "hidden connections<sup>9</sup>". The engineer transformed herself into a painter and fibre artist, more specifically and recently a tapestry artist. The artist's goal was to solve, using drawing, watercolour paintings, and tapestry, a complex scientific problem. Hogg focused on the nBody problem, an astrophysical mathematical problem that aims at describing,

predicting and retrodicting the relative position of massive bodies in time and space. It is especially difficult to account for the location of three or more moving bodies. This is made evident when launching objects in space that necessitate constant mathematical course-corrections. "As a visual artist, it is my goal to produce artworks that enable and encourage an audience to consider complex problems within an incongruous but somewhat familiar conception<sup>10</sup>".

How to solve the nBody problem with *Tapestry Objects in Space* turned out to be a mission. Hogg discovered in Barad's text *Agential Realism*, a potent way to theorize her craft practice. She decided that "Enacting Intra-disciplinarity through Craft Praxis" was her method to solve the nBody problem<sup>11</sup>. Barad describes Agential Realism as an alternative way of knowing the world: it explains reality as the accumulation of phenomena; phenomena being when matter and meaning meet. These meetings necessitate an active exchange between the knower and the world through intra-actions where meaning is gained from within embodied transactions<sup>12</sup>. It also requires that ambiguity is received with wonder and not dread. In short, Hogg sets three bodies in the forms of







LEFT & OPPOSITE Sharon Hogg,  
*Tapestries in Space* (detail),  
 IKG Gallery, ACAD, 2017.  
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

tapestry in space to provoke ambivalent wondrous intra-encounters<sup>13</sup>. She creates a phenomenon, a specific encounter between matter and viewers/performers and when in it, our embodied experience or agency of observation becomes our situated knowledge. As such, the participant is the fleeting solution to the nBody problem; being in space and time with the tapestry objects demands constant readjustment of one's trajectory<sup>14</sup>.

In doing this, Hogg expresses material complicity; she reveals material agency, or as Barad would say, exposes intra-actions. She envisions tapestry as an adaptive apparatus that has the ability to store, process, transform, solve, and enact. The artist started with the materiality of tapestry. She asked herself what tapestry can know about the nBody problem that had not been attempted before her engagement with it. What material dimension does it add towards solving the nBody problem?

"*Solving the nBody Problem with Tapestry Objects in Space* is no substitute for doing the math when launching a mission to Mars. However, I present a multi-dimensional framework for musing on the location of objects in space and time that falls on the positive, expansionary and wondrous side of ambivalence<sup>15</sup>." Hogg uses arc-based geometric drawings and watercolour paintings to reinterpret thirteen historical approaches to the nBody problem. She further selected three possibilities that became the arc-based geometric tapestries in her installation. *Tapestry Objects in Space* is a singular phenomenon where matter meets meaning. The installation uses a unique combination of various fields of practice and inquiry, such as woollen tapestry, watercolour painting, and celestial mathematics, to enact possible solutions to an age-old cosmic problem. This productive relation between scientific and cultural/craft theory and practice reflects what Barad refers to as the ethics of knowing where knowing involves the reconfiguration of boundaries<sup>16</sup>.

*The Weight of Things* and *Tapestries in Space* educe the urgent need to slow down and be in the world differently. Both projects employ craft knowledge as material and conceptual ways to understand and enact differently our presence in the world and the world's presence in us. They encourage material complicity. Conjure up that you are one material/physical constituent in these arrangements/engagements that thrive from cooperation. Will you choose to render still lifes alive, and/or dance in another dimension where math and tapestry swirl together? ■

#### (Endnotes)

1. Sharon Hogg, *Tapestries in Space 2.0* (ElevenNinetyNine Press, 2017), 70.
2. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: The Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 224.
3. Nithikul Nimkulrat, *Voice of Material in Transforming Meaning of Artefacts*, Proceedings of Design Research Society Conference (Bangkok, Thailand: Chulalongkorn University, 2012), 1368.
4. <http://antonreijnders.nl/>
5. Zimra Beiner, May 1, 2017, Interview with the artist in his studio, as well as during his exhibition.
6. Derrick de Kerchove, Miranda de Almeida, Cristina, *The Point of Being* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing On Line, 2014), 1.
7. Hogg, 10.
8. Hogg, 16.
9. Hogg, 2.
10. *ibid.*
11. Hogg, 3.
12. Hogg, 16.
13. Hogg, 20.
14. Hogg, 22.
15. Hogg, 20.
16. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: The Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 180.