

Barbara O'Brien

By the late 1990s, Boston-based artist Laura Evans was well established in her career and known for complex, quilt-like works made of flattened paper bags, upon which she would sew and draw.¹ Looking one day at these simple brown bags, Evans had an epiphany that changed the course of her practice. "The paper bags are what eventually led me into sculpture. I started to wonder why I was paying attention only to the surface [using the flattened bags as paper, or a ground to change]. I asked, what's inside? and I'm glad I did."²

What followed included the series *Greater Than* (2016–18) in which Evans combined angular scraps of leather, wood, and fabric, placing them directly on the wall or clothing sculptures with sharply defined planes of geometric activity, resulting in highly decorated and articulated surfaces. Looking closely at these works one day with a colleague in her studio, Evans was faced with another realization—the forms she was using as the armatures for the *Greater Than* sculptures were beautiful in their own right, without their patchwork coverings—and a direction-altering question: What would happen if she stripped away the surface adornment and focused intently on the form? What she discovered, in the magic of the studio, was that a new body of work was emerging—*Vessels* (2019–21), which is being premiered in the exhibition *Hold In/Pour Forth* at Boston Sculptors Gallery.

Regarding the series title, Evans said, "They are objects, yes, but more importantly they are vessels. They not only have an exterior form, but an interior space."³ What we first notice about

Athena (2019; plate 00)—along with *Reception Vessel* (2019; plate 00), the origin pieces for this series—is indeed the exterior form: an abstraction of the female figure with wide shoulders tapering to a thin waist and hips. This graceful form stands on a thin pair of metal rods that rest upon a small square of slate dug up from the earth of the artist’s garden. What is most surprising and not immediately visible is that the wide triangulated form atop the body, while suggesting a solid head, is actually an open funnel. The “interior space” nearly invisibly asserts itself.

In Greek mythology Athena is the goddess of wisdom, war, and the arts—a complex constellation of arenas that shed light on the both the visual and conceptual vocabulary Evans has developed in this new sculpture series. While the body of a woman is seen to represent ideals, it also holds a complex interior life. The voice of these sculptures is held still with a momentum that seems to make certain an eventual transmission of something held deep inside that will no longer be silent or still.

The visual vocabulary of the sculptures in the *Vessels* series includes a rounded central form; often a handle either crafted by the artist or part of a found-object armature; and an opening—a place of release of tension, of relief. The pale, mottled surface of these works mimics the matte finish of unglazed ceramics and holds the memory of the action of the artist’s hands and fingers as they smoothed layers of plaster wrap, Sculptamold, and joint compound over crafted or found armatures, some from repurposed household objects. This invisible history of being handled, used, and discarded peeks out from the edges of some of the sculptures. Light catches

the squared-off aluminum handles and thin circular base of *Steamed Up* (2020; plate 00)—a still-visible component of the kitchen colander from which its form originates. The tiny circular opening at the top of the domed form seems to spew steam into a mesh that takes on an animated life.

Tweet (2020; plate 00) reflects contemporary communication and mores with an endearing, light-hearted nature. The soft grays and whites of the surface are vividly offset by small elements of bright yellow plastic that become a base, a handle, a beak. *Critter* (2020; plate 00), like *Tweet*, holds the playful energy of the small creature it suggests. *Critter* was formed around a “little glass mug” whose handle shimmers atop the body. The tail is a plastic bracelet that, like the ceramic lid of *I’m a Little Teapot* (2020; plate 00), has personal resonance for the artist. Evans shared, “I enjoy tinkering with/combining odd elements that might not go together in the world of useful things, but have a formal or associative relationship within the piece.”⁴ The signature hole on the very top of *Tweet* is a sort of pressure valve, allowing energies to move from one arena to the next, from the important interior space of the sculpture to the exterior world. As one of the smallest works on view, *Tweet* belies its size, as intended by an artist who has anthropomorphized these sculptures; they suggest birds, beasts, women, and the energies that generate thought, speech, sounds of all sort, and the transformation of thought into language, breath into sound, water into steam, desire into action. *Squawk* (2020; plate 00) is also both bird and vessel. What pours forth from the spout is not water, but a voice determined to be heard above the fray.

At first glance, the sculptures suggest a deep sense of quiet. As in *Squawk*, the forms are solid and gently curved. The artist has crafted a handle into its rounded top edge, the memory of its once utilitarian purpose. Standing more than a foot in height, it has a believable heft and durable feel like the small clay water pitchers of ancient Rome. But the elongated neck is no simple spout; it opens unexpectedly wide, suggesting the straining neck of a goose or Harpo Marx in brilliant comedic mime, tooting a squeeze horn. Evans titles all of her sculptures after they are completed, but the way in which the titles activate our experience as viewers is in no way incidental. The title *Squawk* suggests a cacophony of sound—a voice that has found its way into a wider dialogue. The titles emphasize the animated quality of the sculptures—the held energy of essential elements, water or air—straining to escape the object and enter the wider world.

Creating a literal space—a spout, a beak, a funnel, a neck—from which energies can both enter and escape the sculptures connects to Evans’s history, growing up in Philadelphia as a Quaker, sitting in silent worship in Meetings, and to her more recent practice of guided meditation:

A new meditation has me visualizing light coming through the top of my head. It’s meant to be a relaxation ... gradually filling me up all the way through my body until I get up to my throat and my skull and then out the top again. When I get to my throat chakra is when I’m really able to release. Sometimes I just tear up. It’s about speaking up—speaking out. A lot of these sculptures have openings. Openings are not just about receiving but they are about giving out, too.⁶

In reducing the shapes to their simplest form, Evans taps into her Quaker upbringing and philosophy: “Things are better if they are simpler. Fewer distractions help you get at what is most important. That’s been a lesson of this year, for sure.”⁷ Oblique references to current events and political and societal challenges come up when talking with Evans, but there is no sense of her trying to lead the conversation to a given conclusion. Like the humor or drama in the *Vessels* sculptures, Evans trusts the viewer to discover their own meaning in her art.

Notes

1. In 1999, I included one of Laura Evans’s *Paper Bags* works in *Dumb Bunnies and Dish Cloths*, an exhibition at Brickbottom Gallery, Boston, that was part of my Virginia Gunter Contemporary Curator Award. I have watched Evans’s artistic progression with interest since that time.

2. Laura Evans, email to the author, December 12, 2020.

3. Evans, video conference call with the author, January 4, 2021.

4. Evans, email to the author, January 15, 2021

5. Evans, video conference call with the author, January 4, 2021.

6. Ibid.

7. Evans, email to the author, January 15, 2021.

Barbara O’Brien, an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, is the former Executive Director of Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. She is an elected member of AICA-USA, International Association of Art Critics. Her twenty years in Boston included

positions as editor in chief of Art New England Magazine, Director of the Trustman Art Gallery at Simmons University, and Director of the Gallery & Visiting Artist Program at Montserrat College of Art.