

Sculpture: An Art of Craft and Storytelling

By Glenn Adamson

September 28, 2022 12:51pm



Clementine Keith-Roach: *Mirror*, 2022, terra-cotta bowl, jesmonite, paint, steel-and-wood armature, resin, 25 1/4 by 43 1/4 by 31 1/2 inches.

PHOTO DAMIAN GRIFFITHS, COURTESY P.P.O.W GALLERY, NEW YORK

“Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly.” So wrote Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” a melancholy rumination on the passing of the oral tradition. Benjamin thought that the rise of modern mass media—newspapers, novels, radio, film—had displaced older, deeper connections. Once upon a time, people learned about the world face-to-face, from friends, relations, travelers. Their

oft-repeated tales, grounded in collective experience and shared wisdom, provided a familiar melody playing over the daily rhythms of life and work. In the modern era, however, that sort of exchange, at once personal and timeless, has been replaced by a steady flow of isolated information and opinion.

Benjamin likened this gradual erasure of communal narrative to the concomitant disappearance of handcraft from the productive sphere. Storytelling is an “artisan form of communication,” he wrote. “And this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained.... It is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship.”

Benjamin’s eulogy for storytelling also helps explain some of the key patterns in art history over the past century. It’s no coincidence that abstraction emerged concurrently with modern communications, signaling a similarly lofty detachment from the social fabric. Craft itself by no means disappeared during this period—in fact, it played a crucial role in the formation of modernist art, in ways that have only recently been recognized. (Hence the renewed interest in such material-conscious artists as Anni Albers, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Toshiko Takaezu, Ruth Asawa, and Lenore Tawney.) Even so, craft’s rootedness in vernacular tradition has inspired many contemporary artists to seek it out as a powerful alternative to depersonalization and alienation.

When [Martin Puryear](https://www.artnews.com/t/martin-puryear/) was selected to represent the United States at the 2019 Venice Biennale, for example, he responded with a suite of works that *Washington Post* writer Philip Kennicott characterized as “resolutely meaningful, without specifying which meaning was intended.” In other words, Puryear’s sculptures were somewhat like folktales: the ones filled with implication, without a trace of didacticism.

“Liberty/Libertà,” the title of the exhibition at the US Pavilion, announced a forthright engagement with the grand national narrative. Puryear made sculptures in obdurate materials like wood and metal that resemble historic headwear at greatly enlarged size, implying active thought about the past. The show featured sculptural versions of both the Phrygian cap, adopted during the Revolutionary era, and a military cap from the Civil War. *Aso Oke* (2019), a bronze cast of a 7-foot-high wooden lattice, took its title from a style of Yoruba weaving and its shape from a traditional West African men’s hat, similar to the Phrygian cap, perhaps referencing individuals who were brought to America against their will. Dead center in the space stood an elegiac worked called *A Column for Sally Hemings* (2019), a graceful dress-like form in fluted timber, with a large shackle hanging from its scrolled top like a bowed head.



Martin Puryear: *Aso Oke*, left, and *Tabernacle*, right, both 2019, various mediums, 84 and 74 inches high, respectively.

PHOTO JOSHUA WHITE, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK

Although Puryear has always commanded widespread respect, Venice provided a ratification of sorts. This veteran artist, committed to craft in times when it had been firmly out of favor, has long occupied an unusual position among leading sculptors. The prevailing tendency in the discipline, particularly since the conceptual turn of the late 1960s, has been to rely on found objects or outsourced fabrication, which both effectively elude the manual skill challenges of independent, studio-based making.

This is not to say that outsourcing is incompatible with craft at the highest level, as the recent four-venue Charles Ray survey—marked by a wryly sophisticated play with materials, themes, and scale—made clear. Nevertheless, the notion that a sculptor might spend years mastering a traditional technique, much less position it at the center of an art practice, has long been regarded as eccentric, parochial, even reactionary.

Benjamin's essay encourages us to look at things differently. Up until the early 20th century, sculpture was primarily a storytelling medium, with a firm basis in craft. It typically required the support of official institutions, due to its sheer expense, and so tended to reflect vested interests. Yet each work—whether Pharaonic colossus, Greek temple frieze, Gothic crucifix, or Renaissance equestrian monument—also occupied a crucial role in the collective imagination, providing the material expression (and often the literal depiction) of commonly held mythologies.

With the advent of modernism, however, sculpture—like oral tradition—became ever less confident in its civic role. No longer did progressive artists presume to represent a single, shared symbolic order. This aversion only intensified when repressive regimes in Russia,

Germany, Italy, and elsewhere adopted heroic sculpture as part of their ideological arsenal. In the postwar era, the avant-garde parted company with public monument-making almost entirely. When the two did reconverge, most famously in Maya Lin's austere abstract Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982), controversy often ensued.

These dynamics have now changed. Puryear's successor at the US Pavilion, Simone Leigh, is equally invested in superlative craft, grand scale, and fable-like iconography. And in a development that parallels the recent rise of figuration in painting, and perhaps stems from similar motivations—a growing dissatisfaction with critique as an end in itself, and a hunger for more positive, inclusive narratives—numerous sculptors have returned to an affirmative role. Using time-honored craft methods, they are making monuments for the moment, works in which a diverse public can see itself.

Members of this heterogeneous group—among them Diedrick Brackens, Tania Pérez Córdova, Woody De Othello, Simone Fattal, Hugh Hayden, Kapwani Kiwanga, Mai-Thu Perret, and Marie Watt—have one important thing in common: Each prizes craft not just as a practical way to get things done, but as a source of cultural resonance. For these artists, making-by-hand is a way to express a sense of belonging. It tells a story about their extended community and demonstrates ways to give appropriate form to identity, both personal and collective. In their works, we often see two modes of narrative coincide: culturally specific visual references intertwine with the implicit chronicle of a piece's own physical creation.

Within this broad pattern, we can discern various formal affinities, beginning with certain functional typologies (such as containers, bedcovers, and furniture) that artists adopt for their sociohistorical charge. Quilts are a striking example. Following the powerful precedent of Faith Ringgold, figures like Sanford Biggers and Bisa Butler have laid claim to this textile tradition—sometimes seen in retrospect as an important precedent for modernist collage—because it affords a capacious means of representing Black identity.

Another striking instance is the humble pot, which, after decades of art world neglect, has become one of the dominant sculptural formats of our era. Pottery is among Leigh's primary references, much as it is for artist-activist Theaster Gates, both practitioners originally trained as ceramists. But many other sculptors are also making vessels the protagonists of their artistic narratives.



Ebitenyefa Baralaye: *Big Head I*, 2021, stoneware and slip, 33 by 19 by 14 inches.
COURTESY DAVID KLEIN GALLERY, DETROIT

Ebitenyefa Baralaye, a Nigerian-born artist based in Detroit, shapes stately quasi-abstract ceramic heads that allude to the African American tradition of the face jug. Features are rendered in sinuous coils, a sort of drawing in clay, and lightly applied over the pronounced throwing rings of the vessel-like forms. In an interview for *Art Journal*, the artist told me that he is exploring “the way that facial features represent not just one person but a community, a society, and a culture.”

Baralaye emphasizes materiality too, choosing iron-rich strains of earthenware that index Black skin tones. “Clay is not a neutral substance,” he said. “It is a membrane that has specific characteristics and properties as well as a memory of the forces that acted upon it.... Its physical memory is like the experiences and trauma that we carry in our bodies, not always in visible marks and impressions but in a deeply physiological sense, in our shifting ability to cope, to be happy, to feel fulfilled, to be healthy.” Shot through with vulnerability and violence, the story of African Americans’ heritage is, at one level, all too familiar. But in his richly conceived and executed artifacts, Baralaye takes ownership of that narrative, remaking it into something empowering.

Similarly, New York–based artists Clementine Keith-Roach and Julia Kunin address fraught issues of gender. Keith-Roach’s vessels often seem to tell the story of their own

becoming, with surrealistically disembodied hands applying light touches to the surface. The terra-cotta jars are found objects, sourced from Turkey and Greece—recent examples of the kind of trade items that have crisscrossed the Mediterranean since ancient times—while the added elements are jesmonite casts from the artist’s own body. This juxtaposition is modulated by the trompe l’oeil surfaces of the bodily elements, which Keith-Roach paints in imitation of the original ceramics’ patina, suggesting historical interchange and reciprocity.

In her newest works, Keith-Roach has further extended this vocabulary by working with large-scale basins and urns attached to casts of her own naked legs kneeling, reclining, or standing upright. Here, she is clearly responding to the sculptural nude, as well as the venerable analogy between the female body and a vessel, one destined to carry and nurture human life. Both of these conventions have served the interests of a sexist patriarchy, but instead of parodying that sort of objectification, Keith-Roach offers a feminine figuration that is explicitly celebratory.



Julia Kunin: *Labrys Queen*, 2019, ceramic, 49 by 28 by 4 inches.

JEFFREY SCOTT FRENCH

The same is true of Julia Kunin’s multipart ceramic sculptures, in which lesbian erotic imagery is sheathed in iridescent splendor. Since 2009, Kunin has traveled annually to Hungary to work with technicians at Zsolnay, a large ceramics factory famed since the 19th

century for its luster glazes. The only American to have recently worked in this context, Kunin has done so at a time when LGBTQ+ rights in Hungary are under concerted assault by the right-wing populist government of Victor Orbán.

In these seemingly inhospitable circumstances, Kunin has managed to create works of visionary jouissance. She draws equal inspiration from utopian feminist fiction—Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) and Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* (1969)—and from Zsolnay’s Art Nouveau period, a heyday for allegorical figures of nymphs and femmes fatales. Kunin adopts these stereotypes only to liberate them, breaking her figures apart into free-floating motifs that encode female identity: lips, vaginas, keyholes. There is clearly a rapport between her iconography and that of *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914), Marsden Hartley’s emblematic portrait of his gay lover, painted at a time when it was not safe to tell stories of queerness in public.



Beatriz Cortez (<https://www.artnews.com/t/beatriz-cortez/>): *Chultún El Semillero*, 2021, steel, plastic, paper, soil, corn, beans, amaranth, quinoa, morro gourd, achiote seeds, sorghum, potatoes, chayote/huisquil, and ceiba plants.
COURTESY COMMONWEALTH AND COUNCIL, LOS ANGELES AND MEXICO CITY/SMITHSONIAN ARTS 🍷 + INDUSTRIES

In the works of Baralaye, Keith-Roach, and Kunin, we see an inversion of the strategies of the postwar studio craft movement, in which craftspeople sought to transcend tradition in the hope of attaining fine art status. Today, many artists, free of old hang-ups about disciplinary classification, are boldly exploring craft’s multiple histories. Consider, for example, Beatriz Cortez, a Salvadoran artist based in Los Angeles. As part of “Futures” (a recent exhibition at the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building in Washington, D.C., for which I served on the curatorial team), Cortez created *Chultún El Semillero* (2021), a futuristic pod the size of a one-person space capsule, hand-built in steel, and illuminated

from within. Though it could almost be a science-fiction film prop, the piece is actually based on an ancient model. The chultunes made by the Maya of the Yucatán region are stone cavities, laboriously carved out by hand and then used for long-term storage: time capsules of a sort, dedicated to the survival of the community. Cortez's reimagination of this archaic practice—her sculpture was filled with tools and living plants and seeds—suggests that, at a time when ecological peril makes cross-generational care so vital, we would do well to attend to older mentalities.

This sort of temporal layering, in which materiality serves as the bearer of cultural inheritance, is arguably the most important thing that craft brings to art today. Artists of striking diversity, who otherwise might seem to have little in common, are linked by this common strategy. Earlier this year, the Brooklyn Museum presented a monographic exhibition on Baseera Khan, a queer artist of Indian, Afghani, and East African heritage, who conveys complex ideas about identity through process.

For *Snake Skin* (2019), Khan first built a majestic fluted column of insulation foam, six feet in diameter and fourteen feet high. They then wrapped the column in a patchwork of handwoven silk rugs from Kashmir, and finally, sliced the work into cross sections, exposing its cheap industrial core. These pieces are installed as if they had fallen onto one another, suggesting an architectural ruin. With its extreme material contrast and abrupt disjunctions, as well as its titular reminder that a snake regularly sheds its skin, this is a representation of selfhood as anything but fixed.

In the video *Braidrage* (2017), Khan is seen scaling a wall studded with partial casts of their own body fabricated in resin. These lumps are further ornamented with gold chains, bits of hypothermia blankets, and “commodified Indian hair” from the wig industry. As Khan navigates this cliff, constantly laboring to get just a little bit higher, one is invited to reflect on the sheer endurance required of the least empowered individuals.



Baseera Khan: *Braidrage*, 2017-ongoing, performance.
PHOTO MAXIM RYAZANSKY/COURTESY,
COURTESY SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY, NEW YORK

Given these heterogeneous materials and unorthodox methods, Khan is clearly operating outside craft's traditional domain. Yet, just as evidently, they engage the generative dynamics of materiality that have always animated artisanship. An assessment of craft in contemporary sculpture should take such practice into account, looking well beyond the familiar disciplinary catechism of clay, glass, fiber, metal, and wood.

That expansive approach should also consider the many interrelated storylines and timescales that inhere in craft: the story of materials and their past use; the artist's background and development, including their acquisition of manual skills; and the story of process itself, a dramatic arc from undefined potential to cathartic resolution. These aspects of narrative are evocative, rather than illustrative, flowing as they do from sculpture's very substance. As Puryear told me, "I don't feel I'm working with a narrative intent that arises from the making process, at least not consciously. More like the reverse. The making process itself can be its own story, a record that remains active in the finished work, and the way it's perceived. Making also bears the evidence of the maker's own physical encounter with the material: the dance, or the struggle for mastery, or the surprise discovery—which is the best!"

In his celebration of the art of storytelling, Walter Benjamin was no nostalgist, and his mourning for artisanal traditions was not an expression of conservatism. Benjamin directed attention to past customs not in hopes that they could be reinstated, but rather to keep them in view, as an archive of scattered remnants. Craft, like folklore, has had constantly to adapt to new conditions. But it can still help us get our bearings, simply by telling us where we've been.