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RAMEKON
O'ARWISTERS

SARAH
SZE

SHEELA
GOWDA

ELANA
HERZOG

PABLO
LEHMANN





Work in progress
(detail),
2019.
Textiles collected in
Russia, Norway, and
New York, and embroidery
floss, created at the
Wave Hill Writer
Workspace Residency.

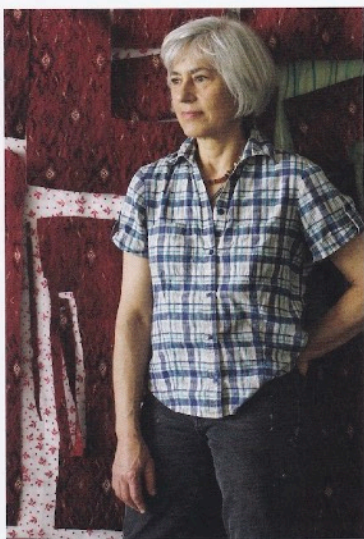
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A Conversation with Elana Herzog
by Jan Garden Castro

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Elana Herzog's work explores how civilizations merge, overlap, and sometimes become as threadbare as a piece of cloth. Her practice involves subtraction and addition, deconstructing everyday materials then adding patterns, staple tracks, and other gestures to create uniquely tactile objects. With a keen eye for symbols, patterns, and motifs, Herzog juxtaposes, layers, and embroiders surfaces that range from ugly to beautiful. Her work captures the ebb and flow of cultural transformation, as people, plants, and artifacts migrate. Like Yinka Shonibare's "African" cloth manufactured in Europe and Joan Jonas's layered sounds, people, and objects that mean different things at once, Herzog's hybridized rematerializations delve into the cultural unconscious, excavating and restoring meanings that have been lost, forgotten, or altered beyond recognition.



FROM LEFT:
Elana Herzog.

Untitled #3,
1994.
Drapes, stuffing,
wooden embroidery
hoops, and steel
table case.
40 x 56 x 36 in.

Jan Garden Castro: Could you discuss the four curtain-like works that you created last year at Wave Hill?

Elana Herzog: The work I did during my Winter Workspace Residency at Wave Hill allowed me to bring together my experience as a gardener and my interests as an artist. Wave Hill is both a botanical garden and the former estate of several American entrepreneurs. Its buildings reflect the architectural tastes of multiple generations of local elites. As a site, it embodies visions of both nature and culture.

There was great serendipity in the fact that my residency came just after a trip to Russia and Finland. In October 2018, I visited Russia for a month as a resident of the CEC ArtsLink Back Apartment Residency in St. Petersburg. I went knowing that traditional Russian and Central Asian textiles were dominated by floral motifs. My goal was to learn about the evolution of the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet textile industry. I attempted to research, among other things, the possible significance of the floral motifs in traditional textiles and to identify the specific plants that were represented. The people I spoke to were reluctant to identify or attribute significance to most of them. The consensus was that most floral motifs were highly stylized and fantastic—divorced from any original botanical sources. Furthermore, their portrayal was greatly influenced by the technology that produced them, whether weaving, printing, embroidery, or painting. The use of dense patterning was thought to be for protection, to ward off bad luck; and specific plants—such as pomegranates, with their many seeds—served primarily as fertility charms. Much more interpretation than that is considered speculative.

Plant motifs are pervasive throughout the world. I've collected textiles that reflect the broad spectrum of decorative floral motifs from Scandinavia, Asia, Russia, and the United States. At Wave Hill, I began several large hanging pieces that layer, combine, and hybridize these motifs, blurring the boundaries between their elements. They are still in progress in my studio in Brooklyn.

Plant life, both cultivated and uncultivated, participates in the global migration of cultures and goods—sometimes inadvertently impacting the ecosystem of its new surroundings. Many terms refer both to plants and to people: uprooted, transplanted, invasive,



“ I’m drawn to ‘down-market’ materials that attempt to emulate high style and which, in turn, often emulate high art. ”



native, alien. Conquerors often import the gardens of their homelands, planting them as they would plant their national flag. These serve as symbols of "civilization" in "savage" lands, as well as sources of comfort in unfamiliar terrain. Imperial cultures conduct scientific research and even engage in espionage to advance medical and technological innovations. All of this parallels other forms of cultural and economic exchange. As a gardener, I participate in the relocation of plants on a local level, collecting, propagating, and distributing them among my friends. I think about the lineages of certain plants that I took from my father's garden, which now have homes in neighboring counties and states. Whenever I travel, I look to see what is growing—what is familiar and what is new to me. Certain plants recur in multiple locations.

JGC: Nature or nurture? What inspired your early interest in the tactile and historic characteristics of

things and, in an ironic twist, your decision to begin deconstructing or altering these materials?

EH: My working process has always been driven largely by intuition. Deconstructing materials is part of a conversation about ephemerality and loss, and another conversation about the conventions of painting and sculpture—about eliminating the support in painting or the mass in sculpture. My tactile, visceral use of materials is probably one of the earliest attributes of my work. It predates ideas or intentions articulated by language or consciously informed by research.

I've always been interested in the way that everything I make refers to something else in the world, whether it is art or not. In the late 1980s, I began to assemble



materials drawn from domestic life in ways that are formal and that allow their prior identities in the utilitarian world to enter the reading of the work. By constructing a language of "impure abstraction" in which all things carry a wealth of information and meaning, I attempted to push back against the values of Modernist abstraction with its assumptions about linearity and progress that I had inherited as a student. I used furniture to establish a literal scale in relation to the human body. I first incorporated fabric pieces into my work primarily for their sensuousness, their gestural and expressive qualities. In the

early '90s, I began to work almost exclusively with fabric, altering it in incremental ways by a range of repetitive processes. Gradually, and almost without realizing it, I was learning about the textile industry. At a certain point, I began doing more directed research, which I've found pleasurable and rewarding. It has expanded the scope of my work.

I'm drawn to "down-market" materials that attempt to emulate high style and which, in turn, often emulate high art. I respond to their aspirational dimension and the pathos of abjection and longing that I experience in it. I continue to be interested in taste as an indicator of class and in how our perception of aesthetic experience is informed by cultural bias. The languages of window display, fashion, and decor provide great tools to express this.

JGC: How does embedding the weavings into gallery walls alter viewers' perceptions of the work?

EH: That work is conceived as embedded into the wall and is defined by that relationship to its surroundings. Ephemerality is central to the feeling it evokes since it has no structural autonomy. Another goal is to make something that appears to be either sinking into or emerging from the walls around it. A further goal is to

FROM OPPOSITE:
Untitled (detail), from
Material Migrations,
2017.

Carpet collected in Tbilisi and New York, metal staples, and wood scrap collected in Tbilisi, view of installation at Artistarium 10, Tbilisi, Georgia.

Scale Shifts/Vision
Adjusts,
2015/16.

Carpets collected in New York and Sharjah, laminated MDF flooring, wood pallet, and metal staples, view of installation at Sharjah Museum of Art, United Arab Emirates.

Untitled,
2016.

Wooden shipping pallet and carpet scrap, 16 x 48 x 40 in.





We/ave,
2007.
Chenille bedspread,
metal staples,
drywall, and plywood,
104 x 120 x 8 in.

CATHY GARBUTT

“
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relationship
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and
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and
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chance
and
intention.”
”

create ambiguity about the boundaries of the piece; this is impossible to do when it's not embedded. It activates the surface of the wall and the relationships between different surfaces, and the larger space is drawn into the work. This work participates in a conversation about surface and support in painting or surface and structure in sculpture. Textiles evoke interesting analogies to many fields—staple to stitch and suture, textile to text, weave to structure, syntax, and systems.

JGC: For the *Gowanus E-Waste Warehouse* (2017), you created a huge pile of unspooled tape that alluded to the toxic waste in the nearby Gowanus Canal. How did you come up with this perfect metaphor?

EH: The Gowanus E-Waste Center is an amazing warehouse full of discarded electronics from the past 50 to 100 years. It's a mausoleum for obsolete technologies and outgrown toys. The work I made there was composed of magnetic tape removed from discarded VHS cassettes. With the help of some wonderful interns, I amassed a large quantity of tape and piled it into a giant cardboard box laid on its side. From there, it spilled onto the warehouse floor. The pile of tangled, shiny black tape resembled an oozing, viscous mass. I was told to use only commercially produced VHS tapes, nothing that contained anyone's personal information. I was particularly intrigued by how the identity of my material (the tape) was changed by the process of removing it from its case and unspooling it. Its change of state made its content unavailable; it had lost its function as the carrier of recorded visual and auditory information. It had been restored to its identity as hundreds or thousands of feet of shiny blackish polystyrene strips. Was the information embedded in it still available, or had the tape become illegible? You could say that this work was a form of deconstruction, as well as a process of unspooling. It reflects on entropic processes in which technologies and entire industries, once seen as advanced, eventually become obsolete. Robert Smithson's spill pieces come to mind.

JGC: What was it like to make *Scale Shifts; Vision Adjusts* (2015/16) at the Sharjah Art Museum in the United Arab Emirates? Would the concept of aligning shifting scale with vision be understood differently by Eastern and Western audiences?

EH: *Scale Shifts; Vision Adjusts* was part of a largely horizontal installation consisting of carpet and industrially made faux-wood flooring. This sets up a viewing situation that tends to flip back and forth between landscape and painting in that our perception alternates between seeing it as a receding horizontal plane and as an abstract painting. The rectangular cutouts in the carpets reveal multiple layers of carpet and flooring. They amplify the reference to landscape in their resemblance to the irregular grids of fields that we can see from the windows of airplanes. The grids formed by these cutouts also speak to the geometric abstraction in much Modernist painting, which is here juxtaposed with the brilliant cacophony of patterned carpet—the antithesis of this Modernist aesthetic. The title refers to the idea of “points of view,” with many layered meanings.

FROM BELOW:
Valence,
2014.
Wood, drywall, paint,
textile, metal staples,
steel shelving posts,
and hardware.
240 x 360 x 48 in.

Sampler #4,
2017.
Textile and steel pins,
34.8 x 18 in.

Sampler #11,
2018.
Textile and steel pins,
33.5 x 17.5 in.

Scale Shifts; Vision Adjusts was the third iteration of *Material Migrations*, an ongoing project of temporary installations in which I use and reuse collected elements. Many of these materials have already migrated around the world as part of global trade networks that move construction materials and carpets (both industrial and artisanal) to distant markets. Then, they travel with me—thus far within the U.S. and to Sharjah in the UAE, and to Georgia. In each location, I pick up new materials and leave some behind. In Sharjah, the shipping pallet on which my carpets had traveled from New York became a key element of the installation; it returned to my studio in New York, where it now has a place in my work.

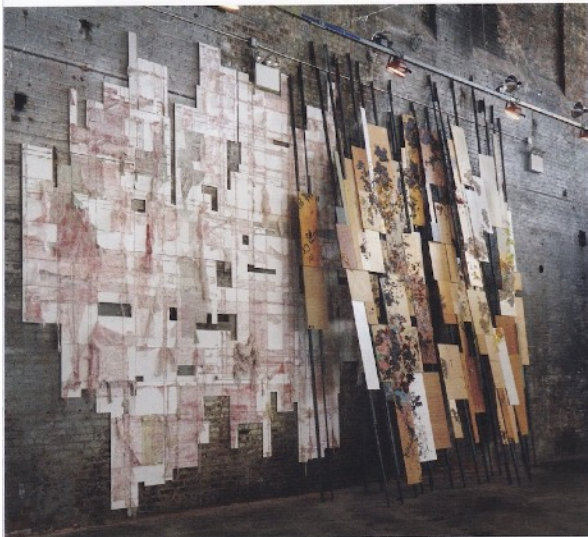
JGC: I've read that *Untitled #4 (2001)* is a response to both 9/11 and Jasper Johns. Could you explain?

EH: In many of my pieces, I refer to artists whose work I admire and whose authority I respect. Johns's white American flag, while iconoclastic, has attained the status of a cultural icon. After 9/11, my then eight-year-old daughter started drawing pictures of American flags. This was not something that she learned from me. At the time, the image of the flag was everywhere in New York City, and it had infiltrated her visual landscape. I was alarmed by the ubiquity of this symbol of nationalistic fervor, something I had grown up feeling skeptical about and did not want to promote in my child. Depicting it as a ghostly after-image seemed a good way to represent both its insidiousness and its questionable and fragile status as an icon.

JGC: You created *Valence* around the end of 2014 for a two-person show at Pierogi. How does the title unlock the piece? Have you altered it since its first installation?

EH: *Valence* was re-imagined for a 2018 show at the Rubin Foundation's 9th Floor Gallery, where it was installed on two perpendicular walls, inhabiting a corner of a white-walled gallery with 10-foot-high ceilings—a very different space from the cavernous, industrial space at The Boiler (Pierogi).

I love the word “valence” partly because it's almost the same as the word “valance,” which is a curtain that hangs at the top of a window. In fact, “valence” is a word used in chemistry to describe the charge of



an electron and in psychology to refer to qualities of emotion in negative and positive terms. It's even used in linguistics. Both the chemical and the psychological uses connect to attraction and repulsion, which always interest me as aspects of aesthetic experience. The word's multiple meanings and associations appeal to me. Most of my pieces are untitled because I like to keep their interpretations as open as possible. *Valence* allowed me to do that.

JGC: Last year you participated in “Everyday Perfection,” a group exhibition at the Albany International Airport. What did you show?

EH: I contributed a group of “Samplers,” from an ongoing series that I began in 2017. I take two identical squares of fabric—identical in that I try to align the pattern in the weave or print in both pieces. I cut horizontal strips in one and vertical strips in the other, and then weave them back together. Theoretically, this process should reconstruct the original pattern exactly, but it never quite does. There is a degree of irregularity that results from my freehand cutting and weaving, and the process of attempting to force two layers of material into the space of one incrementally displaces the pattern and results in a new image. I like the relationship between order and disorder, control and abandon, chance and intention. The structure and

premise are quite simple, but the outcomes of these pieces are nuanced. This project is driven by curiosity. I begin each one without knowing quite what will happen. It's an exercise that I look forward to doing. I try to do it with just about every fabric that I collect and use in other pieces, so it's becoming a record of the fabrics that I find and use.

The results are varied, and some are of greater interest than others. I see a relationship here to what the Russian Suprematist and Constructivist painters-turned-textile-designers were doing with patterns in the early days of the Soviet Union, when artists were expressing their revolutionary ideals through their work and aiding the cause of the revolution. They created dynamic images that disrupted simple geometric patterns by dislocating one or two elements in otherwise conventional configurations of color and shape.

“Everyday Perfection” was organized around a perceived affinity between contemporary art and the work of the Shakers. In 2017, the Shaker Heritage Society of Watervliet, New York, contacted me to discuss the possibility of my doing a residency and site-specific project at their site, which is adjacent to the Albany International Airport. The airport itself is located on Albany Shaker Road, and it occupies, in part, land bought from the Shaker Settlement. I find the intersection of these sites fascinating—the fact that one can literally map one onto the other. Unfortunately, due to budget constraints and personnel changes at the SHS, the original project did not move forward, but the conversation around it inspired a group exhibition curated by Kathy Greenwood, director of the Art & Culture Program of the Albany International Airport. She chose seven samplers to show, and I decided to embed one sampler directly into the gallery wall using metal staples, pulling it apart and deconstructing it in the manner that I'd made so much other work. It was an opportunity to further break down the structure of the weave and to create a ghost of a sampler, or a *Poltergeist*, as I called it, echoing the relationship of past to present. I've been excited about extending this process and plan to develop it further in the future. ■