

Organic Trope Craft Beauty

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Organic Trope Abstraction	2
Post-Minimalism Craft Beauty	5
Ambiguous Color Preciousness	8
List of Illustrations	11
Bibliography	12

My work prior to graduate school involved drawings and unfired clay figures, mainly of animals as human stand-ins, with a childishly humorous bent. In the studio, I became frustrated with the limitations of this approach, and began to look for a more material oriented process of working as a way to move beyond narrative depictions. Using papier-mâché allowed me to make an object grow, and develop a hands-on process to transform a piece as it materializes. The turn to abstraction came out of a desire to move away from the cartoon-element of my previous work. I wanted to find a way to communicate an awkward sense of desire that earlier drawings approached, but without the faux naive transgressions. Dealing with those emotions through abstraction gives me a framework to approach my materials more poetically, and I see a connection between the rounded forms of organic abstraction and forms of desire. Abstraction is also a way to reference the body while maintaining an autonomy untethered by overt, external associations. That sense of being and non-being is important, and fuels the ambiguity of forms. Charline von Heyl describes the dual drive, and writes “I want to get abstraction to a point where it screams that it is something: a representation and a thing” (331) but refuses to cohere when a viewer examines the painting. I want my work to function in a similar way, where hints of unnamable associations mix with the rigor of formal abstraction.

Each piece is physically held for much of the making process, and functions as oversized jewelry or a fragmented body part. The small size suggests intimacy, but I also want the sculptures to function on an ambiguous scale beyond the handheld, miniature model. The work is compact, and balances fey and tough qualities. The small, minimal forms require close viewing, yet the sculptures are as distant and private as they are

unguarded.



Fig. 1.

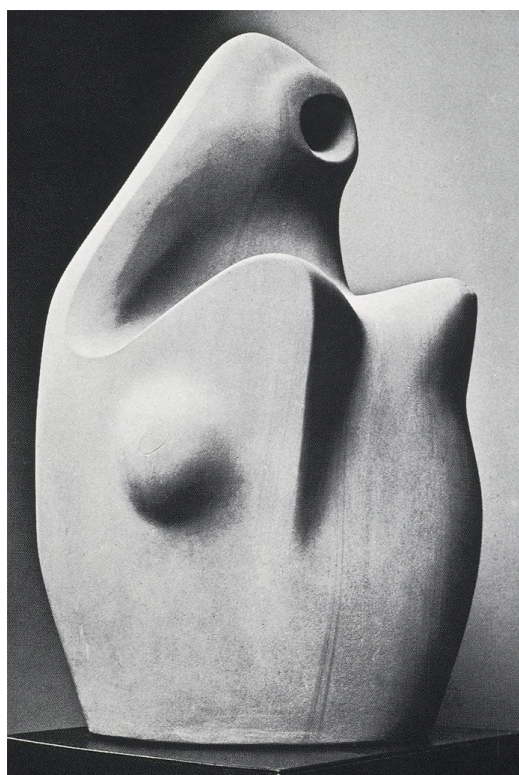


Fig. 2.

Organic Trope Abstraction

Bones and shells normally refer to the natural world. These pared down shapes hover between abstraction and figuration, and suggest sexualized and archetypal symbols. Rounded shapes and curves serve as stark forms that resonate with a density of associations and meanings connected to the body and sexuality. Many early and mid-century Modernists, such as Henry Moore and Jean Arp, use these organic shapes as the basis for an abstract art that references anatomy and nature while remaining non-representational. The simplified forms are used as a universal language that stem from a

collective unconscious, and Moore states “there are universal shapes to which everyone is subconsciously conditioned and to which they can respond if their conscious control does not shut them off.”¹ The role of chance and accident also influences the work of Arp, and his biomorphic shapes come from the unconscious. Modernist uses of organic abstraction hint at surreal associations, but primarily focuses on the formal properties.



Fig. 3.

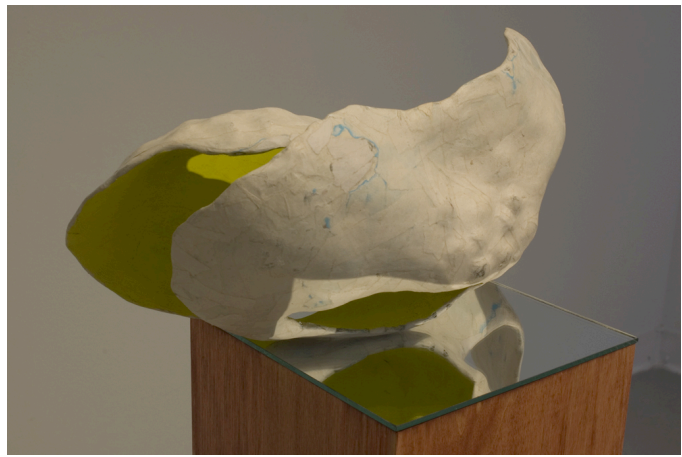


Fig. 4.

Georgia O'Keeffe's abstract paintings come closer to my sculptural work, with her emphasis on softly artificial colors that contrast with organic forms. This is distinctly different from the unpainted surfaces of Arp and Moore's sculptures, which emphasize clarity of materials and simplified shapes. Sexuality plays an important role in many of O'Keeffe's paintings, but it is not the subject. The expressive range includes a tactile physicality that is sensuous while remaining playfully abstract. Bold forms are placed in the center of the canvas, and floral shapes are given volume. O'Keeffe's use of colors

¹ McAvera 17.

complicate her rounded forms, and alters the purity of organic abstraction in favor of incorporating modern, urban references to the natural world.

Contradictions exist within my sculptures: artificial and organic elements combine on the surface, and bone-like shapes suggest both the physical presence of anatomy, and traces of departed bodies. I use abstraction as a subtle provocation to suggest and conceal desire, and the sculptures balance the line between sexual codes and plays on non-representational form. Fragility, preciousness, bareness and subdued kitsch elements mix together as tropes of organic abstraction. The use of trope disrupts the conventions of Moore and blurs formal and psychological boundaries. Risa Puleo describes the way Lisi Raskin plays with hard-edged abstraction, and extends the formalism of that painting tradition as a theatrical gesture:

If trope gives form to something otherwise indefinable, something that is always relative to something else and yet wholly self-sufficient, it causes a disruption to re-signification of the assumed terms. There is no objective beyond the pleasure of obfuscating these terms so they register in double, triple, quadruple entendre ad infinitum. (151)

Multiple references are imbedded in a single object, and they serve as a rhetorical device to go beyond the literal meanings of organic abstraction. My sculptures contain surreal associations, as well as a heightened sense of formal abstraction. Both elements are exaggerated as a troping of organic abstraction to convey personal desire.



Fig. 5.

Post-Minimalism Craft Beauty

I use similar organic shapes as many Modernist artists, but the small scale and materials also connect my work to vernacular craft. The sculptures relate to interior space as much as anything physical, and the pieces are made by continually refining the papier-mâché and sculptamold to create delicate forms that reference nature while remaining domestic objects. They depict a sense of touch, both in the labor of making and the haptic qualities of the surface, and that handmade element places the work in a craft context. The combination of organic abstraction and craft materials reveals the “categorical slipperiness” of the work. Neither pure form nor serious craft object, the

work operates in-between these categories as a trans-medium².

The objects resemble abstracted household decorations like vessels and shell collections. There are multiple references in a sculpture, but the formal components are kept to a minimum. With only a few elements in each piece, the craft-like qualities of the work relate to the post-minimalism of artists like Richard Tuttle and Vincent Fecteau, as well as ceramicist Ken Price. These artists use everyday materials and vernacular references to shift the stripped down aesthetics of Minimalism toward a more personal investigation of process. Their use of materials stem from craft and vernacular art, as in Fecteau's choice of papier-mâché and foamcore, as well as his references to interior design, Price's incorporation of Mexican pottery and his practice of making decorative cups, and Tuttle's use of fabric, string and wonky pieces of plywood. The majority of Tuttle, Fecteau, and Price's sculptures are small, and they use abstraction as a personal language to delve into modest beauty with minimal materials and handcrafted processes.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

² Puleo 147.

Their work achieves a kind of ornamental decoration, and complicates the post-minimalist investigation of materials. Such work also shifts the usual conventions of beauty from high gloss, high production, and virtuosity to a more tenuous, human quality. Bruce Hainley compares Maureen Gallace's small landscape paintings to Fecteau's sculptures, and connects their shared use of vernacular (craft project, Sunday landscape painting) as a trope to go beyond the vernacular while celebrating it without irony. Hainley writes "and yet one of the clearest ways her work differs from the vernacular is in its belief in beauty while knowing that beauty may never be achievable (77)." Beauty, its limitations, and notions of craft mix together to convey a sense of ethereal desire. That longing is a form of beauty, but it is always out of reach, and not fully able to be depicted. Abstraction is used to deal with the ambiguity of desire as both tangible through organic sculptural forms, and fleeting in its inability to completely coalesce those longings. The sculptures retain a level of uncertainty that allows viewer to project meaning onto it, and that use of abstraction provides room for a homespun beauty rooted in desire.



Fig. 8.

Ambiguous Color Preciousness

The work functions in a state of in-between-ness: the handcrafted, physical sense of touch and well sanded surfaces; painted and sculptural elements that unify as painted form, and also act separately to contradict each other. Each piece is self-contained but not fully coherent, with artificial colors altering organic forms. Helen Molesworth describes the issues of feminism and painting in the work of Joan Snyder, Howardena Pindell, and Mary Heilmann, and writes:

The nearly putrid or acidic hues of their palettes suggest that they are willing to perform, in the space of the canvas, the dilemma of whether or not something is a "good painting". By using colors not typically associated with "quality," their paintings stage the problem of how to ascertain it. (434)

Shades of pink, magenta and linden green point to the problem of quality in my sculptures, and how the works function as both pathetic and valued objects.

Delicately arced walls, small size and tenderly refined features give an aura of preciousness. The work reveals a sense of care and labor, but it also contains elements of the pathetic. Hollow forms suggest as much empty space of departed bodies as outward fullness, and "nearly putrid" colors give layers of meaning to the sculptures as saccharine objects. The sculptures emit an aura of vulnerability, and they run the risk of slightness because of their size and delicate craftsmanship. Robert Storr describes the historical connotations of preciousity by explaining the transition in seventeenth century France of the word from "something scarce, something of value, into one of belittling disparagement" (91), and frames the change as an issue of power and sexuality:

There is an obvious sexual politics to this, as well. Preciosity originated with the rise of eighteenth-century salons and the corresponding coming into social and cultural power of the women who set the style and intellectual agendas. The backlash against these urban hotbeds of art and ideas bore the stamp of an old landed gentry desperately trying to retrench itself against the onslaught of the Enlightenment. And what better way to dismiss cosmopolitanism and complexity than to associate them with a lack of virility. To be precious, therefore, was to be overly subtle, effeminate, and by extension, inconsequential. (91)

Small, subtle, and effeminate art is equally dismissive today as it was in eighteenth century France, and faces similar marginalization. Preciousness encompasses tender craft, issues of gender and sexuality, and the assumed connection between craft and identity. As opposed to large-scale work that bombards the viewer, small and precious art is exposed and defenseless. My sculptures indirectly address and disrupt those issues through subtlety, quietness, and slowness.

Minimal features highlight the fragility of the sculptures and emphasize their bare organic forms. The slightness of the work is part of the provocation, and troping of

organic abstraction. The sculptures exhibit a formal restraint found in the art of Tuttle and Fecteau, and share a similar type of beauty. Writing about Fecteau's early foamcore pieces, Hainley states, "Contemplating the fucked-up ways in which meanings elude words and yet often fix on whatever stuff is least expected... Precise and subtle, the project is only as ambiguous as life (83)." Slightness and ambiguity, paradoxically, allow for meaning to form in unexpected places, and this gives the work a life beyond formal aesthetics. Organic abstraction may be a trope, but it is a trope that allows ambiguity to express a range of forms and feelings rooted in the world.

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Jean Arp, *Ptolemy*, 1953.

Fig. 2. Henry Moore, *Figure*, 1933.

Fig. 3 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Iris*, 1926.

Fig. 4. Andy Webber, *Untitled*, 2010.

Fig. 5. Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2003.

Fig. 6. Richard Tuttle, *Spiral #1*, 1986.

Fig. 7. Vincent Fecteau, *Untitled*, 2003.

Fig. 8. Andy Webber, Installation View, 2010.

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