

**Re-Negotiating Materiality: Craft Knowledge and Contemporary Art**  
**Re-négocier la matérialité : Savoir-faire artisanaux et art contemporain**

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**Article abstract**

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Les huit artistes sollicité.e.s choisissent comme mode d'expression les métiers d'art et/ou emploient des pratiques artisanales. Il s'agirait d'un type de réflexivité qui passe par une re-négociation de la matérialité des oeuvres et leurs processus au moyen de savoir-faire artisanaux. Cette re-négociation par la connaissance artisanale a des implications élargies. Ces artistes et leurs oeuvres contribuent au discours des critiques matérialistes apparues dans différents domaines du savoir.

Nous avons demandé à chaque artiste de soumettre une image et une courte description de leur oeuvre à la lumière de notre thématique.

## Re-Negotiating Materiality: Craft Knowledge and Contemporary Art

Ruth Chambers and Mireille Perron

This portfolio acknowledges and represents the diversity of positions enacted by artists who are re-negotiating materiality in their work by using knowledge that is craft-based. As seen in recent contemporary art exhibitions, artists' knowledge of craft materials, processes, skills, and discourses enrich the re-materialization of artistic practices.<sup>1</sup> To name a few well-known examples: Shary Boyle, who represented Canada at the 2013 Venice Biennale, makes, among other works, intricate ceramics figurines; 2014 Sobey award recipient Nadia Myre, a Quebec-based Algonquin artist, creates beadwork for political impact; Shannon Bool, Chris Curreri, and Haegue Yang, whose works were exhibited at *Le Grand Balcon*—the 2016 MAC Biennale—use respectively jacquard tapestry weaving, ceramic throwing, and basketry to support diverse conceptual positions, including queer politics. Whether they embrace the ready-made or found object, opt to make their own pieces, have them made by others in small workshops, or employ a combination of methods, these artists intentionally reframe conventional narratives of production through deliberate choices of making and materials. They embrace conceptual, procedural, and process-based art, while at the same time relying on craft skills.<sup>2</sup> They do not employ tacit knowledge to fetishize the handmade; rather, their gesture is a critical one that suggests a different form of ethical engagement.

This re-negotiation of materiality through craft knowledge has broader implications. It is interwoven with ongoing cross-disciplinary reflections on new materialisms, that is, innovative materialist critiques that are emerging across the social sciences and humanities, as well as in the sciences.<sup>3</sup> In these critiques, matter and processes of materialization are re-conceptualized

### Re-négocier la matérialité: Savoir-faire artisanal et art contemporain.

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1. Mireille Perron, "The (Re)Materialization of Ideas," *Studio Magazine* (Fall-Winter 2011–12): 30–34.

2. Process art emphasizes the "process" of making art rather than a predetermined plan/procedure. Procedural art is linked to the digital realm and emphasizes procedural generation as a method of creating information algorithmically. Eliza Au's work is exemplary of a new combination of procedural work and manual work.

3. Ruth Chambers, "Messing with Making and Meaning in Current Craft Media," *Cahiers métiers d'art, Craft Journal* 7, 2 (Winter 2015).

to address ethical and political concerns. Significant aspects of these accounts include a post-humanist conception of matter as enlivened, as exhibiting agency, and as reengaged with both the material realities of everyday life and its broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures.<sup>4</sup> Through this material agency, the meaning of craft is re-located through a re-view of its long embrace with the quotidian and with questions of labour.

The material and conceptual interrogations seen in these practices have contributed to a reconceptualization of the fluid borders between design, craft, art, and the maker's movement.<sup>5</sup> Craft theorist Glenn Adamson observes that post-secondary education in many art schools is, to a large extent, responsible for "a new breed of post-disciplinary artists."

Signs of this attitude are already emerging in the work of some wide-open-minded artists with extensive training in craft media.... They see their skills not as inherently valuable or ideologically correct, but as a neutral tool—a way to invest their work with authority—and also as a topic, which can be submitted to the same introspection as any other term in the artistic equation.<sup>6</sup>

Other contributors to an analysis of post-disciplinary practices include craft theorist David Pye and art historians Ezra Shales and John Roberts, who argue for more nuanced interpretations of artisanal labour, skilled production,

mechanization, and factory handcraft. Disciplinary expertise is concurrently praised and refuted through an articulation of making that revisits the triad of skill/deskilling/reskilling, wherein reskilling bridges the gap between material and immaterial labour. In his examination of labour in design, manufacturing, and craft, Pye argues for a conception of workmanship that drifts between risk and certainty as an alternative to polarized "made by hand" vs. "made by machine" thinking. Roberts proposes a similar alternative to disciplinary distinctions by positing productive (artistic) and non-productive (non-artistic) forms of labour in a dyad of deskilling/reskilling whereby the process of reskilling integrates what an artist does materially (through craft) and immaterially (through concept) to create meaningful artworks. Shales is similarly unwilling to differentiate "where craftsmanship ends and ordinary manufacture begins," going as far as to propose that manufacturing be recognized as a neglected "Other" in his argument for an inclusive definition of significant objects.<sup>7</sup>

In this Practices section, we present the work of eight Canadian artists in support of broadening interrogations of materialism and post-disciplinarity. They enact the range of new approaches described above. We believe such re-negotiations of craft knowledge through contemporary art practices make a significant contribution to these ongoing debates. ¶

4. See for example, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, 2010); Mark Gisbourne, Wolfgang Hentschel, and Karen Barad, *Agential Realism* (Potsdam), 2015; and Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Orthodoxy, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC), 2010.

5. In the maker's movement, we include DIY (Do It Yourself), DIT (Do It Together), Maker Faire, as well as spaces such as the University of Toronto Critical Making Lab.

6. See for example Glenn Adamson, "Handy-Crafts: A Doctrine," in *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, ed. Paula Marincola (Philadelphia, 2006).

7. See David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambridge, 1968); John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling of Art After the Readymade* (London and New York, 2007); Ezra Shales, "The Politics of 'Ordinary Manufacture' and the Perils of Self-Serve Craft," *Nation Building: Craft and Contemporary American Culture*, ed. Nicholas R. Bell (Washington, DC, 2015), 218.



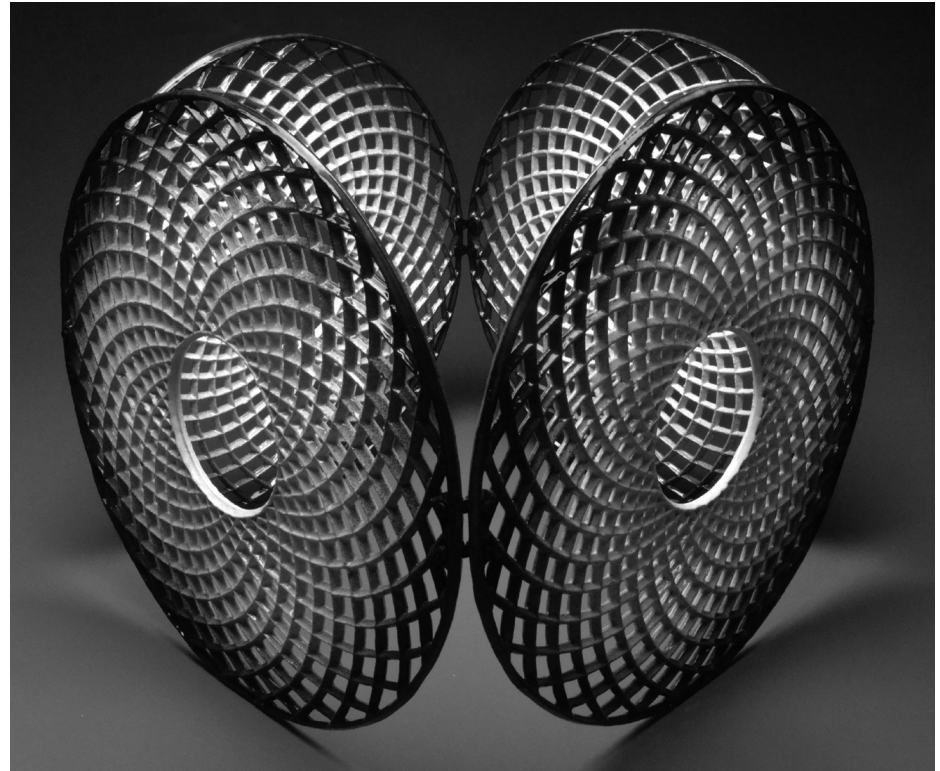
*And from her parts of me emerged*, 2016.  
 Beads, material, coyote pelt, rocks, plexi-  
 glass, handmade paper, 30.5 × 18.7 × 10.2  
 cm. Collection of the artist. Used by permission of  
 McClelland & Stewart, a division of Penguin Random  
 House Canada Limited; original photo of Maria  
 Campbell by Dan Gordon.

## Judy Anderson

Drawing on Indigenous teachings, knowledge, and ways of making, I create work that honours people in my life. Because beading is incredibly time consuming, labour produces an ethic of care; it becomes the enactment of a caring conversation. All my pieces are fully planned before I begin; it is only as I work on them that the true spirit of my subject is realized. *And from her parts of me emerged* honours Maria Campbell who has had an extraordinarily profound effect on my life. Through recreating the cover of Maria's book, *Halfbreed*, I realized that while my journey with her began with this book, it was our friendship, a relationship filled with laughter, stories, tears, lessons, teachings, and love, that really mattered. As a result, it was from this ability to focus on our relationship while beading that I was able to finally recognize that from her parts of me emerged.

## Eliza Au

I create forms that act as lines in space, and patterns that mirror and replicate each other, seemingly in a dance of artificial mitosis. Working digitally in computer-aided design (CAD) affects how I create and view artworks. The liminal space between complexity and order allows room for play and discovery through the rules of algorithms and parametric design. The digital interface has its own inherent surfaces and textures such as the wireframe, pixels, and meshes, which we experience visually. The planning and production processes work in synchronicity with each other, through line drawings in CAD, which are engraved in wood and eventually cast in clay. I am interested in bringing the wireframe surface into the physical world through the processes of craft, such as plaster mould making and press-moulding clay. In doing so, my work conflates craft labour, skilled production, mechanization, and factory handcraft.



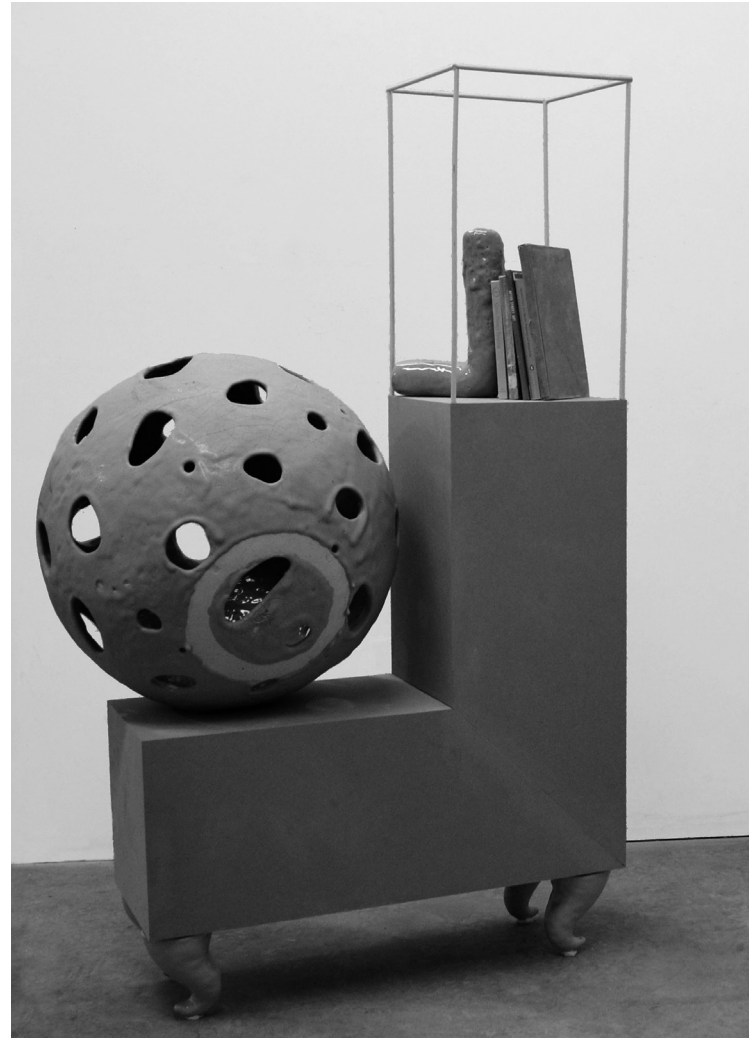
*Squaring the Circle*, 2016. Stoneware clay,  
41 × 41 × 41 cm. Collection of the artist.  
Photo: Eliza Au.

## Zimra Beiner

Making art overwhelms my life; my attempt to honestly expose the making process is therefore an autobiographical narrative. My everyday life is expressed in my method of production; the world around me is represented in things that are ubiquitous and domestic. Looking, translating, and making are continuously mixed together in a loop in which the boundary between art and life becomes blurred. The everyday is interpreted, re-contextualized, and abstracted as a reflection of life passing through me.

This work is a meditation on the precarious tension between imagination and explicit knowledge as each supports the other. A simple bookend was the starting point, yet through the designing, making, collaborating with hired help, and eventual editing, the resulting still life evolved into a complex composition that neither celebrates nor denies but renews its relationship to labour, utility, and materiality.

*Book Stand*, 2013. Glazed stoneware, MDF, books, pine dowels, 147.3 × 91.4 × 55.9 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: courtesy of the artist.





*Demulsify*, 2014. Mixed-media installation, elastic bands, brown paper (lunch bags), cowboy hats, children's toys, silkscreen, MDF, LEGO, 91.4 m<sup>2</sup> (varied). Collection of the artist. Photo: Hakan Temucin.

## Kim Huynh

As an immigrant, I have witnessed the divide between wealth and poverty countless times (according to the Alberta Poverty Coalition, the average income of the poorest fifth of Albertans is \$13,100, and Brown Bagging for Calgary's Kids reports that 30,000 children go to school hungry each day). *Demulsify* portrays these two extremes. A long tubular vessel, knitted from countless elastic bands, ends with a pair of white Smithbilt cowboy hats, the iconic symbol of Calgary. One hat is filled with empty brown paper lunch bags, the other with business ties. The vessel is precariously holding up the architectural space and hangs over a mixed-media assemblage of ten flat forms representing simultaneously children's hands and/or isolated islands. As islands they stand for millionaires' extravagant estates, as children's hands they stand for the attempt to use the same elements to build a different world. To demulsify is to break down into different substances, to create an emulsion that will be incapable of reforming into a single entity. The materiality of this work, such as my time-consuming knitting of elastic bands that can only last for a few years, informs the meaning of the work: a time-sensitive civilizational wake-up call.

## Amy Malbeuf

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Since time immemorial, Indigenous women of North America have embroidered with caribou and moose hair. In the late nineteenth century, what is regarded as the contemporary form of tufting was created in Fort Providence, NWT, by three Métis women: Catherine (Beaulieu) Bouvier, Celine Laviolette Lafferty, and Madeleine (Mrs. Boniface) Lafferty. Celine taught the art form to Sister Beatrice Leduc, who used it in the residential school curriculum, which is how tufting spread throughout the north. *kayâs-ago*, referring to a Cree/English slang term for “a long time ago,” is an installation that consists of eighteen circular light panels, each of which features tufted caribou hair and sculptured quotations derived from Indigenous artists, scholars, authors, friends, and family. It is an act of self-portraiture as well as a portrait of multifarious Indigenous people. *Otipemisiwak*, meaning “people who own themselves,” is a Cree word that some Métis peoples use to describe themselves. I retrace this process to reclaim the history of tufting as an act of self-determination.



*Otipemisiwak*, from the installation *kayâs-ago*, 2014.  
Caribou hair sculpturing on light panel, 30.5 cm diameter.  
Photo: Don Hall, courtesy MacKenzie Art Gallery.

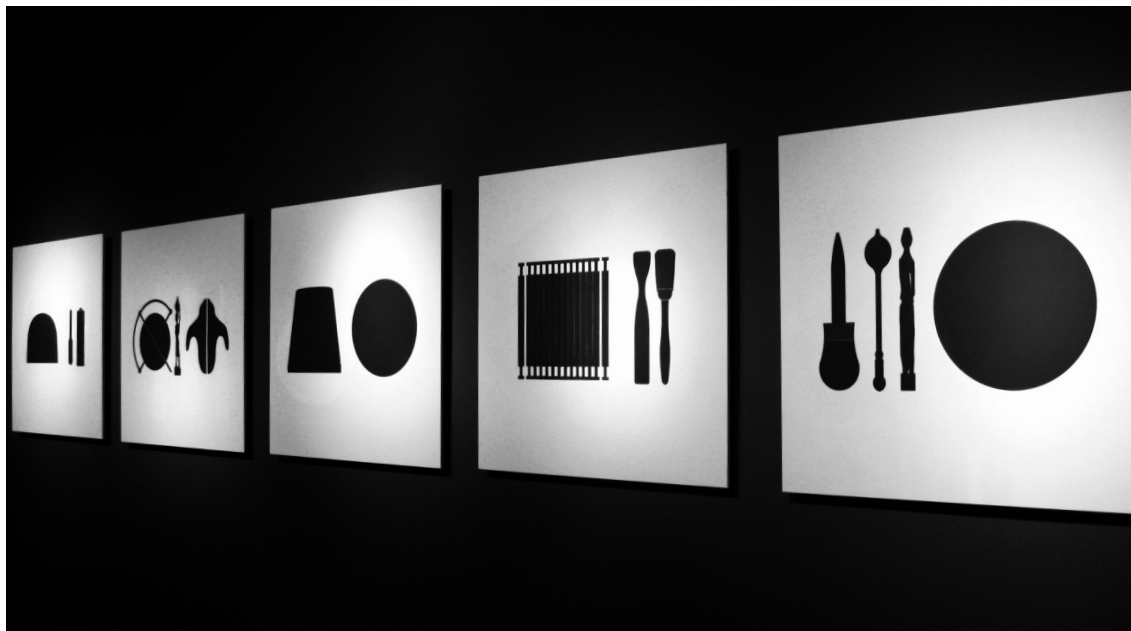




*Boat*, 2013. Cotton, wire, wooden spool,  
1.3 × 6.4 × 1.9 cm. Private collection.  
Photo: Dorie Millerson.

## Dorie Millerson

What captivates me about making lace is the process of transforming a single line or thread into a connected structure. This transformation allows for a seemingly simple line to become dimensional and cast shadows. Many of my works begin as reflections on the need to connect—with people, places, and things. Thread is a perfect material, and lace-making is the ideal process with which to experience and express connection and notions of time. In the slow repetitive act of hand stitching I am aware of time passing, and the form created somehow retains a sense of time spent. While I believe there is a dialogue between my work and the history of textiles, I do not feel confined to its traditional forms and functions. It is the possibility of threads and the challenge of reimagining lace to tell a story that keep me interested in exploring this medium.



*Objets spécifiques*, 2009. Porcelaine,  
60 × 60 × 3 cm chaque élément. Collection  
du Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.  
Photo: Michel Dubreuil.

## Gilbert Poissant

Céramiste de formation, sculpteur, muraliste, je puise mes sources de création dans le domaine du design et de l'architecture, explorant les enjeux que soulève la mixité des champs disciplinaires. Je fusionne les approches dans une œuvre protéiforme qui se moule aux avancées techniques de l'époque tout en réinventant un matériau très ancien, la céramique. Depuis vingt ans, j'utilise entre autres la céramique industrielle comme matière première que je transforme la plupart du temps par des procédés numériques. *Objets Spécifiques* se compose de cinq plaques de porcelaine où je reproduis la silhouette d'objets en bois que je collectionne. Les motifs noirs et bleus flottent entre reconnaissance et abstraction. Paul Bourassa, conservateur au Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, analyse ainsi le processus: «Il met [...] en évidence la nature aléatoire de la représentation: la spécificité des objets provient de leur caractère synthétique, plutôt que d'une quelconque correspondance avec une utilité reconnue» (2016).

## Amélie Proulx

*Les élisions immobiles* is a series of digital prints created as part of a project entitled *Porcelaine numérique* (Digital Porcelain), which centres on an oscillation between the two- and three-dimensional potentials of porcelain. Small porcelain shapes evoking parts of plants were thrown on the ground to be reshaped by the impact in a more unpredictable way. These shapes were then fired to fix their movement and scanned with a 2D scanner. The process of scanning them allowed me to enlarge the original forms and emphasize the movement generated by the impact of the shapes thrown on the ground.

*Les élisions immobiles* est une série d'impressions numériques faisant partie du projet *Porcelaine numérique*, qui présente la porcelaine comme un matériau oscillant entre deux dimensions. De petites formes en porcelaine représentant des plantes enregistrent l'effet imprévisible de leur chute au sol. Le mouvement de ces nouvelles formes est immobilisé par la cuisson à haute température. Subséquentement, un scanner 2D les enregistre de nouveau. Ce processus permet un agrandissement de l'image, mettant en relief le mouvement des formes sous l'impact de leur chute.

*Les élisions immobiles*, 2016. Impression numérique sur papier photorag, 68.6 × 52.1 cm.

