

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Janice Redman: *Rough Alchemy*

By Patricia L Lewy



Janice Redman, *Gorge*, 2019. Ceramic, metal, cotton and wax, 9 ½ x 5 x 5 inches.

The elevator takes forever, so you walk up four flights of stairs to Bookstein Projects, where Lori Bookstein and Joseph Bunge, her partner and gallery director, smile discreetly as you pass. In Bookstein’s “Gallery II,” a small, somewhat confined space, they’ve taken a leap of faith with the first New York showing of fabric artist Janice Redman. Nearly twenty modified found objects are arrayed horizontally on the wall, set on shelves, or placed on the floor. Encased, held: that was my experience of Redman’s art and of the space in which I viewed it. She wraps her objects with such intensity that I was startled and then riveted, simply staring in disbelief.

A specific object—a spoon or cup, say—acquires multiple formal identities through masking, burrowed deep into its wrapping. A teacup handle, for example, peers out from fabric wound round it and filled with batting, creating lumpy channels of material that are then stitched together. Embedded in the tactile softness of cotton, the necks, handles, and finials of utensils, rendered mute and unusable, project from

wrapped balls of swaddling, the residual batting still clinging in clumps like so much detritus. There are further disruptions of use value: the blade of a canoe paddle is perforated with holes, a chair is piled with “pillows”—sandbags painted, like the chair, in a graying noncolor. This stack presses on below the seat and is then surrounded by variously sized rocks of a similar color. The entire assemblage is violated by a large central hole, an opening that wreaks havoc on the very idea of “chair.”

Beyond aesthetic pleasure, Redman’s work sparks a frisson of recognition. Perhaps meaning comes situationally, from the small, rather narrow room, painted white, confining, staged, and populated by these various dramatis personae. In their muteness, each figure (the anthropomorphic tilt is unavoidable) whispers its secrets. Rather than project onto the object, the viewer instead senses presences within them, like revenants locked down by twists, coils, and stacks of tactility. Looped into their interstices, the viewer can only submit.

Redman was born in Huddersfield, England; her mother was a seamstress and lacemaker, her father an antique-clock restorer, trombonist, and apiarist. As the artist tells it, the endpoint of their work, whether mending or repairing, whether making sound or honey, was to restore functionality to the object. For Redman, the act of exalting inoperative remainders—whether leftover fabric, antique purses, rusted metal, or the desiccated body of a bee—and bringing them into new material entanglements is to define herself against two orderly and inexpressive parents: “Expressing emotions was discouraged and the ‘making’ of objects focused strictly on functionality.”¹



Janice Redman, *Foundation*, 2000. Sand, cotton, wool and wood, 60 x 18 x 18 inches.

To disrupt the object as Redman does is to disable its use value, a manifestation of dysfunction that may gesture toward her own physical limitations, the effects of multiple sclerosis. Her repetitive stitching, serial drilling, and ritualistic stacking—also manifesting in her frequent use of hexagonal cells, a motif lifted from wasps’ nests or beehives (Redman, like her father, raises bees)—are more than random modifications of an object. An antique change-purse drapes listlessly, otiose and devitalized, engorged to overflowing with wads of dehydrated bee carcasses and riveted with metal pins. A hanging, knotted, and zippered linear form bulges and spills its innards—bees again—each end spewing single-file, tightly stacked brown rings that suggest intestines. In a similar work, entwined tubes of fabric are suspended from both ends of the slide of a trombone (an artifact from Redman’s personal aural history) and are fitted to a gathering of horsehair strands.

The visceral quality of these works, their tactility and imaginative force, are literally given point by the projecting metal pins that Redman has thrust one by one into myriad bee carcasses, not merely to hold the shells of these once vital bodies in place but also to pierce and wound them. One imagines the movement of Redman’s hand in completing each pin prick as deliberate and

quiet, a dramatic contrast with the hammer blows the German ZERO artist Günther Uecker uses in his “overnailing” of chairs, televisions, and armatures stretched with linen—this despite the fact that Uecker too undoes functionality in the process of creating his menacing “nail fields.”

Part fetishistic Vodou ritual, part iconoclastic gesture, Redman’s protrusions and wrappings also suggest the surreal: one thinks of Meret Oppenheim’s furred teacup, saucer, and spoon of 1936, for example. But the sexualized sensation of sipping from genital hair seems far from Redman’s purpose, no matter the vulvic, phallic, or womblike associations her biomorphic assemblages draw out. Yayoi Kusama’s early-1960s soft sculptures—accumulations of phallic forms stitched from fabric, affixed to furniture frames in massed protrusions that mask their supports—also come to mind as precedents. Redman’s draping tubular shapes align, too, with Eva Hesse’s stitched, loosely hanging latex and cheesecloth pieces, as well as with Annette Messager’s hanging stuffed animals and other fabric forms. The artist Judith Scott, who stole objects and then wrapped them in yarn, created nearly life-sized fiber sculptures as a way to make sense of her environment. Being deaf, virtually nonverbal, and living with Down syndrome, Scott made sense of her world by filling gaps in her experience of it



Janice Redman, *Accounting*, 2020. Metal, honeybees, linen and cotton, 12 x 5 ½ x 3 ½ inches.

through randomly plucking objects from it and then wrapping them in yarn, fabric, and twine to create self-standing “sculptures.”² Redman too embeds and wraps in an allegorical enactment of possession and mastery—not, like Scott, as concealment, but rather to shift an object’s state from its active “use” form (to eat, to sit, to house) to a state of boundedness, of nonuse, of suspension.

Wrapping and darning, historically coded as feminine and accordingly denigrated as “craft,” are now seen as among the most potent aesthetic expressions of familial or personal histories and cultural lineages.³ As such, Redman’s swaddling processes and slackened forms read as restrained but tender statements amid the ebullience of contemporary handwork. Her practice, she has said, is a “personal ritual,” and therefore an intimate one.⁴ Each repeated stitch or twist of fabric, each pinprick or hole, feels deliberate, considered, purposeful, intentional. At her death, Hesse left a body of work that the art historian

Briony Fer has called “little experimental things,” or “studiowork.” They are, in Fer’s terms, evidence of Hesse’s essential act, “the process of making itself.”⁵ Redman, too, refers to her art practice as an expression of simply “making”: “I come from a family of ‘makers,’ and that is what I do: I make things.”⁶

1. Janice Redman, quoted in Susannah Elisabeth Fulcher, “Janice Redman Explores the Secret Life of Objects,” *Provincetown Independent*, August 18, 2021.
2. See Debra Schiff, “Information Behaviors of Deaf Artists,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 44–47. For Scott’s habit of “stealing” items from her immediate environment and wrapping them in yarn, see Barbara Lee Smith, “Judith Scott: Finding a Voice,” *Fiberarts* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 36–39.
3. See Anna C. Chave’s review of Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), in *Signs* 36, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 762–764.
4. Redman, quoted in Bookstein Projects press release for the current exhibition.
5. Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork*, exh. cat. (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2009), 19.
6. Redman, quoted in Bookstein Projects press release.

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