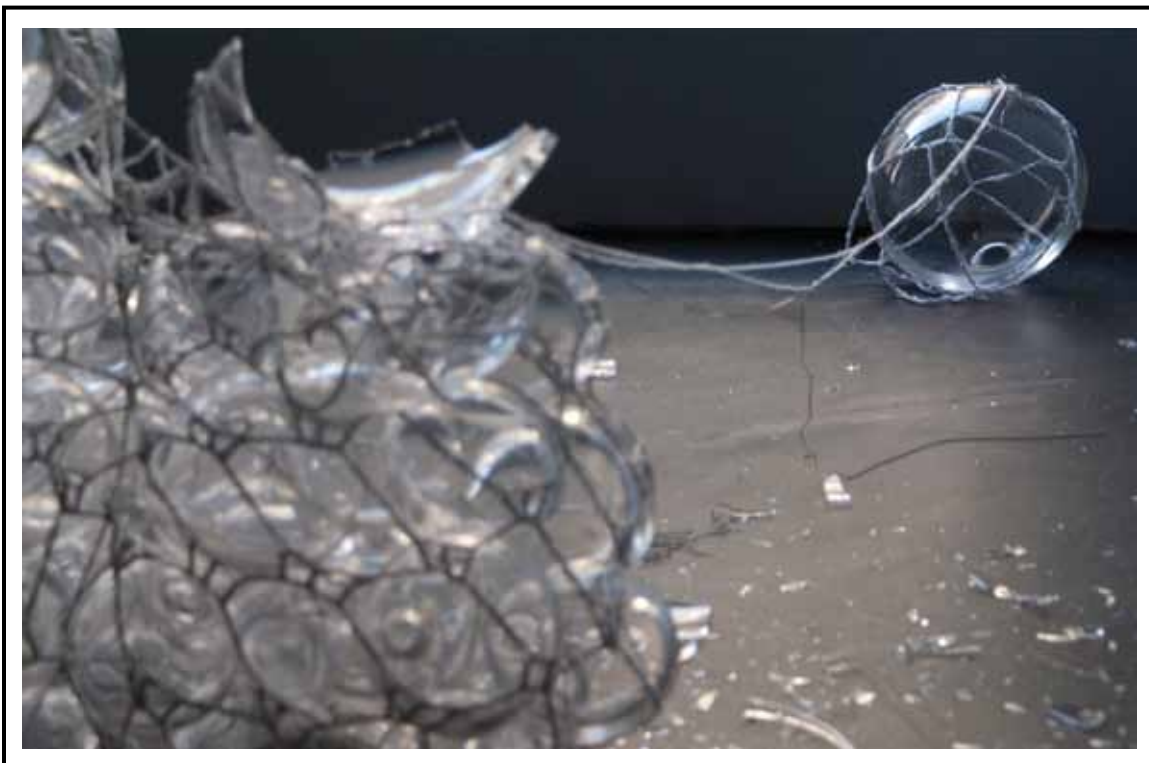


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**DEVOTION/DESTRUCTION: CRAFT INHERITANCE**

ALEXANDRA BEN-ABBA, ALYSSA CASEY, COLBY CLAYCOMB, CRYSTAL GREGORY,  
ELANA HERZOG, JOAN LURIE, MICHAEL MILANO, JOHN PAUL MORABITO,  
ARMITA RAAFAT, AND CHERYL ANN THOMAS

Curated by Rebecca Pristoop

January 17 – March 27, 2016

Opening reception: Sunday, January 17, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

The floor is strewn with broken glass and masses of torn yarn, clumped and unraveling. Something happened here. Something happened that transformed a contained structure—an evenly crocheted web with an assertive shape—into a menacing heap of razor-sharp scatter. *Disruption* happened.

*Disruption* (2011/2016), is a performance by **Alexandra Ben-Abba**, and it asserts the significance of the physical in the artistic process. The physical—conveyed by actions like crocheting and glass blowing—is inherent to artistic processes that employ craft materials. It carries tactility, sensuality, and intimacy and imprints the mark of the maker. It is this somatic relationship between artist, material, and process that uniquely binds creatives in the field of craft.

But what is the field of craft and what does it mean to be an artist in that field? Over the past 15 years, craft has received renewed attention in exhibition and criticism. The traditional delineation of craft apart from art—the former classified as an object or mode of creation employing technical skill while the latter afforded an aesthetic and conceptual identity in its own right—has been questioned, blurred, and reconsidered. Numerous voices have attempted to define or expand upon craft's signification by formulating terms and theories that hybridize or open up aesthetic fields for its inclusion. It has been deemed an aesthetic object with functionality as well as a process, a way of doing rather than a thing in and of itself.

Rather than attempt to define craft, *Devotion/Destruction: Craft Inheritance* exhibits artworks created as a result of formal investigations into the materials and methods historically affiliated with craft. Artists included in this

exhibition are those whose intense study of traditional means for producing functional objects, or whose extended relationship with such objects and ornamentation, has led them to a place of intimate inquiry into their chosen materials. The pieces presented—some built up through accumulation, others broken down to reveal or defy underlying construction—manifest as non-objective visualizations of the inherent materiality of each object. Including glass, wood, clay, paper, yarn, cloth, thread, metal, and mirror, the works in this exhibition transcend the form and function of their craft pedigree through a devotion to, and destruction of, inherited techniques.

The first technique any student of glass blowing learns is how to make a parison—a molded glass bubble. This bubble is the preliminary shape formed in the process of blowing cups, plates, bowls, and other objects. To ensure the functionality of the desired vessel, this bubble must have a thick bottom and a thin top. As a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, Alexandra Ben-Abba spent hours perfecting her glass bubbles. After accumulating innumerable translucent parisons unsuitable for functional use, she began using them to build abstract sculptures. Her interest in the static form of these sculptures—held in place by a net of crocheted yarn—quickly lost its grip as the solid yet fragile nature of glass and its reflective qualities engaged her artistic impulse. What resulted was a series of performances that undermined her original impetus for producing bubbles. In *Disruption*, Ben-Abba unravels the crocheted net holding the sculpture in shape and allows its glass innards to split and shatter to the floor. In so doing, process transforms from method into performance, and destruction is celebrated in the failure of function.

**Crystal Gregory** also considers glass's varied qualities. Approaching the medium from a material and feminist point of view, she explores how glass can enforce physical barriers while visually revealing the objects (or people) it protects. For *Devotion/Destruction*, Gregory links the paradoxical qualities of glass with those of lace, presenting their shared function as both insulator and exposer. A devoted student of fiber arts, Gregory made the 6 x 4 foot woven composition *It Did Not Take Much Moving To Come Along As Fast As We Were Going* (2015) from solder and glass. The metal solder seems to take on the pliability of cloth as it riffs upon a traditional leno lace pattern. Interspersed within this imperfect grid are glass panes that Gregory has placed in an attempt to define space. This exploratory hand-fashioning traverses the divide between a labor and material historically assigned to men and a process and texture traditionally affiliated with women. As viewers, we are left feeling the soft, yet rigid frays of solder and tracing the shadows and reflections of light manipulated by the glass.

The undulating ribbons of solder in Gregory's composition act as vestiges of material for viewers to somatically digest; they highlight the manual relation-



**Michael Milano** *Triangles*, 2014



**Armita Raafat** *Untitled*, 2012 (detail)

ship between artist and material shared by all work in the exhibition. In the case of **Michael Milano**, the artist's physical gestures can be found in the edges of fabric he leaves unfinished while investigating quilt-making practices. Quilting is the sewing together of three layers of fabric—backing (usually a plain piece of cotton cloth), batting (a cushy layer of padding), and top (a design of pieced fabrics). Milano isolates individual steps in this process to explore mathematical and visual permutations of pattern in a non-functional context. *Triangles* (2014) is limited to the processes of cutwork and piecing—the arrangement of ironed and cut pieces of fabric (a sewing needle never pierces the composition). *Verticals* (2014) focuses on sewing, and *Pleats* (2015) employs folding, ironing, and sewing. None of the works include batting. Simply by looking at the traces of thread left by Milano's hand, we are ushered into the intimate space between artist, material, and process.

Like Milano, **Armita Raafat's** physical gestures intersect with the mathematical. Her work tears through the traditional dictates of *muqarnas*, an Islamic architectural ornamentation dating to the 10th century. Conventional *muqarnas* practice prescribes layering small niches into tiers based upon a repetitive geometric formula. Raafat's process begins in this



**Elana Herzog** *Untitled (Chainlink Drapery Study)*, 2004 (detail)

way, as she casts multiple resin niches to arrange a preliminary framework. Then, through intuitive gestures, she dismantles the modular pattern and breaks apart the niches. Within the resultant gaps, Raafat layers materials ubiquitous to Islamic architecture—textile and mirror—and begins to unravel the symbolic meanings entangled within them. She also inserts mesh, plastic, and paint—materials foreign to traditional *muqarnas* practice—to reinforce and articulate the structure of her pieces and set them apart from their historical forbearers. In *Untitled* (2012), fragments of fabric obscured by a film of white paint weave into and around the broken *muqarnas*. By installing this piece on a freestanding wall and intertwining fragmented niches and fabric, Raafat denies any possibility for traditional function or decorative use. A similar investigation occurs in *Untitled* (2015), as Raafat plays upon mirror work, an art form particular to Iran for the ornamentation of interiors. Equipped with 2-millimeter panes of patterned mirror—fabricated by a craftsman in Isfahan, Iran's historical center of mirror work—Raafat breaks apart the symmetrical designs and inserts them into her deconstructed *muqarnas*.

Deconstruction is an arduous task and brings to the fore the significance of labor in the creation of art.



**John Paul Morabito** *Among the Many*, 2013 (video still)

In recent history, intellectual labor has been valued over manual labor, but art that combines the two, particularly art engaged with craft materials and practices, offers a way back to unifying body and mind. Since the mid-'90s, **Elana Herzog** has deconstructed manufactured textiles, becoming intimate with each article's material construction. For her, the revelation of foundational structures acts as a platform to expose fabricated compositions upon which she can insert her personal mark and thereby create a new object enmeshed with, and defining, the integrity of a wall. As she pulls apart commercially produced bedspreads, clothing, and carpets, she reverses the effects of the mechanization of people and economy, returning the industrial to the handmade. Her process begins by attaching fabric to a wall and tracing its pattern with heavy-duty staples. She then asserts her own presence by reinforcing select patterns in the fabric's weft, as exemplified by the brass-colored staples in the 2004 piece *Untitled (Chainlink Drapery Study)*. Herzog's practice is one of action and reaction, with the artist pulling threads and chips of paint from the wall and responding with the placement of more staples or the removal of more threads. Her artwork elicits a visceral response, as the fatigue of time and labor is carried in the denticulate surface and fissure of fabric and wall.

Time and labor are central to the work of **John Paul Morabito**, whose artistic practice also contributes to the reunification of body and mind. Naming labor as his material, Morabito uses thread and the rhythm of his body in relation to the mechanics of the loom to affirm his presence in the act of weaving. *Among the Many* (2013) records this labor in the form of a digital textile. Constructed of flickering video tiles organized in a 32 x 32 panel offset grid, the digital pattern references the diagonal twill of denim. Tracking labor through temporal distance, Morabito determined the duration of his textile by the time it took to weave all of the thread from a single bobbin. He recorded the 55:08 minutes of labor in 16 video frames, repeated them 64 times to make his digital grid, and layered the actual noise of the body's interaction with the loom to create the sound track. The hypnotic pulse of images and tonal hiss of the loom seem to somatically reproduce the tiring effects of labor in this embodied



**Joan Lurie** *Untitled*, 2015



**Colby Claycomb** *Soft Kiss of Sunrise*, 2014

fabrication process.

Melding the embodied with the industrial is a key feature of **Colby Claycomb's** work. His dexterity with the two can be traced to days working construction to earn a wage, while attending the University of California Davis to study art. Claycomb has firsthand knowledge of the labor required to accumulate materials in the creation of functional forms, and he still makes a living designing and fabricating wooden fixtures. This practical experience informs his awe and respect for wood's materiality, a sentiment he portrays in *Soft Kiss of*



**Cheryl Ann Thomas** *Violet*, 2014

*Sunrise* (2014). Numerous pieces of unfinished wooden stakes protrude from a sanded circular board, grain and splintering left untouched. The sharp irregularity has a seductive magnetism, evoking both danger and sensuality. In this piece, Claycomb provides the platform, and wood embodies its inherent materiality.

While mechanical innovations—like the sander Claycomb uses—enable makers to render more regularized and balanced shapes, the touch of the hand is never far removed. This relationship between the body and form is what first drew **Joan Lurie** to ceramics. Working as a photographer, she started shooting images from craft books, becoming attracted to the corporeality encased in each object. To gain mastery over her new material, Lurie began fashioning functional ceramic objects with handbuilding techniques, eventually moving to the potters' wheel. Enamored with clay's ability to support itself through shape and weight, she decided to create objects that capitalize on this material capability. Her now-signature porcelain pieces are built by joining two thrown forms into an enclosed hollow vessel, adding coils to the surface, and then cutting away and building up voids and masses. During this process, the pieces find their own structure, expanding into an exterior armature. After firing and glazing, the trace of Lurie's hand is forever embedded in the work, an expression of the relationship between maker and, in her own words, the "pleasure of working with the material to discover what it can do." *Untitled* (2015) is just one of Lurie's countless explorations into porcelain and a strong example of an artist working in conjunction with the inherent material possibilities of her chosen medium.

**Cheryl Ann Thomas** works with clay as well, and is equally fascinated with its material makeup and relationship to weight and gravity. For Thomas, however, form follows failure. Using porcelain, Thomas layers thin rope like strands into 5-foot columns, halting her hands-on manipulation once firing begins in the kiln. It is during firing that the porcelain asserts its materiality, collapsing into folds and bulges to catch its own weight under the force of gravity. Evidence of this can be traced in the sinking walls of *Violet* (2014), or the crumpled orifices



**Alyssa Casey** *Let go (per teresa a roma)*, 2012

of *Threefold* (2014).

The word "crumpled" usually elicits an image of a discarded piece of paper. But "crumpled" can be used to describe more than just paper (as in Thomas's work), and paper is more than just a surface for unsuccessful poems and sketches. As **Alyssa Casey** reminds us, paper begins its life as a pulp—an aqueous mixture of macerated plant fibers. This soggy matter has the potential to be sculpted, cast, turned into sheets of paper, or even left to find its own shape. For *Let go (per teresa a roma)*, (2012), Casey used a cotton/pine pulp to mold flat sheets of paper. She then hung these wet rectangular panels from a drying line on the top floor of a paper mill in

Spain, leaving one edge of each sheet unpinned. With open windows, and the pull of gravity, the damp sheets fell to the floor, finding their shape in relation to the rush of wind, the irregularity of ground, and the degree of dryness upon impact. The organic folds and crinkles in each of the five objects in the series speak to the when, where, and how of their genesis, visualizing their formation and engaging the viewer's somatic experience.

Moving beyond the functional, each work in this exhibition takes shape as an abstract investigation into craft practices. Through prolonged relationships with material and process, the artists in *Devotion/Destruction: Craft Inheritance* make visible the physicality of de/construction and the visceral effects of their actions. Through their work, they also carve a space for the re/consideration of the socio-historical constructs of traditional craft production. ■

— Rebecca Pristoop  
New York, NY, 2016

#### COMMENTS FROM THE CURATOR

My thoughts on craft materials and processes are greatly influenced by a number of books and essays. For an exploration of new approaches to understanding craft in contemporary art I recommend *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), edited by Maria Elena Buszek. For thoughtful explorations into the possible distinctions between art and craft, look to Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) and Kenneth R. Trapp and Howard Risatti, *Skilled Work: American Craft in the Renwick Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998). No consideration of craft would be complete without reading Glenn Adamson's book, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007). His approach considers craft as "an approach, an attitude, or a habit of action" as well as an idea that can be explored in philosophical and cultural terms. These are just a few suggestions from the rich collection of thoughts on craft finding renewed attention today.

#### BIOGRAPHY

**Rebecca Pristoop** is a New York-based curator and art historian. Her recent exhibitions include *To: Brooklyn, Sincerely: Soweto*, *Rabbithole*; *Fragile Territories*, *LaunchPad*; and *Traversing Tradition: Transformation in and of Contemporary Jewish Life*, The Jewish Theological Seminary. She has worked in curatorial departments at the Jewish Museum and The Museum of Modern Art. At the Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs, she organized *Counter Pointe: Perceiving the Body in Ballet Photography*. From 2010 to 2011, Pristoop ran the art and food salon **flatbreadaffair** from her Brooklyn apartment, where she curated site-specific installations, dinners, and panels. Pristoop is the recipient of a grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts and a research award from the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute. Her exhibitions have been featured in *Architect's Newspaper* and *Yediot America*. She received her MA in art history from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

## CHECKLIST

### ALEXANDRA BEN-ABBA

*DISRUPTION*, 2011/2016  
Glass, reflective yarn  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

### ALYSSA CASEY

*LET GO (PER TERESA A ROMA)*, 2012  
Handmade cotton/pine paper  
#1 15 1/2 x 15 x 3 1/2 inches  
#2 17 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 3 1/4 inches  
#3 12 x 13 x 8 1/2 inches  
#4 18 x 15 x 4 inches  
#5 28 x 11 x 1 3/4 inches  
Overall installation dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist

### COLBY CLAYCOMB

*SOFT KISS OF SUNRISE*, 2014  
Lumber, plywood  
40 x 46 x 58 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### CRYSTAL GREGORY

*IT DID NOT TAKE MUCH MOVING TO COME ALONG AS FAST AS WE WERE GOING*, 2015  
Solder, glass  
72 x 48 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### ELANA HERZOG

*UNTITLED (CHAINLINK DRAPERY STUDY)*, 2004  
Chenille bedspread, metal staples in reinforced, painted drywall panel  
100 x 86 x 3 inches  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo Credit: Cathy Carver

*UNTITLED (PURPLE JACKET)*, 2008  
Woman's jacket, metal staples in reinforced, painted drywall panel  
41 x 48 x 2 inches  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo Credit: Etienne Frossard

### JOAN LURIE

*UNTITLED*, 2012  
Porcelain with black underglaze  
21 x 21 x 2 3/4 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*UNTITLED*, 2014  
Porcelain with black underglaze  
21 1/2 x 13 x 12 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*UNTITLED*, 2015  
Porcelain with white matte glaze  
19 x 15 x 15 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### MICHAEL MILANO

*TRIANGLES*, 2014  
Cotton broadcloth, canvas  
22 x 21 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*VERTICALS*, 2014  
Cotton broadcloth, thread, canvas  
30 x 30 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*PLEATS*, 2015  
Canvas, thread  
32 x 52 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### JOHN PAUL MORABITO

*AMONG THE MANY*, 2013  
Video  
55 min. 8 sec.  
Courtesy of the artist

### ARMITA RAAFAT

*UNTITLED*, 2012  
Fabric, plastic, resin, paint, mirror  
96 x 38 x 8 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*UNTITLED*, 2015  
Plastic, resin, paint, mirror, cardboard, pigment, sumi-e ink  
45 x 7 x 21 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

### CHERYL ANN THOMAS

*THREEFOLD*, 2014  
Porcelain  
22 1/2 x 21 x 23 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*VIOLET*, 2014  
Porcelain  
19 x 21 x 18 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

Cover: **Alexandra Ben-Abba**, *Disruption*, 2011/2016 (detail)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I thank the artists. It is their work that inspires me to look, feel, and consider more deeply. Crystal Gregory in particular has been a true partner. Our ongoing conversations transformed a nascent idea into a fully articulated exhibition. I thank friends and family for enduring endless babble in my attempt to articulate that *thing* about craft materials and Dr. Maurice Berger for giving me the confidence to weave a coherent essay. Jeremy Lehrer edited my text with the precision required to thread a needle, for that I am most grateful. Thanks go to Deborah Rising for designing the brochure. Finally, I wish to thank the staff of Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs—David, Noah, and Karen Dorsky, and Chelsea Cooksey, for their willingness to field all questions and their affable and knowledgeable support in the organization of this exhibition.



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