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The State of Sculpture: Craft + Reclaimed Land Art + Contested Monuments



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Clementine Keith-Roach:
Lost Object, 2022

THING THEORY

Four sculptors discuss the forces that shape objects—and the ethics and implications of remaking them.

Gordon Hall, Abigail Lucien, Lydia Ourahmane, and Michael Rakowitz

Moderated by Mira Dayal

GORDON HALL The thing I love about sculpture—which is also maddening and makes it difficult—is that it puts you into such a close relationship with physical stuff, with things and weight and messes. I can get to know the world through making objects, remaking them, learning the history or physical being of things. With my students, I talk about sculpture less as a category of artwork than as way of approaching art-making in general: it could involve writing or speaking, as well as any kind of making that has to do with material intimacy.

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ When I was in art school, sculpture offered a kind of multiplicity: people were doing performance art, video art—there wasn't a single word that designated what everyone was up to. This was the early '90s, when there was less categorization. I really like, Gordon, your idea that sculpture involves a hybridization that makes what we do as artists bigger than just sculpture. And that's been the case for a long time. My sculpture teacher in undergrad used to paraphrase a Nam June Paik remark from the '60s: If Michelangelo were alive today, he'd be a video artist. It was an argument for video being a form of sculpture, enabling you to see all different sides of something.



Gordon Hall: *Sash*, 2021, colored pencil on paper, 6 by 25 by 5¼ inches.

ABIGAIL LUCIEN Sculpture is also a way to subvert and confuse this language that we think we know. Many of us start our work with something that surrounds us, but as we pick it apart and change it, we open up how we understand our proximity to that thing, and how that thing can teach us something.

LYDIA OURAHMANE When you bring objects into an exhibition space, or you make something that you force other people to contend with, it's out of your control. You, the object, and the viewer are at each other's mercy. Objects and materials have their own effects, and they will say what they will, beyond you. I see myself as more of a medium than a speaker.

HALL I'm also very curious about how static objects can perform. Because I came to sculpture from dance, I think about objects and bodies in a choreographic sense. When I put together a show, I think about the relationships *between* the objects in addition to the objects themselves, both spatially and temporally. When viewers move through the room, what do they see first? What do they see when they turn around to leave? And I like to balance more abstract and less abstract objects. How do you read something that feels very unnamable and formal when you see it next to something recognizable, like a chair, or how do



A can of date syrup, made in Lebanon, that Michael Rakowitz purchased at Sahadi's in Brooklyn in the early 2000s.

you read a chair differently when you see it next to something that you can't name as easily?

I'm interested in how objects, especially useful-seeming but ambiguous objects, teach us different ways of seeing, especially how to see bodies. This has a lot to do with reading and naming gender, but I don't want it to end there. It's a more expansive issue about how to transform our own perceptual capacities to match our ideological commitments.

OURAHMANE And there is the question of responsibility, of what you are choosing to give time and space to. What do you deem worthy to recall? Who does that serve? Where do you stand? When I was at Goldsmiths, I wrote my dissertation on illegal immigration from Algeria to Spain, because so many of my family members, friends, and other people I knew were planning to make that journey, or had already tried and been caught. What struck me was the narrativization of this as a "phenomenon," which was completely dehumanizing. It was no way to actually understand the reality of the situation. Several of my projects stem from that research: how do I make these narratives felt again, or how can I give them a body?

RAKOWITZ That makes me think of my ongoing project *The invisible enemy should not exist* [2007–], which is a commitment to "reappear" the more than 7,000 objects that remain missing following looting of the national museum of Iraq during the United States-led invasion in 2003. I've started to make life-size substitutes for the objects that were lost from the museum, using databases online. A lot of them are small enough to put in your pocket.

The event that made me want to reconstitute those objects relates to another project [*RETURN*, 2004–], where I reopened my Iraqi grandfather's import-export business with the sole purpose of attempting to import Iraqi dates to the US for the first time in over 40 years. That project was inspired by a visit to Sahadi Importing Company in Brooklyn. The owners are from Syria and Lebanon, and they fled Iraq for the United States a couple decades before my grandparents, who arrived in the 1940s. Sahadi's is where my grandparents went to get their spices, looking for substitutes for those they had left behind.

I saw this can of date syrup there that said **PRODUCT OF LEBANON**. The label was mostly in Arabic. My mother had a freezer full of date syrup that my grandfather had made by hand the same way he did back home in Baghdad. He died in 1975, and we used the last of it around 1985. My mom started to complain that the only brands of date syrup she could find were made in California or listed Israel as the country of origin. It was always more filtered, and she said that they are literally trying to whiten us through the date syrup.

At the counter, Charlie Sahadi told me, "Your mother is going to love this; it's from Baghdad." The date syrup is processed in the Iraqi capital and driven over the border in large plastic bags to Syria, where it gets put into unmarked cans and then taken to Lebanon to be labeled. All through the 1990s and up until that moment in 2004, this was the way that Iraqi companies circumvented UN sanctions. So it was almost like this object was too terrified to tell me where it was from, almost as if political pressures had started to carve the object.

I have always thought of that object, even though it's a readymade, as resulting from a sculptural process. I was trained as a stone carver, and I've always loved that the etymology of the word "sculpture" goes back to the Latin *sculpere*, which means "to carve." To me, this suggests that you can visit all kinds of things onto an object to change it. The political pressures exerted on that date syrup changed it from something quotidian into something that was suddenly holy for me and my family.

OURAHMANE Quite a few of my works have also evolved through being moved from point A to point B. One undergraduate work [*The Third Choir*, 2014] involved moving 20 oil barrels from Algeria to the United Kingdom. At the time, I'd heard it was illegal to move artworks out of the country, so suddenly, just by trying to make this happen, I was confronted with the bureaucracy of that passage. The project ended up being an outrageous feat involving the Algerian ministry of culture, the police, shipping companies ...

and it required 934 documents to move those 20 empty barrels. Beyond the paperwork, there were lots of bodies involved – me, my dad, all of his friends, people who did us favors, people at the customs.

It was a revelation to me in terms of what an object can activate: to move these objects, we had to get the law changed. All of this matter that is produced, all these human interactions, all that is concealed and tightly held in the objects themselves because they’ve actually lived through that process: they carry that weight. I remember the first time I showed the work, I thought, how do I convey the tremendous effort that it took to make that happen? I would like to think that even audience members who weren’t aware of the entire process were still able to feel something; I like to think that the narrative can exist in multiple spaces or unfold through hearsay. The work becomes a universe anybody can enter.

HALL It’s easy to think language is trustworthy, that it explains things, or explains them away, and that creates a power imbalance between language and artworks. But I feel it’s possible to have language and objects be in a more mutual relationship, where you are not talking *about* the work but speaking from it or with it or to it. The old hierarchy stems partly from the fact that we don’t respect *things* as having agency and lives, as Lydia was saying, and that is why we destroy the planet we live on. We trust ideas and words, and somehow this “immaterial realm” is more valuable than the physical stuff that is all around us and under us, that supports us and enables us to live – including our own bodies, with which we have very fraught relationships. So the hierarchical relationship between language and objects mirrors the hierarchical relationship between ideas and things, which I think sculpture is uniquely equipped to take on.

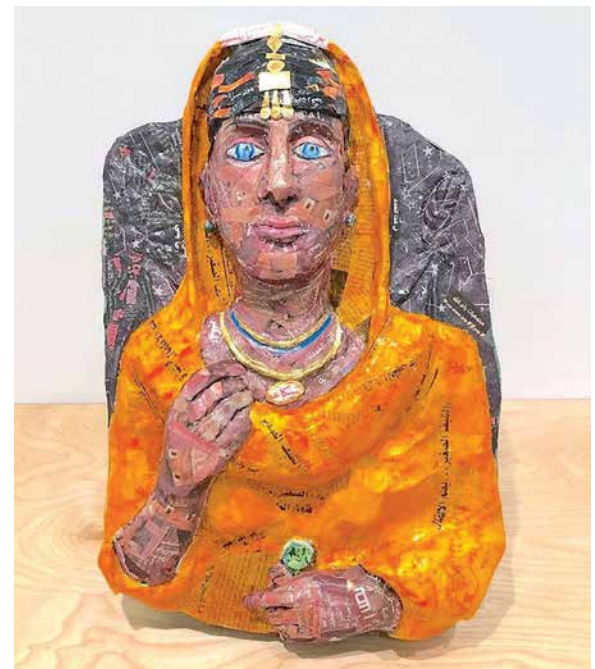
Objects from Michael Rakowitz’s series *May the obdurate foe not be in good health, 2011–*, Arabic newspapers, food packaging, cardboard, and museum labels.

LUCIEN I totally agree. I have a deep love for language, but I talk to my students all the time about trying to put words to your own thoughts and feelings before running to the didactics to understand something. Often, as viewers, we are put in a sort of consumer space, where the more easily we can connect an artwork to words, the more we value it. But I am interested in the opposite, in the complication of literacy. What happens when there are many different types of views? Sculpture has the ability to make you reconsider what you thought was true.

In June 2020, I was working on one of my recent installations [*Holding Your Name Like Butter in Your Palm, 2021*]. It was just a few days past George Floyd’s murder and a few days after my father passed from the coronavirus, and I was thinking about how intimate groups move toward healing and how that ripples into larger waves of local or international grief and processing. I stopped conceiving time as a linear thing and instead saw it as a constantly revolving loop.

That brought me to the first magic objects I encountered, things that were in the bathroom or part of daily care, as when you’re having your hair done by your mother or your aunt. Cocoa butter, for example, is a healing material that can make a scar disappear by daily rubbing. It contains fatty extracts from the cocoa bean, the same bean used to make chocolate. It has an incredibly pungent smell that is quite memory-triggering for those who have experienced it daily.

I’m interested in how we hold space for processing grief and healing, whether in a private or public space, at a time – maybe always in America – when Black individuals have to be concerned with safety. I imported something like 400 pounds of cocoa butter and made it into blocks cast directly from the foundation of SculptureCenter in New York. This



Courtesy Michael Rakowitz



Photo: Andy Keate/Courtesy Chisenhale Gallery; Courtesy Lydia Ourahmane

was a way of building out Black space, specifically a space for rest, within an institution. The installation measures time by the gradual evaporation of the cocoa butter into the air, which is inhaled by folks within that space and then carried out.

OURAHMANE I really love that, Abigail – moving through or even metabolizing material as the ultimate form of mourning.

LUCIEN There’s a way to understand the materials we work with so closely as always time-based. Always living, if that’s not too generous a word.

RAKOWITZ When I was working as a shopkeeper, waiting for those dates to be shipped from Iraq, the empty store made me think about the empty museum, and its objects coming back as ghosts. Like any good ghosts, the objects would not appear the same way they appeared in life.

When you think about why a museum is looted, you realize it’s due to the existence of a market. The people who entered the museum during this desperate

Left, a gold tooth from Lydia Ourahmane’s installation *In the Absence of Our Mothers*, 2015–18, X-ray scan, text, and two gold teeth.

Right, Lydia Ourahmane: *The Third Choir*, 2014, 20 oil barrels imported from Algeria, radio transmitter, and Samsung phones.

time of being bombarded yet again, after decades in which Iraq was repeatedly decimated, realized that objects from the past can be liquidated to ensure the present and the future.

LUCIEN I have spent so much time thinking about mourning as celebration, death as birth, and the way things are held within time and material. I’ve gotten into research on hermetic knots and different processes of measuring time, pre-calendar. Sailors would tie knots every night to mark how long they had been on a voyage. Then there’s the idea of tying a knot around your finger to remember something. I started casting rebar in silicone and then casting that malleable silicone into permanent knots in bronze. If you insert a memory while tying this knot, can you make that memory also permanent and unwavering, because of object permanence? That belief, or the intersection between faith and mythology, is really deep in my practice and the way that I think about existing in the world.



Sculptures from Abigail Lucien's installation *Holding Your Name Like Butter in Your Palm*, 2021, cocoa butter, bronze, sea salt, chicken feet, matches, soy wax, acrylic, vinyl and steel; at SculptureCenter, New York.



Photo Kyle Knodell/Courtesy SculptureCenter, New York (3)

HALL All our work involves almost excessive acts of care for objects. It feels like the object is partly a proxy for caring about other things, because the world is filled with stuff that we don't care about, or can't care about. I have to pick particular objects that I want to lavish care and attention on, so that I can bring more of that to things that aren't artworks.

One of my series of sculptures involved creating replicas of various found objects – small, functional, handmade things that came into my life in accidental ways. I considered these acts of replication to be expressions of attraction to the objects, much like the desire to become familiar with the body of someone you like.

Then I encountered a certain bench, first in a photograph, and replicated it for a project [*The Number of Inches Between Them*, 2018]. For years, my work has been about furniture and seating and things that hold up other things or support our bodies. That is why I was drawn to the bench initially. Then I saw it in person in rural New Jersey, and things got a bit more complicated. It turns out Dennis Croteau made the bench; he was a little-known artist who died of AIDS in 1989. Included in the show was a letter I wrote him asking his permission to re-create the bench – which was obviously undeliverable. The piece touched on lots of things that had been threads in my work for a long time – support, vulnerability, infrastructure. It



Above, Gordon Hall: *Graphite Covered Leg*, 2020, cast concrete and graphite, 2 by 8½ by 27½ inches.

Below, Gordon Hall: *The Number of Inches Between Them*, 2017, cast concrete bench and performance.

also evoked the way the AIDS crisis affected who our teachers and mentors were. The history of abstraction is really skewed for a lot of reasons, but part of it is that so many people who might have told a different story are no longer alive.

LUCIEN This ties back to the idea of sculpture as an open method rather than one defining practice. I wonder if this attention, this depth, shows me the capacity that I have to care.

HALL When you're a kid, grown-ups tell you not to be materialistic, right? Of course that makes sense, not using consumer goods as a hierarchical symbolic language. But it doesn't feel like a complete answer, because are we supposed to not care about stuff at all? How *can* we care about it? Is there a materialism that is not materialistic? That idea is at the heart of all these different modes of caring.

RAKOWITZ There's something really interesting here about usefulness. All our works engage with objects that have been made for a certain purpose. In ancient Greece, art – referred to as *technē* – was really about methods for bringing something forth into the world. In the more recent history of sculpture, Duchamp's readymades render useful things useless. So I am interested in the many transmutations we sculptors perform in our practices; it isn't just a physical alteration, but a kind of transubstantiation. ●

