

IMMERSIVE MATERIALITY

Everyday Material Used in Diverse Labour-intensive Processes
Creates Site-responsive Environments

By Etty Yaniv

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Today's ubiquitous use of found everyday material to enhance an immersive experience in Installation Art traces back to Dadaist notions of collage and the "ready-made". This is well reflected in the work of Julie Schenkelberg, Tamara Kostianovsky, Lorrie Fredette, Samuelle Green, and Sabrina Barrios, who through diverse labour-intensive processes create site-responsive environments made of "ready-made" objects and humble material such as paper or fabric, while underscoring socio-political themes. It is not by chance that all five artists are women. They inherit a rich legacy of Installation Art by preceding women artists who created formidable three-dimensional forms born of discarded material through experimental processes. For instance, Eva Hesse, whose abstract yet sensual structures made of rope, latex, and cheesecloth are considered by many art scholars as staples in the explorations of process and post-minimalism. Or the Italian artist Marisa Merz, whose installations at the recent retrospective "Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space" at the Met Breuer in New York brilliantly incorporated Arte Povera's signature investigation of throwaway materials. At age 90, Merz was revealed to be "the queen of the male dominated Arte Povera," as Roberta Smith put it in the 26 January 2017 edition of *The New York Times*.

Julie Schenkelberg readily acknowledges her debt to women installation artists of the past. "I couldn't do what I do now had a lot of women not opened up the art world with their installations forty plus years ago," she says. That said, her elaborate spaces have affinity with Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*, an immersive environment created between the two world wars, in which he transformed his studio and family home in Hanover, Germany into an abstract walk-in collage composed of found objects, grottoes and columns. In her installations, Schenkelberg, who was born in Cleveland and lives in Detroit, also uses a wide array of found objects she has scavenged from dilapidated neighbourhoods, drawing upon ruins of her hometown and other cities she to which she has personal connection. Her elaborate assemblage process includes raw material such as metal from condemned buildings, chairs from scrap yards, and vintage mouldings from homes, which are altogether associated with past industrial history, its fall, and the beauty of the surrounding landscape. In addition, Schenkelberg also incorporates plaster casts of her family's possessions, silverware, books, jewelry and windows, which coalesce in her installations into an imaginative and open-ended personal tale within the broader drama. With a strong sense of place and a flair for the theatrical,





Schenkelberg assembles layer upon layer of such discarded materials to create intensely visceral sites. Ranging in scale from big rooms to tiny niches, her tactile environments invite the visitor to enter, get up close, and engage with the narrative. Overall, her installations transport us to a sacred place, an altar, a sarcophagus, a funerary ship. The domestic, the industrial, and the otherworldly merge into one environment where traces of time leave evident marks, assembled with a strong sensibility to form and colour: burnt wood from a deserted home, a cast spoon from the artist's family kitchen, and a window frame from a ruined building, which transform into a new existence.

Like Schenkelberg, Tamara Kostianovsky assembles in her immersive installations found objects that are loaded with biographical intimacy within a wider political context. Kostianovsky mainly uses discarded clothes and upholstery as a surrogate for the body, "a type of second skin", as she puts it. Kostianovsky, who was born in Israel, grew up in Buenos Aires, and lives in Brooklyn, says that her practice originated at a time when she was awaking to the work of women artists who used their bodies as "material". In her installations, she groups sculptures representing a unified subject matter: a row of hanging meat carcasses hooked to metal chains, clusters of dead birds descending in mid-air, tree stumps scattered on a wooden gallery floor. Each of her forms is made of fabric fragments which she meticu-

lously assembles to form a rich, bold, and highly detailed sculpture, both terrifying and exquisite. She is particularly drawn to the notion of the aestheticized torn body in collage, something she sees as unprecedented until the emergence of the form in the 20th century, as a response to the carnage of the Great War. This fascination with the horror and beauty related to the flesh is clearly reflected throughout her whole work, starting from her earlier meat series, in which she depicted naturalistic beef carcasses out of her own clothes as a reflection on the era of military regimes in South America, when she was growing up. In 2015, when she placed an online order for birds' feathers, to her great surprise, instead of feathers, she received a dead pheasant. Both horrified by the violent scene and smitten by its beauty, she started transforming fragments of discarded clothing and upholstery fabric into hauntingly beautiful images of what appear to be taxidermy fowls with vibrant colours. Recently, after her father's death, she focused on severed trees made of her father's clothes to honour his love of nature and gardening in a context of environmental concerns.

Lorrie Fredette is also preoccupied with human impact on nature, but her entry point is through the themes of disease and ways that human health and nature intersect. Fredette also works with multitudes of sculptural forms, but while Kostianovsky's sculptures are each formed as unique and their sensuality can be readily associated in colour and