# Craft Contemporary

Betye Saar, *Red Clock Tower*, 2011
Mixed media assemblage, 27.75 x 13.25 x 7 in (70.5 x 33.7 x 17.8 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
Photo. Robert Wedemeyer © Betye Saar

## *MAKING TIME*

Tanya Aguiñiga, Uzumaki Cepeda, Beatriz Cortez, Keiko Fukazawa, Katherine Gray, Gronk, Sherin Guirguis, Betye Saar, Timothy Washington, and Ann Weber

# *MAKING TIME*

*Making Time* celebrates the relationships cultivated between artists and Craft Contemporary over the past decade. The group exhibition includes Tanya Aguiñiga, Uzumaki Cepeda, Beatriz Cortez, Keiko Fukazawa, Katherine Gray, Gronk, Sherin Guirguis, Betye Saar, Timothy Washington, and Ann Weber. All of the artists featured in *Making Time* have been pivotal over the course of the museum's history— not only in terms of their artistic importance in Craft Contemporary's exhibition history, but also as individuals who have challenged the institution to think in different ways.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be taking a look at how exactly these artists have influenced Craft Contemporary's viewpoint. These will be divided into three general categories: **1) Material History, 2) Transforming Space**, and **3) Postcolonial Critique.** Together, they have challenged us to reconsider how we interpret and connect to our past, present, and future.

## MATERIAL HISTORY

Ann Weber (*Ann Weber: Love and Other Audacities*, 2011)

Keiko Fukazawa (*Made in China: New Ceramic Works by Keiko Fukazawa*, 2016)

Katherine Gray (*Katherine Gray: As Clear as the Experience*, 2018)

As a craft institution, materiality lies at the heart of our approach. Part of this is because craft has traditionally been defined by its materials: 1) ceramic, 2) fiber, 3) glass, 4) metal, and 5) wood. But materiality is so much more than that. Embedded in each material is a story—a long line of generational knowledge, a system of beliefs and ideologies, and a community built around it. "Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users. Man is not only *homo sapiens* or *homo ludens*, he is also *homo faber*, the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts. Thus objects also make and use their makers and users," puts material culture scholars Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton in their book, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self.*[1]

Ann Weber, Keiko Fukazawa, and Katherine Gray are all artists who delve deep into their materials, investigating their histories and subverting their forms in order to question the values, uses, meanings associated with each material.

[1] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/224927533_The_Meaning_of_Things_Domestic_Symbols_and_the_Self

*Katherine Gray: As Clear as the Experience*, 2018

## GLASS

*"I use a material that we don't generally 'see': glass. It is often flawlessly clear and colourless, hence invisible in that regard, but also it can be so ubiquitous and banal that it does not register in our psyches either. It is a material that allows us unparalleled connectivity (via smart phones and fibre optics) yet also serve to separate us. To my mind, these two polarities are what set this material apart from so many others, and one of the reasons that I feel compelled to keep working with it as an artistic medium. It is both present and absent, known and unknown, and vacillating between a state of mundane familiarity and otherworldly perfection." – Katherine Gray*

Using the contradictory nature of glass—fragile and durable, liquid and solid, otherworldly and mundane—*Katherine Gray: As Clear As the Experience* urges viewers to see glass anew and experience the medium beyond its everyday function. "Although glass is usually transparent, it is never 'clear'; it is always tinted by the intangible emotions and experiences embedded in the material," says curator Holly Jerger. What materials or objects can you think of that might seem invisible, but hold important memories, emotions, and experiences for you?

*video* (Craft Contemporary)
*video* (American Craft Council)
*video* (Corning Museum of Glass)

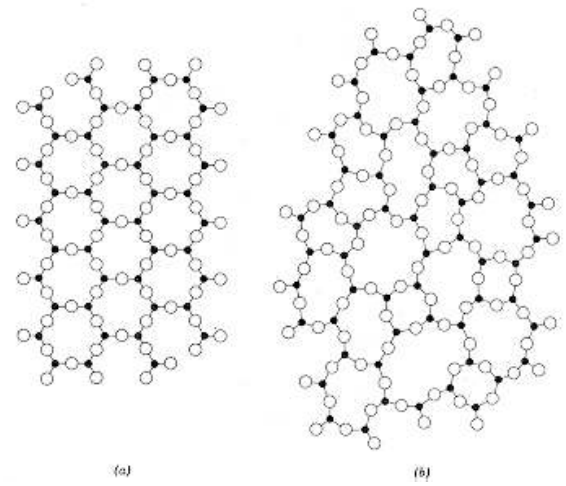
## Questions:

Q. Did you see the show? If so, what did you think?
Q. What other materials do we generally not see?

## Did you know?

Did you know that people have been arguing over centuries about whether glass is a liquid or a solid? As evidence, some point to the observation that glass in old windows was thicker at the bottom than at the top. However, this is because glass panes used to be handmade, and its irregular thickness reflected the process of glassblowing. Windows were installed with the thicker and heavier side of the glass on the bottom.

Glass is actually an amorphous solid, a solid that is defined by its lack of structured atoms and molecules. Like a liquid, the atoms that form glass are not arranged in any regular order. But, like a solid, glass is also stable and doesn't flow at room temperature. Other kinds of amorphous solids include rubber, plastic, and gel.



This diagram illustrates the difference between **crystalline solids (a)** and **glass (b)**. As you can see, the molecules and atoms of the crystalline solid on the left are arranged in a highly regular pattern, like a lattice. Glass, on the right, features a random structure instead.

## Resources:

Corning Museum of Glass (Origins of Glassmaking)
Corning Museum of Glass (35 Centuries of Glass)
Corning Museum of Glass (Glass in Nature)
Blown Away, a Netflix series pitting glassblowers against glassblowers in a reality TV competition, where artist Katherine Gray serves as the hotshop's Tim Gunn ;)

*Made in China: New Ceramic Works by Keiko Fukazawa*, 2016

## PORCELAIN

Porcelain is one of the earliest globalized commodities and objects of transcultural exchange. Highly prized by the West, porcelain began to be shipped all over the world along the Silk Road starting in the 10th century and played a central role in the cross-cultural exchange between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Thanks to their global distribution, Chinese porcelain influenced virtually all ceramic traditions they touched—and in turn, was also influenced by the tastes of the varied markets to which they catered. The demand was so great that a number of European factories started to produce their own versions in imitation of Chinese porcelain, giving rise to what would become known as *chinoiserie*, a European style of decorative arts that sought to imitate and interpret Chinese and other East Asian artistic traditions. It is important to note that, though inspired by Asia, chinoiserie was a fundamentally Orientalizing endeavor that depicted less about Asia and more about the West's fantasy of the exotic Other.

As you can see, the very history of porcelain is one of tension between the East and the West. Japanese born and L.A.-based artist Keiko Fukazawa draws upon this rich history of intercultural exchange and turns it on its head in her ceramic practice. After visiting Jingdezhen, a city historically renowned for its production of porcelain as "white as jade, as thin as paper, and as bright as a mirror," Fukazawa incorporated its traditions to deconstruct and recombine the techniques, forms, and symbols of both the East and the West to create something that is utterly hybrid. Plastic bottles are remade in porcelain, painted with motifs from classical Chinese landscapes; elsewhere, the same landscapes are dotted with logos of luxury goods and corporate brands. In juxtaposing the art forms—and the values they embody—of the East and West, Fukazawa's work comments on the gaps, contradictions, and complexities between communism and capitalism, reflecting the shifts in both Eastern and Western cultures as they confront their similarities and differences.

(cont.)

## Questions:

Q. Did you see the show? If so, what did you think?
Q. Can you think of other materials that carry a loaded history—i.e. cotton, indigo, diamonds, etc.?

## Learn more:

Craft Contemporary catalogue of *Made in China: New Ceramic Works by Keiko Fukazawa*
Khan Academy – Porcelain (Production & Export), Porcelain (Decoration)
Met Museum – East and West: Chinese Export Porcelain

*Ann Weber: Love and Other Audacities*, 2011

## CARDBOARD

*video* (KQED)
*catalog* (Craft Contemporary store)

Dumpster diving on her way to work, Ann Weber turns to the camera and says, "I hope that the garbage truck hasn't beat us to it." Why is the artist scrounging around local dumpsters, you might ask? To collect cardboard, of course. After working in clay under notable California Funk artist Viola Frey, Weber turned to one of the most ubiquitous materials available—cardboard—for its ability to offer new possibilities of scale, accessibility, and flexibility.

Cardboard itself is a material full of nuance, ranging from thin, bendable, and almost fabric-like to rough, corrugated, and structural. The fact that it's everywhere (admit it, you probably have at least one or two cardboard boxes this very second) means that it's also one of the most accessible, oftentimes even free, materials you can find. This everyday quality makes a perfect foil against the rarified materials of "high art" (a strategy used by artists such as Picasso and Warhol), positioning cardboard as a material naturally suited to comment on the modern world of consumerism. A constant presence in collage, found objects, assemblage, and junk art, the use of cardboard embodies their ethos of scrounging and repurposing overlooked objects in order to find meaning, and beauty, in the quotidian.

## Questions:

Q. Did you see the show? If so, what did you think?
Q. What material do you think is undervalued?

# REFLECTIONS

## Activity:

Look at the objects around you and pick one up. What does it feel like? What is it made out of? Imagine the journey of each material—not just from extraction to manufacturing, but also how those processes have been created over time. Whose knowledge is built upon?

What does the object mean to you? If someone were to look at the same object, a hundred years from now, what might they infer about it? If it could speak, what do you think it would say? How does its use and meaning change according to the different perspectives?

## Why has materiality often been so overlooked?

Part of the reason why materiality has often been so overlooked is because there is an implicit hierarchy of the senses. Professor Constance Classen writes that, historically, "men had mastery of the 'higher' senses of sight and hearing, [while] women were linked with the 'lower' senses of touch, taste, and smell."[2] Indeed, women were not the only ones associated with the 'lower' senses, but also immigrant populations, lower classes, and other marginalized groups. These distinctions were reinforced through Enlightenment principles, where sight and hearing came to be associated with logic, reason, and order, while touch, taste, and smell were markers of emotion, vulgarity, and disorder.

Art reflects this hierarchy, whether consciously or not. Of course, art is primarily a visual medium—though oftentimes to the exclusion of other senses. The "white cube" presentation that is conventional to practically every museum and gallery is one that presents a sterile, hermetic, and "neutral" vision of art that privileges the mind over body. However, by shutting out the 'lower senses', white cubes also shut out the people associated with the lower senses, along with the art that they make.

Curator and critic Jim Drobnick argues that "Countering the primacy of the visual opens up the museum to behaviors, activities and identities that are not necessarily Western, privileged and masculine, and which fail to produce collectible artifacts. Marginalized, private or everyday experiences, such as those typically associated with women's domestic labor, can be given distinction and value."[3] We 100% agree!

For more on the fascinating history of the senses, check out *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, edited by David Howes (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005).

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[2] Constance Classen, "The Witch's Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2005), 74.
[3] Jim Drobnick, "Volatile Effects," in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2005), 272.

## Touch:

Some of the most affecting and devastating stories of the COVID-19 pandemic revolve around touch—of those who are not able to hug, kiss, or just hold the hand of their loved one. These stories highlight how important touch is to our psyche and overall wellbeing. Even though it's the first sense to develop, it's one that we don't often think about.

Learn more about the role that touch plays in our lives in BBC's podcast titled "Anatomy of Touch," presented by Claudia Hammond. Over a five-part series of episodes, Hammond explores questions around touch hunger, how different cultures perceive touch, digital touch, and other pressing questions in our age of social distancing.

## Link:

Anatomy of Touch, BBC

## One last parting thought (and book recommendation):

In engaging so deeply in questions about the materials they use, artists such as Weber, Fukazawa, and Gray have been crucial in reminding us, too, to rethink our relationship to materials. One question we have been mulling over is: **How can we reframe our relationship from a "mastery" over material, to one that is reciprocal instead?**

"In some Native languages the term for plants translates to 'those who take care of us,'" points out Professor Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.* She writes, "We Americans are reluctant to learn a foreign language of our own species, let alone another species. But imagine the possibilities. Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don't have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how much less lonely the world would be." Luckily, according to Kimmerer, the first step is one that is simple enough— that is, to pay attention. After all, "Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart."

## Resources:

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Knowledge, Scientific Wisdom, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).