

Form Re-Formed

February 25 – April 2, 2022

Works by Nancy Cohen, Marisa Tesauo and Austin Thomas

Curated by Jeannine Bardo

Essay by Jeannine Bardo

Life as art, art as life

Limb/ swish- a bodily movement, maybe for walking or dancing.

Limbs/ wish- the body hoping, desiring

A curtain tassel used as an ornament for dress.

A curtain tassel worn at the hip that moves with the body and swishes over limbs.

limb/ swish.

A curtain tassel moving with a body through space, an adornment creating sound, moving in sounds of swish, entering beyond the ordinariness of just being an object.

limbs/ wish.

A curtain tassel added to a pedestal, hanging from a hook and surrounded with a metal spiral

A curtain tassel made into an enduring object

A work of art

Limbswish

A pioneer of the “ready-made” art object, the German avant-garde, Dadaist and poet Elsa Hildegard Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927) was the creator of the work of art, *Limbswish* (1917-18). Loringhoven’s sculpture exemplifies the artist’s practice of incorporating found objects into her everyday dress, thus collapsing the distinction between life and art. Loringhoven used the curtain tassel as a fashion accessory that eventually became an artwork. The title of the work is itself a poetic pun referring to the placement and sound of the movement it made when worn as an ornament (limb/swish, limbs/wish).¹

The artists of *Form Re-Formed* bring form to life as art in their everyday. Like Loringhoven in spirit, albeit less performative, Cohen, Tesauo and Thomas create art from “ordinary articles of life”. They are bodies and minds moving, mining and musing through life, creating new forms from the by-products of life in the human sphere. They are bodies and minds on notice, critiquing, alerting, archiving, hoping, desiring and embodying life as art and art as life, creating works of art that are themselves condensed forms of the moments of each artists’ lived life.

It’s not about your stature, it’s about your silhouette, the shadow that you cast. -Austin Thomas

The art of Austin Thomas takes on many forms, from public works to social sculptures reminiscent of Joseph Beuys. Thomas is a cultural producer, a creator of happenings who has invested her time, creative energy, and equity in spaces that bring art and people together. These social structures include the artist-run gallery, Pocket Utopia, and the public works project, “Plaza Perch,” an installation consisting of benches made with reclaimed wood from Coney Island that revitalized a city street and gave community members more access to their public space.

Thomas’ bio reads; “artist, curator, community builder, and an exhibition manager orchestrating and communicating with many different types of people and materials to get things done.” Bam! Thomas has a history of moving through the world as a cultural producer and the cast of her living shadow continues to lengthen through her work in education. Beyond her dedication to these cultural practices, Thomas is also a visual artist with a personal practice that includes drawings and collage works which are beautiful, intimate explorations of color and form. This is another space in Thomas’ mind and body that, although more private, is just as important to a life lived as art.

The works in *Form Re-Formed--Wave Range Turquoise, Air Over Range, and Covid Blue*, from the *COVID 19 Sequences--*are from Thomas’ ongoing monoprint series in which she uses the forms of found materials to create her images. Craft foam circles, triangles cut from Plexiglas, and steel templates borrowed from a metal shop are inked, arranged, and re-arranged in infinite compositions to create a plate for each monoprint.

In Thomas' hand, a respect and attraction for the simple, humble forms she uses help her find that studio "sweet spot," living a practice that is both serious and playful. In the social space of a printmaking studio, she allows herself to get lost in the possibilities of creating a myriad of new forms, organizing and reorganizing plates, and mass printing in one day--many of the works are printed on found paper from unused stationery or book linings, materials touched by many hands. This layering of shared experiences imbues them with history, passing moments in time, re-formed into something new, but replete with an understanding of the past. Even Thomas' inking choices reflect this push and pull into time and space. By not re-inking all of her plates for each printing pass, she is choosing to make "ghostings" by pulling several images at once, composing and rearranging paper and plates that layer over and under to create new forms and colors. Items of detritus become exalted and given new importance, like fine art doodles and beautiful thought bubbles with luminous colors fading in and out of the page.

Austin Thomas...artist, gallery director, cultural producer, educator...infinite possibilities, infinite forms, filling the growing shadow of a life deliberately lived.

Nature works within itself, producing its own materials and ceaselessly reworking them; when things are going well for me, I'm doing something similar. -Nancy Cohen

There is a reason artist Nancy Cohen often uses nature as a metaphor for her process--the two are inextricably linked. Cohen is a body and mind moving through the natural and the industrial geography of her surroundings, collecting ideas and imagery and ever aware of the forces that cause constant change. Cohen often speaks of the fragility of life through the lens of the individual and her studies of the waterways that surround her. Both are fraught with danger and beauty, both can create and destroy, but Cohen understands that humanity's odyssey through life is reliant on the natural world which it threatens. It is within these optics that she observes the connection of the body and the psyche to the fragility of the world itself.

Cohen's artistic process mirrors the forces of life, natural events, and the unknown. Each endeavor is a physical feat. Cohen makes her own paper for her drawings, macerating, building, wetting, drying, building again. The paper work in this exhibition, *Underside*, at first glance, evokes a waterway with reeds and clear water, but a closer look also brings to mind fences and a turbulent shore. There are multiple perspective points and it is hard to tell if one point is moving forward or back; rising or falling.

Creating new forms from natural forms is one way that Cohen reflects natural processes, but the kiln is where a mere mortal can bring the seismic forces of the natural environment to a bodily scale. Cohen finds a way to transform the discarded objects she finds on her walks through nature and the urban community she inhabits. These objects, glass bottles, metal refuse, wire, and sand leave the nth iteration of their lifetime to enter Cohen's kiln and re-emerge as a new form, often an object that resembles a new life form. The three glassworks in *Form Re-Formed -- Couple, Navigable, and Four-Part Embrace*-- with names that call up intimacies, all conjure thoughts of strange, gelatinous sea creatures or seed pods, an unknown plant or animal form. Having a copious amount of informed and intuitive knowledge in the crafts of ceramics and glass gives Cohen the confidence to take chances and makes Cohen's fearlessness worthy of our respect.

I am fascinated by the predicaments that our contemporary societies face: excessive consumerism, accelerated rate of building, our relationship to these constantly shifting environments, our sense of place and the histories we are creating. - Marisa Tesauo

Looming over the works in the front gallery at Stand4 is Marisa Tesauo's, *Contain the Container*, a sculpture made from cast paper and pigmented plaster that teeters on a feeble, hand-made wooden table. It resembles an ancient ruin, deteriorating with time and crumbling under its own weight. *Contain the Container*, casts a large shadow and is an object on the precipice, ready to throw itself at one's feet, lunge at the viewer, or just crumple to the floor. The container that was used as a model for *Contain the Container* is the diminutive, ubiquitous plastic basket that holds store-bought strawberries. Tesauo magnifies the scale, flips it upside down, and puts it on a table that is woefully unstable.

Tesauo is a body and mind moving through time and space, making us aware of what we leave behind in our contemporary world full of throw-away objects. Her work is rife with concerns about the precariousness and negative impacts of human systems. Using the unassuming, yet ever-accumulating waste of our lives as both subject and material, Tesauo creates new drawings and sculptural works inspired by the positive and negative shapes and spaces of these abandoned objects.

L'interstizio, Tesauro's wall sculpture is an example of how the artist moves in and out of the positive and negative shapes of both language and form. The title, *L'interstizio*, written in Italian, translates to *interstice* in English, meaning "a space that intervenes between things", the negative space. For this work, the subject is once again the positive shape of the strawberry basket, but this time it is made in ceramic form and seems to have collapsed inward in the firing process. Multi-hued with matte and shiny surfaces, it is backed with another ceramic shape, a shiny, metallic-finished rectangle of punched holes.

Waste Cloud Descending, Tesauro's watercolor drawing of two floating shapes, subtly calls attention to the ways we continue to fill empty spaces with our refuse, by highlighting the objects we make to protect the objects we buy. The larger "cloud" shape at the top of the page is a representation of the crinkle-cut paper that is used to protect consumer products and the smaller shape is a drawing of pressed cardboard, another object used to fill the negative space in packaging to safeguard the commercial goods we purchase.

Tesauro works with materials of the present with a sage nod to the past. Inspired by the ruins of cities, both old and new, her work evokes buildings that once held lives and artifacts of past civilizations, ancient ruins that stand haphazardly as a backdrop amidst our modern, ever-changing world that continually erases the present.

Will our earthly existence be just a filament of waste in the archeological strata? We are continually looking to the past to understand who we are, unearthing and collecting objects to fill in the stories of our history. This makes the poignant placement of Tesauro's sculpture *Fessure* in the Stand4 Gallery space an appropriate marker to the end of the exhibition. Placed between two walls in a small, shadowy space, perched on an acrylic shelf made by the artist, *Fessure*, glows in the dark and draws us in. We enter the space between the two walls, the "fissure", to find a ceramic sculpture reminiscent of an ancient Egyptian scarab, a beetle that lays its eggs in its excrement and is associated with the divine manifestation of the early morning sun.² Like the scarab we are in a continual state of creation, but unlike the scarab, the waste of our commercial, consumptive ways, is not life-giving

Form...re-formed, again and again.

1. Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Artist Overview and Analysis". [Internet]. 2022. [TheArtStory.org](https://www.theartstory.org/artist/von-freytag-loringhoven-elsa/)
Content compiled and written by Laura Hillegas
Edited and revised, with Summary and Accomplishments added by Valerie Hellstein
Available from: <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/von-freytag-loringhoven-elsa/>
First published on 02 Nov 2017. Updated and modified regularly
[Accessed 16 Feb 2022]
2. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2014, April 3). *scarab*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/scarab>