

CYNTHIA LAHTI





Della, 2013
Found paper image combined
with broken ceramic sculpture
created by the artist on wood
base
22 x 10 x 5 in
Photo: Cynthia Lahti



Pink Sea Brain, 2016
Wood objects combined
with ceramic sculpture
created by the artist
28 x 10 x 8 in
Photo: Cynthia Lahti



Siren 3, 2019
Ceramic
12 x 6 x 18 in
Photo: Cynthia Lahti



Yellow Dew, 2017
Fabric, wood found objects combined
with broken ceramic sculpture created
by the artist
27 x 13 x 13 in
Photo: Cynthia Lahti



Western Nocturnal, 2016
Metal, plastic objects combined with broken
ceramic sculpture created by the artist
18 x 16 x 9 in
Photo: Cynthia Lahti

Previous page

Greyhound, 2017
Fabric, metal found objects combined with
broken ceramic sculpture created by the artist
24 x 11 x 9 in
Photo: Cynthia Lahti

LITTLE STORMS

by Jon Raymond

Has anyone ever done paper and clay before? It must've happened, but it's hard to think where or when. And what about clay and stuffed animal? Those two substances—the glazed, mottled mud of ceramics and the synthetic fuzz of fake creature—have rarely, if ever, been fused into a singular object on purpose, I'm almost positive. Collage is usually about sticking two images together and seeing what third, new meaning emerges, but it can work on the level of materials, too. Inside the bounds of the right shape, the proverbial oil and water can find a shared life.

Cynthia Lahti has wielded many materials in her work over the years. She's used glass, plaster, paper, clay, and wood, among many other things, to make friezes, vessels, busts, figurines, and animals, set sometimes on wooden plinths, and sometimes on little metal spikes. Her recent, aggressive mixture of media—incorporating found objects wholesale into handmade ceramic sculptures—is a relatively new tack, but it extends a polyglot sensibility that can sometimes feel like a circus exploded inside a hospital.

You can name all the materials Lahti has used over the years, however, and describe the many influences she's adopted, but the language never fully accounts for the effect of her objects on the eye. Her colors, textures, and shapes go straight to a sense cluster reserved for things like tree bark, hanging moss, and wet boulders—natural occurrences that transcend signification and register purely as beautiful things-in-the-world. They're the kinds of objects that never exhaust looking, and that never seem forced. They can come across as fire-damaged, like a forest, or wind-shaped, like clouds, or sometimes even like things the human hand barely touched. In every case, they feel like things that are still in the process of becoming.

In this, Lahti joins a long history of artists missing a strong finishing instinct. In the early moments of Modernity, Manet famously left his brush strokes unblended and the backgrounds of his canvasses unfilled, much to the scandal of the academic audience in Paris. In the era following Ingres, French people just couldn't see his work as “done.” John Cage, equally famously, gave chance a full vote in his art, calling on the I Ching to make his creative decisions for him, while his comrade Robert Rauschenberg took a less radical approach, adopting the surrealists' theory of automatic writing by watching TV in the studio to distract himself into making unexpected choices. What we call Folk art also lives in this raw zone. Bill Traylor's rustic lines obviously didn't take a huge amount of time to complete, nor demand a long process of revision, but the de-gravitized images he made feel carved in stone.

For all these artists, the very unrefined quality of their work is part of the signature. They've comprehended the ideal conditions for their own abdication of control, and turned it into a practice. Lahti's “Siren,” for instance, features a trio of clay women singing into air microphones, like back-up singers. Their postures are simple and the scale is small but the figures are canvasses for a coursing ecology of subtle color and tone. On the chest of the left-most figure is a light cranberry speckling that fades in and out like a stain, and on the middle figure there's a bruise of pale mossy green. The hands and eyes and mouths of all the figures are blackened in the kiln, including a little notch in the mouth on the right-most figure that almost becomes a sneer. Did the color have to begin and end exactly where it did? Did the blackening follow a totally prescribed agenda? Regardless, the elements seem perfectly placed, fully organic and kind of haphazard. In other words, in their ghastly and beautiful way, actively alive.

“Pink Sea Brain” seems like a paused improvisation. Did Lahti set out to make a figure with a forehead like that, all elongated and strange? Or did it just happen in her hands before her own brain decided the right path? Similarly, with “Betty”: did Lahti squash that magazine image on the sculpture's head a single time or did she try a few configurations, finessing the wrinkles just so? I'm guessing the former attack, under the knowledge that the creases would come out better without too much mindful intention interfering.

Not everyone allows themselves to collaborate with the forces of nature like this. You see the effects faked all the time, by artists who can't quite leave well enough alone. They systemize their surrenders in a way that renders the chance encounter ritualized and predictable. They round off the edges, or they return elements to a comfortable, decorative arrangement, second-guessing their audience's tastes. But Rodin didn't do that, and neither did Giacometti or Helen Frankenthaler. And neither does Cynthia Lahti. All of them allow the unknown to step forward and touch their work in the act of creation, giving mother nature space to fill the vacuum in the final chamber. And as a result, they leave behind objects that storm with the chaos of their making long after their making is done.

Jon Raymond is the author of novels Rain Dragon, The Half-Life, Freebird, and the forthcoming The Empty Chair, and the short-story collection Livability. A selection of his art writing was published as The Community.



Betty, 2013
Found paper image combined with broken ceramic
sculpture created by the artist on wood base
15 x 12 x 8 in

Photo: Cynthia Lahti



Cousins, 2005
 15 raku-fired ceramic sculptures arranged in a group
 26 x 26 x 12½ in
 Photo: Daniel Petterson

CYNTHIA LAHTI

b. 1963. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon

2013 Hallie Ford Fellow

Cynthia Lahti creates artworks that are visually alluring and beautiful, despite their overt imperfections and sometimes-humble materials. Her practice encompasses drawing, collage, and sculpture, and is influenced by human artifacts from ancient times to the present, as well as by personal experiences and emotions. Lahti grew up in Portland, Oregon, leaving to earn her bachelor's degree at the Rhode Island School of Design. After graduating in 1985 she returned to Oregon where she continues to live and make art, finding inspiration in both its physical and psychological landscape and the way it encourages a fearless studio practice. Lahti's work has been exhibited widely, including Ditch Projects, Springfield, Oregon; Portland Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), and the Portland Art Museum, in Portland, Oregon; the Maryhill Museum, Goldendale, Washington; and Zentrum für Keramik, Berlin, Germany. She was awarded the Bonnie Bronson Fellowship in 2015, the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Individual Support Grant in 2017 and the Oregon Arts Commission Artist Fellowship in 2018.

Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch
President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.



VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

© 2020

Published by The Ford Family Foundation,
Roseburg, OR

All rights reserved. This book may not
be reproduced, in whole or in part, in any
form without written permission from
the publisher.

Essay © 2020 by Jon Raymond

Designed by Martha Lewis

Photographed as credited

Edited by Abby McGehee

Printed and finished in Portland, OR,
by Brown Printing

All works: Courtesy the artist