

ARTFORUM

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Julia Haft-Candell

CANDICE MADEY

In “Carrier Bag of Fiction” at Candice Madey, Julia Haft-Candell’s ceramic sculptures were imbued with language; they read as origin stories in a state of revision. The show was named after and inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” a 1986 essay in which the author interrogates the trope of the heroic journey and argues for an antidote to “the killer story” of the hunter protagonist who slays all. In her text, Le Guin shakes up this male monomyth, insisting that “the reduction of narrative to conflict is absurd.” The author’s stance was the starting point for the artist’s works, which invited questions instead of supplying easy answers. The objects here did not offer closure but cultivated an open weft of inquiry.

Clay and weaving are foundational in these sculptures—perhaps even etymological in that those tried-and-true forms are catalysts for stories. Haft-Candell employs sgraffito, a technique that involves carving into clay before firing to create a textured raised surface. The artist uses crosshatching to mimic the pattern of woven fabric so the final product resembles threadbare textile fragments that appear to be wrapped around or embedded in the hard surface of the fired clay. This effect is countered by kneaded and pinched sections that bring to mind rock structures or petrology, as in *Expanding Teal* (all works 2020), a beguiling knobby cluster shot through with metallic lines recalling the most ardent restraints. In *Volcano with Woven Feelers*, four limbic protrusions reach out of an erupting mountainous form, summoning both genesis and destruction.



Haft-Candell understands that to forge ahead, one must interrogate authorship and implicit hegemonies. What language can serve the purpose of renewal? Only a fresh one, since the dominant narratives are untrustworthy and often malevolent. Haft-Candell’s sculptures and attendant glossary are hermaphroditic yet binary-inclusive—nothing is thrown away; everything is just reworked. She pairs ideas, such as *torus* and *dash* (referring to, respectively, the feminine and masculine aspects within sacred geometry), in allegorical modules as a means to explore a visual lexicon of materiality and storytelling. In the process of inquiry, a glossary becomes glossolalia, straying from its stranglehold on meaning (however loose).

Chain with Wash of Blues is a paean to futility and strife. Its garlands of links spilling from a cluster of gray- and teal-glazed clay were just slack enough to seem discarded, as though the product of struggle. *Woven Kick with Lavender and Slate* is a disembodied, Muybridge-esque study of arrested movement (the work is based on a pose from gymnastics diagrams, according to the artist). In the spirit of Le Guin, Haft-Candell undoes the putative trajectory of traditional narrative to get at something that predates narrative. Her objects, though static, nonetheless insist upon transmutation and a protean spirit. In this sense, these are disruptive pieces whose relationship to temporality is intervallic, not finite.

It was fitting to encounter these sculptures as a new chapter in American history was commencing, following a troubling political arc during which leaders were saboteurs and fictions were plentiful. Haft-Candell’s reckoning with shifting realities and time through the lens of Le Guin’s antihero creed is particularly relevant as we witness (and contribute to) our epoch of mass extinction. *Woven Dash with Dark Blue Slab* is poignant, a gaping ripple of a thing akin to an ancient sea creature. The dash shape, which resembles punctuation, is forced into the slab for emphasis, while its mesh-like texture imparts softness. Haft-Candell is, in her words, “creating a monument to the idea of weaving” by using clay to immortalize a form that’s susceptible to the ravages of time. To create a monument to an idea of something that is notoriously difficult to preserve or archive is a defiant act. The pliancy of fiber arts may be absent, but Haft-Candell’s shapes hold space for vulnerability. The artist pulls treasure out of, to use Le Guin’s words, “this vast stack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.”

—Charity Coleman