

Myth, Memory, and a little bit of Magic: Harriet Bart's *Material Alchemy*

By Christina Schmid

Harriet Bart's art weaves together myth and memory in objects and installations that are as finely wrought as they are deeply felt. *Material Alchemy*, curated by Sydney Marshall, gathers a selection of works that span the decades of Bart's creative practice. From *Ascension* (1976) to *Reckoning* (2022), they reveal an abiding fascination with the sheer materiality of objects as well as with their potential to hold and shed multiple meanings. Inspired by Samuel Beckett, Bart proposes that "the purpose of objects is stillness." Yet this stillness, in her hands, is not immutable but radiates with a latent significance that is steeped in what the artist calls an "an inherent order of things:" an order that morphs and shapeshifts before settling into ever new constellations. Her work stages, witnesses, and commemorates these manifold transformations that are akin to a kind of latter-day alchemy.

It is important to note that Bart's creative practice started with fiber arts and textiles. These forms of expression are rooted in traditional women's work, which has long been belittled as 'craft' by the philosophers and art historians who thought up a divide between fine art and other forms of cultural expression over the course of the 18th century. In recent years, this distinction has come under increased scrutiny, and for good reason: Whose work was dismissed and devalued never was a neutral assessment; neither were the arbiters of such judgment objective. Bart's work takes on this chapter of cultural history and embraces an unapologetic feminist ethos. In her carefully considered structures – whether they are built from the warp and weft of weaving, the looping progression of a single thread of yarn in crochet, or include steel finely spun into elegant bowls, chrome sewing patterns, or found objects – she pays homage to the nameless makers and seamstresses (like her mother) whose work never received the credit it deserved.

This sensibility, commemorative and restorative at the same time, runs like a thread through Bart's work: The artist book *Garment Register* (2000) pairs women's names with fragments of poems, photographs, and samples of fabric. The painting *Concrete Poem* (1985) turns inside out the labels typically affixed to factory-made clothes and orders them into a grid on canvas. *Strong Silent Type I* and *II* (2016) take on a cliché of masculinity and, both tongue in cheek and dead seriously, claim the phrase for women. The works offer a counter version of female silence and strength in sewing patterns made from blackened steel and shining chrome. The suggestion of soft fabric, cut to suit the body, becomes armor; silence power. In the crocheted *Ascension* (1976), the oldest work included in *Material Alchemy*, Bart still uses actual yarn. Its blackness lends the work an elegiac air while the title suggests a rising, shedding, leaving behind: whether spiritual, art historical, or feminist, the work beckons with an abundance of potential meanings.

The poetic quality of Bart's work lives in the archive of objects she returns to. She wields them like a material grammar that is at the same time precise and oblique. This tension animates her art. She presents us with a constellation of objects, a grid, or a scaffold only to compromise the insight such hermeneutic devices putatively yield. The painting *Geography* (2015) is a case in point: small squares suggest a cartographic measuring of land, yet the ghostly terrain with its luminous patches of blue exceeds the attempt to capture its beauty and map its mystery. Simply put, there is the grid and

then there is what eludes the grid, which is what does not abide by the protocols of science, reason, and historiography. Always, Bart's work gestures at the ineffable.

Conceptual to the core, her art traverses media and is often inspired by a poem, a line from a novel, or a single sentence from an artist talk. Distilled and concentrated, these words act as portals into her work, which is thus born in dialogue with writers and thinkers across the centuries. In *Sunset Gates* (2020), *The New Colossus*, the 1903 poem by Emma Lazarus that is displayed at the base of the Statue of Liberty, is partially erased as if to suggest that its message is under attack. Ancient myths, too, in particular the stories of women descending into underworlds like Inanna and Persephone, act not only as an archive but inspire how Bart works: myth-making is a mode of communication, as curator Laura Wertheim Joseph notes. Allegorical and rich with symbolic meaning, objects conjure, evoke, and suggest meaning but refuse to settle on any particular message or moral. They withhold and yet re-appear in ways that convey multiple layers, connotations, and webs of meaning. Consider the plumb bob: From architectural measuring device to alchemical token, a symbol of moral rectitude and a means of divination, the object shifts shapes and meanings. Imposing in *Pendulum* (2003), intimate in the artist book *Plumb Bob* (2009), it reappears in *Reckoning* (2022).

Like Bart's *Autobiography* (2011), *Reckoning* stages a retrospective. But beyond the personal, *Reckoning* invites a coming-to-terms that is both a ritual of remembrance and a holding accountable. Somber, pensive and elegant, the work exudes a pervasive sense of mystery. Twelve vintage harrow discs each hold a carefully curated object: kernels of corn, small piles of cinders, shards, and pellets of ore; a burl of wood, a bone, a piece of weathered limestone. A plumb bob hangs suspended above each of them, as if focusing attention and, for the time, suspending judgment. An ornate chair at a shrouded table overlooks the twelve offerings and suggests a seat of some authority. Rather than a judge's gavel, the objects this absent arbiter relies on are more mysterious: a vial filled with specks of gold, the minute gears of a pocket watch, a small globe covered in strips of cut-out text, a wax-encased page from a book and more. Whether personal, cultural, or generational, the judgment under way seems ceremonial, like a ritual whose protocol is withheld.

Jane Hirshfield's poem *Let them not say* deepens the artist's grappling with responsibility: "Let them not say: we did not see. We saw." The poem's fire burned with a "kerosene beauty" and, rather than put it out, "we warmed ourselves by it." There is no denying culpability. Yet who is this "we"? And who acts as the judge of who saw what and did not do enough? The artist? Or is this some archetypal scene of justice and judgment? Perhaps we as viewers, each one of us, are called upon to engage in this taking stock, even though the terms of reckoning remain mysterious. Such lacunae are characteristic of Bart's work and, indeed, essential. In these absences, a different presence stirs – ghostly, spectral, and haunting.

The role of the body epitomizes the shimmer between absence and presence. Nowhere to be seen, the body is nonetheless urgently implied in Bart's work. When she commemorates fallen soldiers, pays tribute to women workers, or returns to the book form with its close ties to the solitary, intimate, and internal act of reading that typically involves holding a book and being immersed in it,

she conjures absent bodies without ever showing them. Her work shares a haptic aesthetic, reliant on tactility, with fiber arts and crafts: the presence of the hand is always a given and the body, with its need for warmth and shelter, motivates making. The specter of a body and its capacity to know by touch also bear philosophical significance: "Having a body is in itself the greatest threat to the mind," wrote Marcel Proust. In European intellectual and religious history, ever since Descartes' famous dictum, "I think therefore I am," the body has been cast as a sin-riddled vessel prone to deception. Women's ways of knowing had no place in this masculinist-rationalist worldview and were systematically discredited and exterminated. Subtly, Bart's oeuvre reconnects and resurrects these older ways of knowing. Her work gestures at what has been lost and might be irrecoverable but lingers as a presence felt rather than seen. This is where the subtlety, depth, and magic at the heart of her oeuvre unfold.

Bart's artwork keeps gesturing into a realm of knowing that is ancient, arcane, held in the body – and always with us. It lives hidden in the folds of the everyday waiting to be found. *Quotidian*, a work that has lived in Bart's studio for many years but is on view for the first time in "Material Alchemy," articulates this most enduring mystery of all: the sacred breathes in what is misunderstood as ordinary. Bart reminds us that nothing ever is devoid of magic, if only we take the time and cultivate the means to see and sense it.

Works Referenced

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Jane Hirshfield, "Let Them Not Say" (2014) <https://poets.org/poem/let-them-not-say>

Laura Wertheim Joseph, "this is indeed the place / with many layers." *Harriet Bart: Abracadabra and Other Forms of Protection*. Edited by Laura Wertheim Joseph. Published by the Weisman Art Museum. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 8-32.

About the Author

Christina Schmid is a writer who thinks with art and experiments with prose. She is interested in the materiality of text, haptic criticism, and the ways art generates ideas. Her essays and reviews have been published online and in print, in anthologies, journals, zines, artist books, and exhibition catalogs. She works at the University of Minnesota's Department of Art in Minneapolis where she teaches contemporary art, theory, and critical practice. She is a 2020 recipient of a MN State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant for Creative Prose.