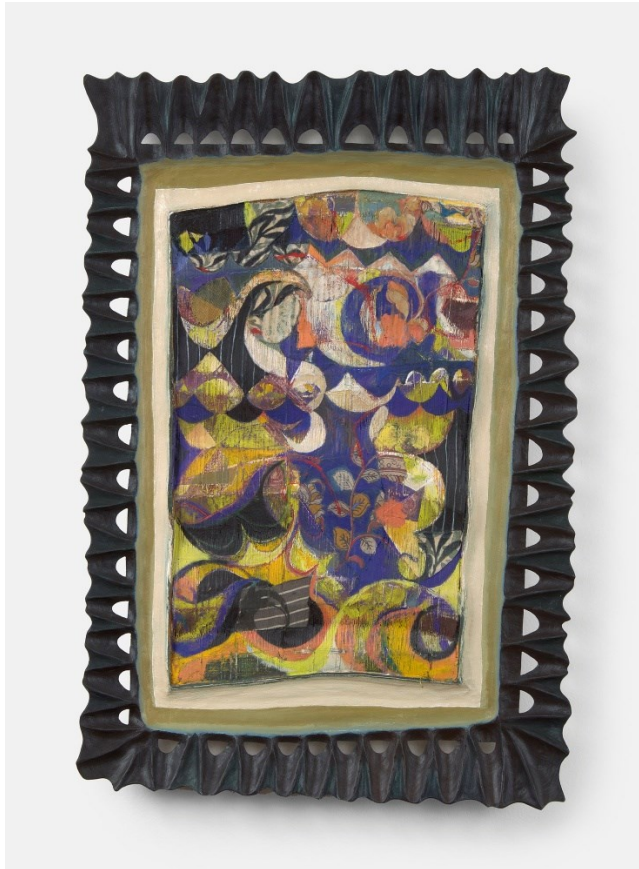


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Becca Lowry

Issue 16, 2024

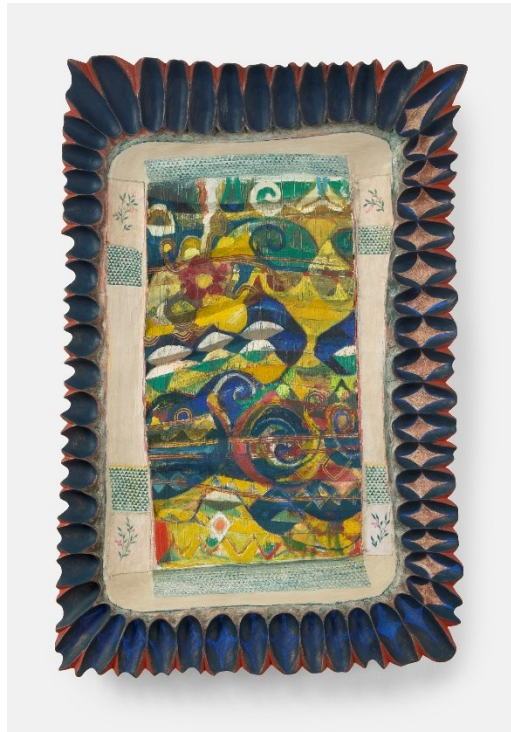


The Mountains Will Still Be Here, 2023. Painted weaving on handmade wooden armature (plywood, crochet thread, Indian cotton textile, curtain, oil paint). 28.5 x 19 x 2 inches

ARTIST STATEMENT

My mixed-media weavings are elaborate wall-hung abstractions carved from assemblages of laminated plywood, woven through with crochet thread, and then painted/collaged with oil paint, fabric scraps, thread and other mixed media. The works draw language from the natural world as well as from the rich inheritance of decorative patterning made by artisans for millennia. The work is born of a need to build, to exert myself through physical ritual, and to locate myself experientially within a lineage of laborers that includes ancient stone carvers, woodworkers, weavers, as much as it does makers within my own family who built houses, wooden boats, jewelry. I explore a curiosity about the talismanic capacity of objects: to protect, to store memory/history, to embody incantations.

Interview with Becca Lowry



Untangle Me, 2023. Painted weaving on handmade wooden armature (plywood, crochet thread, Dutch wax fabric, curtain, nightgown, oil paint). 31.75 x 21 x 3 inches

Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you became interested in becoming an artist?

I grew up surrounded by makers- my father was a carpenter, my mother a jeweler and there were people in my extended family and larger community too who taught me how to throw pots, sew, weld, make stained-glass, etc. There were tools and materials all around me and that's what we did in our free time- my brother would make boats and see if they were seaworthy and I was usually painting or making clothing. By the time I finished high school though, the experience of watching both my parents struggle to make a living scared me into a more practical path. I made a conscious and difficult decision not to go to art school and instead went to Smith College where I ended up studying Economics because I wanted to know about the systems that birthed inequality. I took a few art classes but I was really focused on doing something 'useful'. Following college, I worked for ten years supporting research on economic and health inequalities in the developing world. By my early 30s a series of difficult life events left me struggling emotionally and in 2012, I left my paid job, intending to take a break and recalibrate. I took up painting again, which I had mostly abandoned since college, and found myself unable to put it back down. So, in some sense I think I've mostly fought against being an artist. But making things has always been what I love doing and, for the past 10+ years, I have finally been embracing that.

Can you tell us about some of your most memorable early influences?

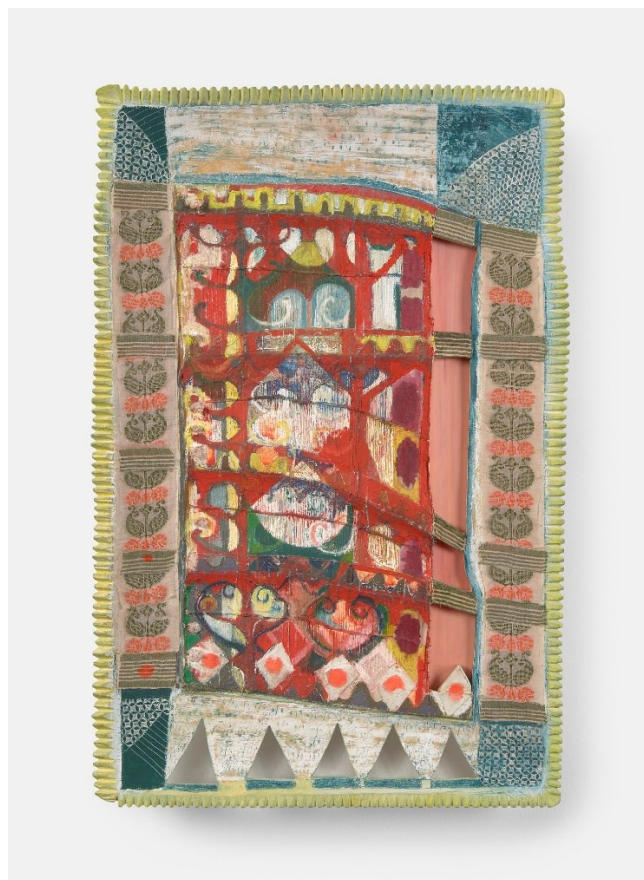
One of my older cousins was/is profoundly artistic. He went through a long phase of making stained-glass windows, starting when I was 10 or so. His work was very abstract, more like paintings than traditional stained-glass. I can still picture a giant circular piece he made around this time, maybe five feet in diameter, that hung in a large window at the top landing of the stairs in my grandmother's house. I was in awe of that

piece. Something about the scale and the intricacy and the reverential placement of it in this huge South-facing window. I probably didn't know it at the time, but looking back I think this was a moment when I understood what art can do, how it can transform the experience of a place and shift something inside a person.

I also remember going through some prolonged Paul Klee, Basquiat, Georgia O'Keeffe, Frida Kahlo, and Egon Shiele phases.

Where are you currently based and what brought you there? Are there any aspects of this specific location or community that have inspired your work?

We live in Connecticut in a very rural-feeling house in an otherwise fairly suburban-feeling town near New Haven. My studio is in the garage out back and I use part of the back yard for my carving. We're about 20 minutes from where I grew up, further up the shoreline, and where my mother, step-father, and other relatives still live. We moved back here primarily to be close to family and close to the water. I grew up a stone's throw from the Long Island Sound, which meant that the beach and water and tide pools were my playground. My ability to roam as a kid was essentially limitless and I think I am always looking for a way to approximate, as best I can, that sense of living amidst beauty. When I first returned to art in my 30s, the imagery of this area – the Sound, the marshes, the plant life, were an obvious influence on my work. Still now, in some of my larger sculptural work, people often see sea creatures and water-like motion and, although it's not intentional, I have no doubt that this environment continues to shape my sense of what's beautiful.



Generations, 2023. Painted weaving on handmade wooden armature (plywood, crochet thread, Bengal cotton saree, stained glass, hand painted fabrics, sewing thread, oil paint). 23.5 x 15.5 x 2 inches

What is your studio space like? What makes your space unique to you?

My studio is a converted garage out behind the house. Our property abuts a large piece of previously farm, but now re-wilded, land that has yet to be developed and there are many old trees, especially cedars, in our yard. We are distant enough from any neighbors that I can carve and make a lot of noise and sawdust outside without disturbing people. Which means that I have the privilege of spending many of my work days outdoors. In my studio itself, aside from how messy it typically is and what's hanging on the walls, there is nothing particularly 'me' about the space. But it's convenient and affordable, which counts for a lot.

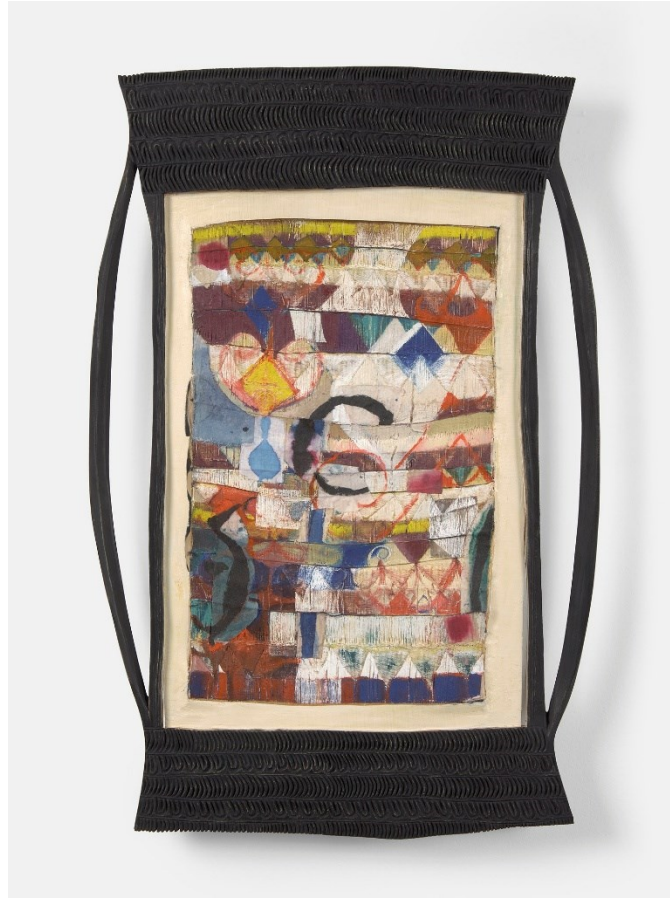
What is a typical day like? If you don't have a typical day, what is an ideal day? Do you work in large chunks of time, or throughout the day?

I wake up around 6:30, when our son gets up, and the first hour or so of the morning is making chai and getting him fed, lunch packed, and off to school. By 8/8:30 I'm usually at my computer with my tea and I try to do 3 or 4 hours of paid work. By noonish I get to go to the studio and I typically have the rest of the afternoon there until my wife and son come home around 5. Most days I fit in some exercise towards the end of the day as well. Then it's dinner and bedtime routines and kitchen cleanup.

What gets you in a creative groove or flow? Is there anything that interrupts your creative energy?

I treat art-making like a job. I don't wait around for inspiration. Usually, if I go put the time in, I have no trouble getting into it. Not to say that I don't ever get stuck – I do of course. But I'm usually working on 3 or 4 pieces at once so I can often set a piece aside if I'm stuck and work on something else. I also haven't figured out an easier resolution to stuckness other than just pushing through it. So, whether I'm in a flow or totally confused about where things are going, I still put the time in and eventually something shifts and things start working again.

By far the most disruptive thing for my creative energy is when the world feels impossibly dark, as it does right now with the world on fire and the horrors we are financing in Gaza and the political climate here, and and and. I have a hard time valuing what I do when things feel so unbelievably broken. Art seems more appropriate for a gentler world. Many people of course say that art is most essential in times of darkness, that creative expression plays a vital role in reminding us of our hearts, of our capacity to be generous. And I do think many art forms can serve that function for me. Good writing, good music are often what bring me out of a funk. But for some reason, looking at art doesn't often function this way for me. Maybe I'm too close to it to be spellbound? Unfortunately for me, making art is basically how I cope with the world, so it is in these darkest of times that I need my work the most. So, I battle with myself- I tell myself what I'm doing is frivolous and self-indulgent and then I retreat to the refuge of my studio. It's not a pretty dance but it's the truth.



Storms Worth Naming, 2023. Painted weaving on handmade wooden armature (plywood, crochet thread, hand-painted fabric, oil paint). 37.25 x 21 x 2 inches

How do you maintain momentum in your practice? Is there anything that hinders or helps your focus?

I think consistency breeds momentum. Just showing up in the studio every day. I have guarded my studio time with ruthlessness. I think it's important, especially in this money-oriented culture, to treat your creative time with respect so that others are more inclined to respect it too. And having a regular schedule is what allows me to be firm about my time.

I did my first two residencies in 2022 and 2023 and those were hugely helpful – both for the dedicated time, the gift of mornings and evenings without obligations, and also because of the sense of community those experiences fostered. It's easy to feel like a crazy person, blindly pursuing an improbable dream. So, being amidst a group of people striving for something similar was quite affirming for me and gave me back a sense of purpose that I had lost somewhere along the way.

Also, you have to just keep applying to things. Brush off the rejections and just keep applying.

What medium/media are you working in right now? What draws you to this particular material or method?

The forms of all of my sculptural work are carved from plywood. I love working with plywood because of its durability. I can make forms that look incredibly delicate but are actually quite robust. And I also appreciate that I can make revisions. It's not easy, but I can cut away and add back material if I need to. I started using plywood as a painting surface when I was young because my father was a builder and there was always scrap

plywood around. Now that he's gone, I appreciate having a way to feel close to him. And I love the tools and the physical exertion required to carve away material. I firmly believe that physically exhausting myself on a regular basis is essential to my wellbeing.

Can you walk us through your overall process in making your current work? Does drawing play a role in your process?

I don't use drawing really at all in my process. I usually just follow my nose or use an older piece as a starting point to try something similar but new. The first step for the work shown here, which I call 'painted weavings', is to build a wooden structure that acts essentially as the warp threads would in a weaving. I make something that looks like a rib cage (or a ladder with a central spine) through which I weave crochet thread back and forth to create a surface for the painting. The process of weaving is meditative and slow and is something I enjoy doing at home in the evenings or on weekends while my son plays around me. This woven section becomes the center of the piece and then I build a kind of irregular-shaped frame, also out of carved wood, around it.

The woven area at the center of the piece has a lot of texture and the surface undulates along the wooden structure underneath. So, it creates a complicated starting point for a painting, which I like. Often the first moves of the painting are to adhere fabric scraps and thread to the surface of the weaving as a kind of underpainting. This gives me some starting points and obstacles to work around. The painting then evolves through an iterative process of adding paint, more fabric scraps, thread, sometimes sawdust mixed with wood glue, and then removing material – sanding/scraping or cutting away and peeling off earlier layers. Then I add more paint and fabric, and so on. I find that if I just paint the way I paint, things get boring pretty quickly. So, I use the fabric scraps as a way of introducing new ideas, seemingly incongruent elements. This way the painting gets a jolt of a different quality of line, or a new color that I wouldn't have thought of and then I have to respond to that.

What is exciting about your process currently?

I am currently working on a way to make larger 'canvases'. To date I have been limited in scale to what I can reasonably weave around. But I am now trying out a way to join multiple woven sections together into one larger piece. It's right now sitting in parts on my studio floor so I don't yet know if it will work. But if it does, I am excited about what that might open up for me.



Rewilding, 2023. Painted weaving on handmade wooden armature (plywood, crochet thread, hand-painted linen, fabric scrap, oil paint). 26.5 x 23 x 1.75 inches

Can you talk about some of the ongoing interests, imagery, and concepts that have informed your process and body of work over time? How do you anticipate your work progressing in the future?

I've always been someone who worries about the world and for a long time I tried to channel that concern into a job that felt proactive & useful. At some point though I had to acknowledge that the work wasn't giving me much back and I was depleted. When I turned back to art, initially as a temporary respite, I brought my worry with me. I think my work now is a manifestation of a very basic impulse to *_build_* something with my sadness for the world. But along with the sad, there is also an expression of awe for the beauty and complexity of the natural world. And a reverence, or maybe a nostalgia, for what we as humans can make with our hands. So, there are references to the kind of markings and structural coloration you might find on a flower or bird, but there's also always a pattern of some sort, I guess as a signifier that this is human-made. And then I think there's a talismanic element, a concept of object as a container for emotion or history or memory. The story each piece tells could be collective or autobiographical but, either way, I want to make something that feels substantial and complex enough that it could house something as important as a memory.

Do you pursue any collaborations, projects, or careers in addition to your studio practice? If so, can you tell us more about those projects, and are there connections between your studio practice and these endeavors?

I have not yet pursued any creative collaborations but I would love to someday. A collaboration with a textile artist would be particularly exciting to me.

I do have another career, as a data programmer. The work is part time, remote, and flexible, which pairs well with being a parent and with my studio practice. Surprisingly, there are some parallels between the computer

work I do, and my artwork. Both are fairly solo pursuits and follow a process of envisioning a final product and then building it through a series of steps. There's also a certain tolerance of repetition that is required of both. But otherwise, the two activities occupy very different spaces in my brain and I appreciate that.

Have you had any epiphanies recently that have changed the course of your work or caused you to shift directions?

The residencies I did over the past year (at Millay Arts and Interlude) taught me that I like people and need community more than I thought I did. I don't know that this has changed my work yet but I would like to get to a place where I feel more a part of a larger community of artists and thinkers.

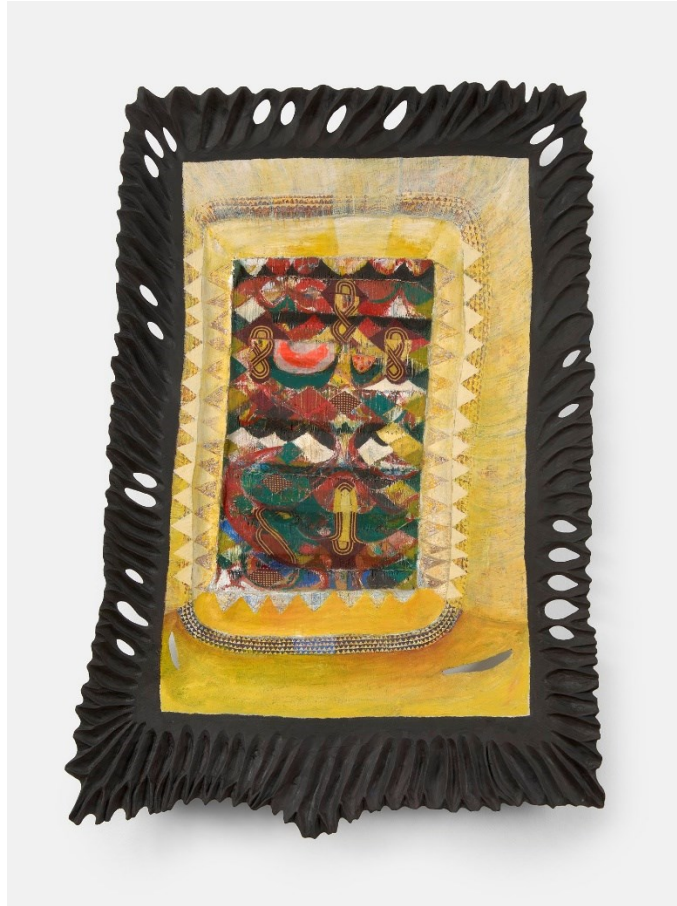
Can you share some of your recent influences? Are there specific works—from visual art, literature, film, or music — that are important to you?

The kind of art that tends to influence me in an active sense (like makes me want to jump up and run to the studio) tends to be ancient stone and wood carving and intricate functional art and craft, like quilts and tapestries, ornate furniture, those incredible shields from central Africa made of intricately patterned twine weaving and wood, or the Indonesian ones made with hide and human hair. But I am just as likely to get a new idea by looking at the back of the cane chair in our dining room or an ornate hinge on a piece of period furniture. I'm drawn to intricacy, repetition, and (super exciting) the breaking of patterns. And to edges and seams, places where the perfection of a material is interrupted or where one material meets another. Like in Martín Ramírez's work, I love everything about them, but I get particularly excited about the places where different papers are overlapping and the pattern continues, with subtle shifts, across the seam.

Music and writing play an important role in my titles and generally influence what I'm thinking about and how I'm feeling in the studio. I've only somewhat recently started paying attention to poetry and I am in awe of how much good poetry there is in the world. When I read words that exactly name something that seems unnamable, it fires me up to try to make something that sings too.

Can you elaborate on a recent work of yours, and tell us the story of how it came to be?

There is a piece called "Blessed and Broken (after Simone Campbell)" that sticks out as one that had a particularly bumpy road to completion. The outer section (what I call the fringe) and the inner section (the woven part in the middle that reads like a painting) were part of two different pieces, both of which were struggling. And I decided to excise the center of one and put it into the center of the other, which involved some scary cutting off of parts. And, of course, when I dissected and put these two pieces together, they didn't work at first but they influenced each other in a way that got me unstuck. So that piece has a lot evidence of revision, of things tried that didn't work. And I believe it is the first piece where I decided to leave some fabric showing, unadulterated, to just be itself. Those beautiful maroon and pale-yellow stripes come from a Dutch wax fabric that I've kept for almost 20 years, something I bought (in Mozambique I believe) when I was living in Botswana in my 20s. I try not to ever throw beautiful things away. The title comes from a piece of writing by Sister Simone Campbell, an activist nun. The full phrase was "Blessed and broken, you are enough".



Blessed and Broken (after Simone Campbell), 2022. Painted weaving on handmade wooden armature (plywood, crochet thread, Dutch wax fabric, oil paint). 22 x 24 x 3.25 inches

Have you overcome any memorable roadblocks or struggles in your practice that you could share with us?

Oh god I question things all the time. Sometimes because it just feels too hard and too thankless. But mostly it's when the world gets unbearably dark and I vow that I must do something more useful with my life. I am very lucky to have a partner who believes deeply in the value of my work (and the value of art in general) and she has many times been the one to believe in the work when I couldn't. Her unwavering support has kept me from giving up more times than I can count. I had a particularly hard bout of this in 2022 and another thing that helped get me through was the residency I did at Millay Arts. When I first got to the residency, I was distressed to realize that none of the other residents seemed to have this same doubt about the purpose of their work. But over time, as I came to know and value each of them and their work, I was sort of tricked into valuing my own more as well. It was easy for me to see why it was so important for each of my coresidents to keep doing what they each were so good at and loved so deeply. And once I saw that, it was hard not to give myself the same grace.

Who are some contemporary artists you're excited about? Is there a recent exhibition that stood out to you?

I need to give myself some constraints here so I will limit myself to artists whose work has an emotional presence that excites me and influences my own, and whose work I've seen somewhat recently: Anina Major, Carlos Rosales-Silva, Clare Grill, Danny Huff, Elisa D'Arrigo, Ever Baldwin, Helen O'Leary, Jonathan Ryan,

Ooloosie Saila, Yevgenia Baras. I also have always had a particular love for figurative work and there are so many contemporary artists in this space that excite me – Aaron Gilbert, Clarity Haynes, Henry Taylor, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Robert Pruitt, are just a few.

Do you have any tips or advice that someone has shared with you that you have found particularly helpful?

Just keep making work you believe in and don't be in a hurry. Also, put the time in to build genuine relationships.

What are you working on in the studio right now? What's coming up next for you?

Currently I am focused on finishing work for two upcoming shows: A two person show with Ashley Lyon at Headstone Gallery in Kingston, NY in April 2024 and a solo presentation with Elijah Wheat Showroom at Future Fair in May 2024.

Anything else you would like to share?

Thank you so much for including me in this beautiful publication. It's an honor.

Thank you for talking with us!



Becca Lowry

