

SculptureCenter


Make

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**New Sculpture
In
New York**


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Things Don't Fall Apart

Anthony Huberman

Simply put, *Make It Now: New Sculpture in New York* is a show to be looked at. Looking, usually, needs lighting. At a recent panel discussion, Richard Tuttle described two kinds of art in illuminating terms, distinguishing between the back-lit and the front-lit. With apologies to the artist for likely misappropriation, this distinction is one way to begin thinking about the works in *Make It Now*.

We confront a back-lit work as we would a screen, engaging it as spectators, consuming delivered information, oftentimes finding pleasure in its grace, insight, complexity, or sheer beauty. The source of light—that which makes what we're looking at visible and therefore meaningful—is invisible. In other words, the mechanism responsible for generating the meaning of the work is present only by implication. As viewers of the back-lit, we appreciate something that has been created *for us*.

With the front-lit, on the other hand, everything is in plain sight: the mechanism that lights the work—literally or figuratively—is exposed. The artist's decisions are laid bare. Suddenly, viewer and light source share the same space, and the viewer can obstruct, divert, or otherwise affect the process through which the work generates meaning. Front-lit art is vulnerable to our scrutiny and second-guessing. We are, willingly or not, participants. For its part, the work becomes necessarily fluid, porous, even transparent. We have a say in determining what we see.

The works in *Make It Now* are clearly front-lit. Many of the twenty-eight artists presented here are baring their devices, giving their support structures a central role in defining the object. Sculpture is therefore revealed as such. They are creating art that is about the very nature of the decisions they are making rather than about the stories those decisions are meant to tell. Their works have breathing room: thoughts and gestures are interrupted and the materials are "just enough," leaving space for the viewer's own imagination to roam and wander. Furthermore, these artists are addressing the history of art head on, revealing their connections to it, rather than letting it languish as an interpretive backdrop.

These same works are also and equally back-lit. How could they not be? Living in New York in 2005, these artists watch wars unfold on television, a president cheered on by a faith-based minority, electoral votes counted by paperless microchips, and American flags burned one after another. It is in the bright glow of this contemporary reality, mediated by the screens of televisions and computers, that these artists think about art and its place in the world, and the objects they make resonate with an awareness of this reality, which lights them, inevitably, from the back.

Make It Now is an exhibition, first and foremost, about *making*—about the process of slicing, carving, molding, bending, placing, piling, arranging, and adjusting materials. The show also highlights the prominence of things, of the *it* in sculpture today. These artists, who skirt nameable references either through abstraction or by reference-overload, are invested in a material "it," rather than a referential "that." References have a way of making objecthood recede, and these artists have enough confidence in the status of the object to let it speak for itself. Finally, the exhibition is about directions sculpture in New York is taking *now*. But the title *Make It Now* also refers to the increasingly present impulse to

locate—even insist on—the contemporary currency of the historical, the traditional, the “then.” These artists are not ignoring the history of art, nor are they rebelling against it in a bout of modernist zeal. Rather, they are comfortable—thrilled, even—with the idea of joining paths with its continuum. Ezra Pound’s famous modernist battle cry, “Make it new!” is only partly present, as this show sidesteps modernist ideals of “the new.” Pound’s eagerness, idealism, and optimistic faith in the possibilities of art, however, are central to this exhibition.

Make It Now comes at a time when artists are faced with a fundamental and timeless challenge: how and what to make in a time when the political back-lighting seems ominous, even disastrous? Of course, this is not the first—nor the most—tragic moment in history, and *Make It Now* considers how these artists approach sculpture differently than their forebears. They are not making *Guernicas*; the strategy of direct critique is noticeably absent. They are not making *Brillo Boxes*; the safe place of irony seems less appealing. They are not making *Silence=Death* billboards; their activism is subtler than that. They are definitely not making *LOVE* signs; they want alternatives to nostalgic reminiscing (despite its wild popularity in today’s art market.)

The artists in *Make It Now* are seeking a way to believe, a path forward, a chance to contemplate an ideal, and are making those impulses into something tangible. Avoiding the pitfalls of modernist utopian thinking or the revolutionary spirit of ’68, they choose a practical idealism of admittedly limited reach. Nevertheless, these artists believe in personal agency, even as they strive to imbue their work with history’s weight and authority.

How does one locate meaning in a world that places a premium on short-term memory? This exhibition suggests one possible approach: mine the long-term memory of art history, find its enduring forms and images, and make them in new ways that resonate with the contemporary moment. History is scattered throughout this exhibition, with various centuries overlapping, coexisting, and becoming, always, part of *now*. Among the iconographies and genres that are brought to the surface: the monument, the pedestal, landscape, the still-life, and other so-called conservative tropes labeled “meta-narratives” and placed in a postmodern quarantine for much of the late 20th century. Ester Partegàs, Charlie Foos, **Jean Shin**, and Navin June Norling each offer takes on the monumental. Pedestals play prominent—if intentionally problematic—roles in works by Gareth James, Nicole Cherubini, and Dave Hardy. The pictorial is back, albeit migrated away from painting, in Leslie Hewitt and Frank Benson’s still-lives. Andrea Cohen, Lisa Sigal, and Bryan Savitz make landscapes. Roberto Visani and Klara Hobza consider obsolete, even ancestral, tools. More than revivers of the modernist avant-garde, these artists are its survivors.

Another question seems no less urgent: how does one search for beauty in a world that feels like it’s falling apart at the seams? In *Make It Now*, artists propose seeking the beauty in those seams, in the grace of structures awkwardly held up by scaffolding or even cardboard, but that stand erect nonethe-

less. Works by Gedi Sibony, Phoebe Washburn, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, and Fritz Welch, with their exposed lattices and visible internal structures, suggest the impossibility of seamlessness. This, perhaps, is what the beautiful looks like in 2005.

The artists in *Make It Now* present historical ideals—the heroic, the grandiose, the assertive, the majestic, for example—as relevant, powerful, and attainable in 2005. Their economy of means, however, represents an articulation of these ideals that's in tune with the context of contemporary realities: the provisional, today, is a property of the ambitious. They are not glorifying history, nor are they refusing to revere it, but they are entirely aware of its awesome fallibility. World order reigns, if only by a thread. *Make It Now*, in many ways, is about the strength of that piece of thread.

Distancing themselves from personal memories or adolescent angst, the artists in this exhibition are after the longer, more persistent stories, stories filled with those small-but-big words like idealism, truth, reality, belief, faith, and human nature. Rather than tell fairytales, they engage with the *real* in the world. Of course, those ideals require an author, someone with faith in authorship, rather than relativist resignation to being "played," as Roland Barthes might say, by a collective consciousness. Indeed, the caution preached by postmodernism—with regard to claiming authorship or to the will of the individual within a larger cultural context—seems to be losing its punch. These artists are insistent without being reactionary, and know that David, standing in Goliath's shadow, can still speak up.

While refusing to be played, the artists in *Make It Now* have nothing against playfulness. Frank Benson and Leslie Hewitt, for instance, take the familiar genre of the still-life and coax it into mischievous new forms. Benson's still-lifes present a condensed history of art: it's not painting, it's sculpture; it's not a vase, it's a warped piece of consumer plastic; it's not a floral arrangement, it's a single flower; it's not real water, it's fake Coca-Cola. But it all still sits on a pedestal. While his flowers introduce the exhibition's figurative and colorful side, Benson's more abstract, warped sheet of MDF begins its formal exploration of laid-bare—albeit re-adjusted—raw materials. We start small and simple, because it will only get bigger and messier. Hewitt's photographs replace Cézanne's apples and oranges on a wooden table with worn-out copies of Alex Haley's *Roots* or VHS cover-sleeves placed on, next to, or under an anonymous wood dresser. Multiple images showing the still-life objects each time rearranged—and therefore not-so-still—are presented in a sixteen-foot long frame.

Andrea Cohen's new floor sculpture and Lisa Sigal's site-specific installation are also about painting. Reaching more than fifteen feet into the cathedral heights of SculptureCenter's main exhibition space, Cohen's mixed-media sculpture recalls the cascading waterfalls in Chinese landscape scroll paintings and merges the transparent with the imposing, the fluid with the solid. Where Cohen brings painting into a language of sculpture, Sigal finds sculpture in the fabric of her painting vocabulary. Appropriately, she works on the wall, using painted chunks of Sheetrock, insulation foam, and joint compound to make temporary architecture out of abstract color fields of fragmented things.

Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Gedi Sibony, and Bryan Savitz all reference landscape in their sculptures. The long wooden stick that holds up Hutchins's leaning papier mâché form foreshadows the skinny patchwork of metal studs that prop up Sibony's gigantic gestures. Her meticulous collage of newspapers painted black becomes a slice of mountainside or the curve of a wave; his large-scale mixed-media sculpture is a graceful and innovative expression of process art. Both are landscapes on the brink of collapse, and while Hutchins's is material and metaphorical, Sibony's is conceptual: his viewers witness themselves in a complex spatial arrangement that is as much about their movement within it as about formal composition. Folding, peeling, bending, and collapsing, Sibony brings to mind Richard Serra's famous list of transitive verbs. Not nearly as restrained in its execution but just as economical in its materials is Savitz's installation of used cardboard cut into the shapes of bald eagles, picnic tables, coal mine canaries, and infinite other markers of the American landscape, which inserts a blast of color and vernacular into SculptureCenter's cavernous underground space.

Navin June Norling, [Jean Shin](#), Phoebe Washburn, and Charlie Foos invent monuments, though of the 99-cent-store variety. Distinct from installation art, these works accentuate the sculptural reality and authority of the monumental, making fronts and backs, but not penetrable "withins." Norling paints on rotting, castaway storm windows, using them to form a translucent wall, a totem pole for suspended thought bubbles that float high up in the air. Also translucent, [Shin](#)'s empty plastic prescription bottles multiply many times over in dizzying mirror reflections of each other. Washburn has turned the outdoor courtyard's gravel into an indoor obstruction by painting hundreds of them, carrying them inside, and turning them into a massive boulder of pebbles, wood, and consumed scaffolding. Foos's video of himself riding a coin-operated plastic horse in front of a deli, lance and shield in hand, is an equestrian monument, stuttering with each inserted quarter.

Installed in SculptureCenter's courtyard are Ester Partegàs's and Dave Hardy's objects hiding from objecthood. Partegàs's towering structure resembles both a construction site for something not yet finished and a heroic statue undergoing repairs under a blue tarp. The sculpture is frozen in a loop of being neither remembered nor forgotten, neither partial nor complete, neither meaningful nor meaningless. More landscape than monument, Hardy's installation contains echoes of a time and place when ornamentation ruled. Amid his wooden podiums and green-grass hedges, a gothic lantern pierces through a box, hinting that just a small glimpse of beauty is sometimes exactly enough, or that folly, no matter how tamed, will persevere. In both artists' works, objects overcome their own smothered disappearance.

In *Make It Now*, the fake sometimes looks real, and the real sometimes looks fake, and Vincent Mazeau and Matthew Ronay each capture the tension between the two. A garden birdbath (concrete), a chandelier (urethane), frozen icicles (Styrofoam), and a cinderblock wall (okay, cinderblocks) comprise Mazeau's quiet Proustian corner. In Ronay's floor sculptures, a cartoon is made raunchy, with penis, dildo, and booty amputated and laid on the floor before a mirror.

While owing as much to Classicism and the Baroque as it does to Minimalism and Relational Aesthetics, *Make It Now* has one foot—or at least a few toes—solidly planted in Pop. Rachel Harrison, Robert Melee, SOL'SAX, Luis Gispert, Roberto Visani, and Nicole Cherubini light Pop from the front, expose its mechanisms, and ask what holds it up. Marlon Brando, store-bought mannequins, Black Flag, and bling-bling regalia all find a way into their sculptural forms. But these Pop references are not meant to challenge the highbrow sanctity of fine art; rather, they establish the art object's urgency within contemporary popular culture. This Pop makes art political, not glamorous.

Harrison pursues her particular art of juxtaposed juxtapositions, in which sculpture slips between being sculpture, a support structure for photographs, a space for Pop fetishes, and back around again, endlessly. Each split-personality form is also a pedestal for the next. Melee makes statues out of plastic mannequins while Gispert makes pop-music emblems into shiny shapes folded in on themselves, both incorporating the display modes of commerce. Against a backdrop of colored blinds, Melee uses things—rather than walls—to hold up his painted objects. Gispert covers the logo of the seminal Los Angeles punk band Black Flag with fake jewels in a floor sculpture that both heralds and humbles the anarchist brand. 'SAX appropriates the smooth jazz of *La Vie En Rose* to make a hip-hop *La Vie Sous-Sol*, an underground music room of upside-down figures hanging from the ceiling. Referencing more violent icons, Visani's political Pop takes the shape of handmade rifles. Constructed of shells, pheasant feathers, chunks of sidewalk concrete, and many other materials, they obliquely refer to the Atlantic Slave Trade and find eerie resonance in contemporary diplomacy. Cherubini works with pedestal-placed ceramic urns, also claiming personal ownership of historic iconography: in her takeoffs on Roman and Etruscan vessels, fake gold chains, rabbit fur, and faux jewels replace hieroglyphs. Nothing is sacred in Cherubini's gangsta-turned-glam displays of ostentation.

Performance is yet another genre that seeps into the language of sculpture, directly in the case of Nancy Hwang, by implication with Fritz Welch, and in the form of aftermath with Klara Hobza. To some, SculptureCenter's narrow lower-level spaces are claustrophobic. For them, Hwang ups the ante: behind curtains, she places a bed, a nightstand, a telephone, a video camera, and, at times, herself, constructing an architecture of intimacy between strangers. Spending the day in the bed or making herself instantly available by phone, she invites visitors to join her in conversation, whether it be confession or small talk. Welch also reacts to the compression of the basement. Squeezed between two wall drawings, his material Big Bang—a room-size wind-up toy made of found materials and containing too many musical and literary references to count—hangs on the precipice of explosion, or, equally likely, is caught milliseconds after one has begun, the clamoring noise of his pots and pans left hanging in mid-air. In her performance (and subsequent video), Klara Hobza makes SculptureCenter's entire building her object. Using Morse code, she turns on and off over a hundred lights strung across the building's clerestory beam structure, trying to communicate with

all of Long Island City. Her pathetic attempt—since her potential audience is not likely to know the transmitting language nor possesses the equipment to respond—makes a place into an expression of desperation.

In *Design and Crime*, Hal Foster argues that the old project of connecting art to life—as practiced by the Bauhaus, for example—is today accomplished through design. This is capitalism's revenge on postmodernism, he proposes, as design makes the transgressions of the latter into the routines of the former. In *Make It Now*, Guyton \ Walker—the collaborative duo of Wade Guyton and Kelley Walker—and Corey McCorkle penetrate the fortress of design and, without disrupting its useful functions, problematize its logic. Guyton \ Walker's chandelier made of coconuts, while infinitely clumsy, provides a majestic source of light. In a seventy-foot-long installation of fluorescent bulbs that seem to be made of wood, McCorkle transforms James Turrell's spiritual immateriality into a world-bound object again. Equally divorced from Olafur Eliasson's grandeur and Bruce Nauman's psychologies, McCorkle's lights merge the mystical with the everyday.

Make It Now gives sculptural shape to the idea of transparency. Gareth James's kinetic sculpture of turntables and revolving Plexiglas cubes takes Marcel Duchamp's early rotoreliefs as inspiration and makes the optical effect transparent and in stereo. Seth Price silkscreens downloaded Jihad propaganda video stills onto thin sheets of crumpled plastic, making transparent anti-forms that are unrecognizable as images, but dynamic as drawings. These see-through non-things are installed throughout the building, like parasites to the exhibition.

Throughout *Make It Now*, one thing is a constant: artists interrupt space with shapes. Yet none of the shapes seem anchored, so we are left to wonder where these forms (and their content) might wander next. Interrupting today's culture of greed and speed, these artists move away from frenetic sampling, reckless referencing, and postmodern channel-surfing to invest in the gravity of what art has been and what it can be, in the questions art has asked and the ones it might still ask: in 2005, can the beautiful be made in some other way? What does the epic look like today? Can soliloquies be dramatic with the sound turned off? Is a giant who forgot to put pants on over his stilts still a giant? Is fragility the new heroic? Is see-through the new monumental? Such seeming contradictions become concordant because somehow, somehow, things *don't* fall apart. Someway, somehow, transparent materials are solid, cracked surfaces are alluring, and wobbly structures are more like jewels than ruins. Someway, somehow, history is hip. Someway, somehow, the big questions still apply. Someway, somehow, with skyscrapers falling, subway cars derailing, and landlords evicting, New York goes on, and it does so gloriously. *Make It Now* celebrates the beauty of the small that is big, of the fragile that is monumental, of the old that is new. Remember, sculpture has always been the "malleable" art, the one that is able to make something meaningful out of a pile of nothing, whether it's lit from the front or from the back.

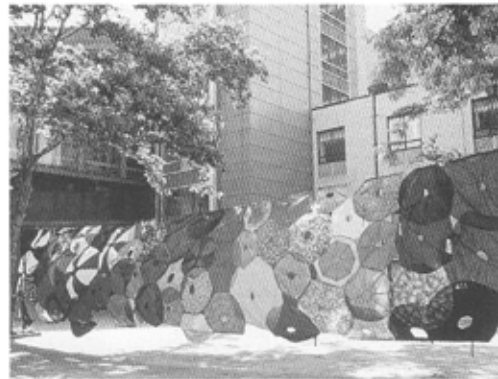
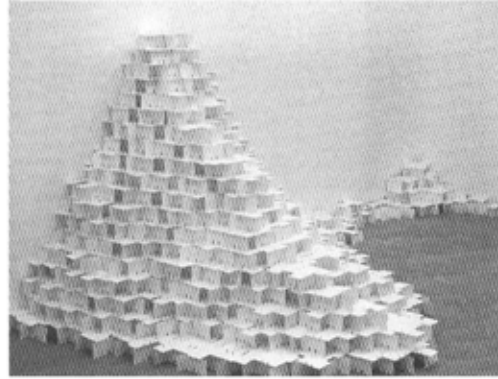


Jean Shin **b.1971, Seoul, South Korea**

Jean Shin, like several of the artists in *Make It Now*, uses discarded material (the excess, the forgotten, the no longer useful) in works that operate between abstraction and representation. Made from the remnants of contemporary urban life, Shin's sculptures form a sort of visual history and a social mapping. The artist often starts by collecting hoards of material such as lonesome socks, scratched-off lottery tickets, or broken umbrellas. These humble castoffs are then organized, sewn, stacked, tied, or in some manner assembled into sculptures that act as metaphors for the body, for architecture, or for communities. Shin uses formalism and repetition as the organizing structure of her work, while retaining the histories and references of her material sources.

For an installation created in 2004 for The Museum of Modern Art's Projects series, Shin asked all the employees, from the janitors to the director, to contribute an article of clothing that they used to wear to work. She then laboriously deconstructed the items, removing the seams, cuffs, and collars. The parts were arranged in an abstract flat pattern on opposite walls, and a dense web of seams, cuffs, and collars connected the two walls overhead. Here, what is cut away describes what's between us. *Chance City* (2001/2004), constructed from over \$20,000 worth of discarded scratch-and-play lottery tickets, is a cityscape created as a house-of-cards structure. Shin's sculptures and installations describe the values and aspirations of communities through the scraps. For SculptureCenter, Shin creates a sculpture from thousands of used prescription pill bottles that reflects a fragile culture of dependency. —mc

Jean Shin earned a BFA in Painting and an MS in Art History and Criticism at Pratt Institute in 1996. Her solo exhibitions include Projects 81, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2004); and Penumbra, Socrates Sculpture Park, New York (2003). She has been included in numerous group exhibitions including Material Matters, Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY (2005); Counter Culture, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2004); and Open House: Working in Brooklyn, Brooklyn Museum, New York (2004), among others.



left to right, top to bottom

Alterations, 1999. Fabric (paint scraps) and wax. 2' x 22' x 12'. Collection of Peter Norton. Photo: Steve Tucker

Carte Blanche Constructions (Tower of Babel), 2001. Rolodex cards. Dimensions variable

Projects 81 (Cut Outs and Suspended Seams), 2004. Cut fabric (clothes from MoMA staff), starch, thread. Dimensions variable. Photo: Masahiro Noguchi

Umbrellas Stripped Bare, 2001. Broken umbrella fabric, thread, cable. 50' x 6'

Penumbra, 2003. Fabric (broken umbrellas), thread. 72' x 45'. Photo: Masahiro Noguchi

Fringe, 2000. Neckties knotted onto fence. Site-specific installation, downtown New Haven, CT

All images courtesy of the artist and Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York