

## **Ways of Holding: The Art of Anne Q. McKeown**

By Dahlia Elsayed

In her Newark studio, Anne Q. McKeown is showing me a maquette for an upcoming installation. Amidst the chicken wire, bubble packaging, toy soldiers, and plastic mesh is a cardboard box in the scale of the exhibition space, and in it she is arranging tiny wire forms covered with a tight green skin of paper. One sees hands, a Jungian Lizard, botanical forms. Even in their miniature size, they are both delicate and threatening, grabbing into the empty space. Anne's hands move continuously as she describes the plans for an ambitious installation.

This new project, like much of her work, originates with narrative and without being too revelatory, suggests something deeply personal. "I'm always holding stories in my head," she says, "Holding symbols and colors."

This kind of "holding" as she describes it, is evidence of detailed observation and thoughtful listening, processed through time and action. It results in the heightened attention to visual forms that appear in her work that can read as familiar but not literal. She describes the holding as "an incubation time, so that things occur without direct reference." It is in a way a kind of ripening of an idea, through editing, planning, envisioning. "Some things disappear, my head has to be ready for my hands to move."

In her drawings and installations shapes exist that seem representational but are not quite: the ghost of a figure or a contour of an animal or a partial architectural grid, suggesting a closely held image from a distance. One gets a sense of comfort from recognition, but complicated through color and surface, a careful complexity contrasting with our instantly graphic visual culture. It takes some time, it's more than what you see at first and reading is pleasurable.

While looking in one of her sketchbooks, talking about the colors of green in the new work (a green for lust, a green for envy), Anne opens to a page and out falls a beautiful rust colored sheet of paper - bark cloth actually - as she explains, from a Ugandan ficus tree, with stark white waveforms she has painted on it. It could be a hundred years old - and this is the thing about Anne and her work - it pulls across time and borders and places - there is east and west here, and north and south. A vast knowledge of artists and art history mixed with techniques that again span time - all continuously flowing pouring out of the hands of a contemporary artist.

Here is a reference to Islamic architecture, here is a tornado form, and here is a reference to a patch of fluorescent pink she saw in Tribeca this morning. Whether it's from the Byzantine or her iPhone, she's an observer, watching the world, always excited about the visual. And it's exciting to watch her excitement, to see an industrial sheet of blue plastic draped behind a wire

mesh with seemingly fragile formed paper, transformed, layered into a large installation, appearing simultaneously prehistoric and futuristic, that invites and commands careful looking.

It's too limiting to define Anne as a papermaker, or a sculptor, or a printer - the work crosses mediums, and instead is propelled by ideas, symbols, color and texture, and techniques that rework themselves across projects and categories. She is above all the labels a maker - not categorized.

In one series of work, she used projections of tracings of figures from the western canon of art and tracings of previous wire sculptures as starting points for new drawings, filling the sheets of white paper with overlapping outlines that retain the dimensional feel on the flat surface. The layered shapes open onto and top of each other, creating an orchestrated pile of lines and objects. And in a new series of small oil paintings, heaps of Hummel figurines that belonged to her mother and have been passed around through the family are tumbled over and partially visible, suggesting more abstraction than nostalgia. In these works, things come back with a new life. The methods and ideas of one body of work don't just end - they continue on to other forms, so that her system of gesture and process is not limited to medium, an unlimited system of making, regenerating infinitely.

It's a process of chance and intention that she describes as "Automatic but also a fight against the automatic, something automatic from the predetermined." It's evident also in her openness to the will of her materials: Not knowing how the paper is going to dry, wrinkle, set, keeps a sense of life there. The accidents remain, because she sees them as part of the conversation between control and randomness. "They speak to the story, the way the wrinkle or bulge of a paper can come out looking like your father's eyebrow. It would take a lot to say that's not what I want, I'm pretty free having it come out with its own identity."

Mostly she works from a place of sophisticated resonance, a skilled hand that acts as an effortless continuation of contemplated concept. Her works present a combination of masterful hand, educated mind, sensitive eye, and the unconscious instinct (as well as a fearlessness).

"You feel it in your gut," she says as she describes the accident of dropping glue covered toothpicks onto a page of the New York Times, and how the outcome - the small wooden sticks and glue drops - added a scarring sculptural element to the photograph in the paper. What was it about this particular combination, that didn't need further manipulation? "It felt true," she replies.

It is that truth in Anne's work that resonates with the viewer, that pulls one closer in. There is always a transparency and opaqueness both in form and in content, a complexity that is genuine and generous. Each move, each brushstroke, or twist or layer feels accurate, keeps the story

going, propels forward. There is no dead space, even in the quiet gestures. It doesn't feel forced in idea, or tortured in material. Instead it inhabits a place of purposeful effortlessness.

Anne is always making something. Whether she is bending wires, mixing pigment, twisting paper, drawing, each action moves her forward, instinctively, methodically gracefully plodding towards the next thing.

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