

Alexis Granwell: Open Surfaces

by Juliana Cerqueira Leite

My hand is in the pocket and then the tips of the fingers brush up against something unexpected. It is part-pocket lint, part-tissue, part-memory from the last cry or the last cold, transformed by the washing machine from absorbent sheet to rigid fossil.

When I arrive at Alexis Granwell's studio in the South Side of Philadelphia, I note that the entrance hall of the warehouse is a surprising amalgam: white popcorn-textured walls, old plaster molding, green-blue wooden door, and mustard-yellow pipework. I recall some of the colors I'd seen in her sculptures online. Alexis shows me into her studio, her sculptures and wall reliefs people the space and there is color. She tells me how one relief's hues remind her of winter, a sculpture's purple reminds her of childhood, and some purples have more dignity than others. Coming from a background in painting and printmaking, she has a particular relationship to color. Hers are often mixed tones, a subtle emotional register. In some of her works, confettied chunks of pigmented paper are reminiscent of multicolored chewing gum furtively but proudly smooshed onto the underside of a table.

The paper pulp and sheets that Granwell uses are worked wet, and drying changes the vibrancy of the pigments, which are embedded into the material. It makes the works opaque, thirsty, and inviting to touch. The fibrous surface of the sculptures seems to materially “cross-fade” into the negative space surrounding it as opposed to presenting a finite skin. Hazy, like felt, or gauze, or tissue, or dense cobwebs, the surface is or appears to be in some sort of motion. Harder boundaries emerge only between tectonic segments of colored paper whose edges are crumpled, pulled apart, the same material appearing again in other parts of the same work. Sheets of soft, pliable paper appears to be pushed onto a resisting form concealed underneath—I imagine fingertips pressing and water running, and the limits created by something unseen.

Granwell’s concern with the tactility and “hapticity” of her material, its supports and abstract armatures, raises questions that have traditionally been associated with sculpture. Earlier works I see in the studio are composed of organic, pierced forms that could be the lumpy grandchildren of modernist sculptor Barbara Hepworth. The more complicated relationship between form and surface seen in Granwell’s recent works engages a less stable alliance between support and surface, image and plastic form—especially as the paper surface appears to slip downwards from the sculptures to coat the folding chairs and other recog-

nizable metal forms that act as their supports. Her hollow armatures are shaped from metal mesh and welded metal rods, yet these materials are entirely concealed. I ask her how she determines their shapes, and we talk about memory, our shared experiences of landscapes and touch upon the visualization of emotion as form.

The torso-sized volumes harbor craggy topographies, caves that occasionally pierce clean through the sculpture's body, and thin, line-like protrusions that loop and ring the space surrounding the work. Granwell's finely made dimensional lumber supports suggest painting that has had to adapt to a new freestanding reality. The canvas has crumpled into a three-dimensional form, color jets outwards independent of surface, and the whole event rests on stretcher bars reconfigured into a plinth.

The objects that artists make when they move from painting to sculpture frequently evidence their negotiations with medium-specific tropes. I think of Eva Hesse's "Hang Up" from 1966, the empty wrapped frame supporting a large wire loop that juts out awkwardly into space like a jumping rope or lasso inviting a body. Or Franz West's "The Unconscious," monumental loops snaking into the streetscape and terminating at a little nubbin of a seat. Granwell's handle-like ejections tentatively meander out from, and then back to, the main body of her sculptures. They bring surrounding space into the sculpture while their scale

invites a body to grab or lift the artwork as if it were a pitcher, small body, or amphora. These “handles” add a layer of contingency to works that are already materially sensitive to their environment.

Her materials are kept wet. Granwell opens the door of her studio refrigerator exposing a colorful world of plastic bottles filled with waterborne pigment and fiber. Wrapped in thick black plastic, her raw materials are large handmade paper sheets cast in bulk, with color. Stored wet, the paper is sensitive to mold and fungal spores—even as they are present in our breath, she tells me. She wears a mask while working to protect not herself, but her material. I am reminded of how wearing a mask while making my own very dusty and dry work brings attention to the breath, and with it a certain state of mind.

The intimacy of pulped paper can be felt in the mouth, in the memory of tissues and how they relate to moisture and the body, the feeling of rain and what it does to a newspaper. Granwell tells me how she enjoys seeing the paper go from fiber to sheets and back to fiber, cyclically, as if it is digested and then reconstituted. The wetness dissolves the paper into something that remembers touch. Unlike the stable structure of the dry pages in a book where touch is largely unreadable, moisture turns paper into a quilted fillet of clay. What it remembers now are not words but other forms of pressure.

The finished sculptures are unsealed, open to touch and therefore need care. Granwell explains that she initially sculpted with expanding foam, but her desire to be closer to her work made the use of toxic substances problematic. I think of how many sculptures I saw at the Venice Biennale this year directly referenced Donna Haraway, engaging an eco-conscious vision of the future, only to reveal themselves to be made with toxic petrochemicals. Granwell speaks of her excitement in recently seeing the work of Rosemary Mayer and Ree Morton, women who also chose to work with accessible and highly tactile materials at a time when artists like Donald Judd and Richard Serra were no longer fabricating their own work.

It's tempting to think of certain material choices as related to gender—especially as exclusion from Dia-scale production budgets has historically limited women, queer, poor, and non-white artists to the aesthetics of what they could find at home, the local art shop, or the dollar store. But I'd like to flip this narrative and consider the impact of choosing such tactilely well-known materials. Granwell's choice proposes that art happens within the reach of everyday life, in the beauty of a crumpled page, the napkin colored by spilt juice, the way that light looks in winter or a purple appears undignified. Accessible to material and tactile memory, her work considers the ways in which we write ourselves daily without words—and read our unwritten histories through careful touch.