

Has your work and process taken on new meaning for you in recent years?

SM: I think my perspective has changed over the last few years, like most people, but my art-making has always been my rock. It continues to nurture my psychic health and organize my inner eye.

Melissa Messina is an Independent Curator, Curatorial Advisor, and Executor of the Mildred Thompson Estate, Atlanta, GA.

Shawne Major (b. December 1968) is an American mixed-media artist based in Louisiana. Major is known for working in two-dimensional mixed media hangings and three-dimensional mixed media sculptures. Her drawings in this exhibition are being exhibited for the first time.

Major was born in New Iberia, Louisiana. She attended the University of Southwestern Louisiana, where she received a BFA degree in painting (1991). She went on to study at Rutgers University, where she received an MFA in sculpture (1995).

Major has exhibited extensively throughout the United States, including exhibitions in Louisiana, Georgia, Indiana, Illinois, Texas, Washington D.C., and Alabama. A selection of her awards includes a Joan Mitchell Center Artist in Residence (2016), Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Residency Fellowship (2015), Pollock-Krasner Foundation Artist Grant (2008), and Artist in Residence, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (1992).

Her work can be found in private and permanent collections, including the Francis Greenburger Collection (New York, NY), the Ogden Museum of Southern Art (New Orleans, LA), the US Art in Embassies, Brazzaville, Congo Frederick Weisman Foundation (Los Angeles, CA), and the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, DC).

* Cover image: *Billet Doux* (detail), 2019, mixed media including rubber inner tubes rope, string lights, ribbon, lace, doll hair, vinyl rain coat, costume jewelry, phone chargers, electrical cords, and braid sewn onto fabric and plastic poultry netting. Image courtesy of the artist.

This exhibition is generously funded, in part, by Texas Commission on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Wesley W. Washburn, M.D. and Lulu L. Smith, M.D. Endowment Fund, the C. Homer and Edith Fuller Chambers Charitable Foundation, the City of Beaumont, and the members of the Art Museum of Southeast Texas. Additional funding provided by SouthArts.

To find out more about how National Endowment for the Arts grants impact individuals and communities, visit www.arts.gov.



Art Museum of Southeast Texas
500 Main St. Beaumont, TX 77701
(409) 832-3432 | www.amset.org
Museum Hours
Mon-Fri 9-5 Sat 10-5 Sunday 12-5
Closed major holidays

SHAWNE MAJOR FORCE MAJEURE AND OTHER COMPULSIONS

ART MUSEUM OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS
SEPTEMBER 30 - DECEMBER 3, 2023





Force Majeure and Other Compulsions

Shawne Major, in conversation with Melissa Messina

Shawne Major is widely acclaimed for her vast mixed media tapestries which began in the early 1990s. These meticulously entwined pieces are laden with found objects disassociated from their former use and sewn together into a ground of mesh or netting. Into these new surroundings, new narratives are woven. In a 2016 conversation, in preparation for the group exhibition *Conjurers: Artists Imbue the Ordinary*, Major shared that she views these loaded planes of color and texture as metaphors for the filters through which we see reality, signifying our specific visions of the world. Over the past three decades she has developed a highly attuned abstract visual language that mines formal considerations for their emotional content. Her pieces, therefore, possess unique, and self-containing, visual tonalities that reflect the density and complexity of our human experience. For this interview, on the occasion of her solo exhibition at the Art Museum of Southeast Texas, we revisit the impetus behind Major's obsessive practice, touching on its importance in today's cultural climate, her use of abstraction to convey meaning, and the emotional states her works evoke. We also highlight her intimately-scaled drawings, presented for the first time with her large-scale multi-media pieces, that together comprise *Force Majeure and Other Compulsions*.

Melissa Messina: Let's start with the title of the exhibition, *Force Majeure and Other Compulsions*. It is a title as enigmatic and compelling as your work. Tell me how it came about?

Shawne Major: A force majeure is an irresistible compulsion. I was interested in how acts of



Cazimi, 2021, Mixed media including rope, string lights, ribbon, lace, costume jewelry, phone chargers, electrical cords, and braid sewn onto fabric and plastic poultry netting.

bracelets - can you speak to their use both formally and conceptually?

SM: Although my fiber works are abstractions, generally the circles refer to escape hatches or portals. Also, I like to layer organic and geometric abstractions so that the element of time and change is suggested like layers in sedimentary rock.

MM: Speaking of escape hatches, I cannot help but think about our dire environmental crisis when I look at your work because in so many ways it is tied to issues of consumption and consumerism. Do you feel your work touches on these issues?

SM: Yes, there are a wealth of associations that add to my palette when I use objects that have already lived in the world. I am using the language or detritus of consumerism as the medium and sometimes I'll make pieces specifically about climate change but usually the issue is in the background. Lately my material object choices have been mostly junk jewelry, electrical cords, toys and rope. I still have to purchase new materials sometimes, when I have a specific color or form I need for a piece.

MM: In this vein, your work also evokes for me the notion of desire - the desire for objects, for connection, for the past, for memory. There is a longing I feel in all of your pieces. Can you speak to desire as it relates to the content in your work?

SM: I feel like the works are layers of (my) emotion expressed in physical objects so definitely desire would be part of the mix although the final result is always abstract.

MM: You stated at the onset of this conversation that "acts of nature and other trauma can and will alter a person's perspective forever." Given the conlifts of the past few years, your work feels to me more poignant than ever.



Lucid Dreamer, 2018, Mixed media including ribbon, lace, costume jewelry, phone chargers, electrical cords, and braid sewn onto plastic rain coat and window screen.

MM: Is memory, which in many ways is our need to return to past emotional states, our force majeure, our irresistible compulsion?

SM: Yes, I think memory is humanity's irresistible compulsion. Also, sewing, at least for me, could be considered an irresistible compulsion since I've been doing it nearly every day for the last 30 years.

MM: Let's talk about your process as it relates to abstraction, which plays a big part in your work. Abstraction requires formal considerations such as decisions about texture, color, line, etc. But these formal considerations also have deeper, more intuitive meaning. First, I'd like to ask you about color. Can you talk about the ways color is important to your work both aesthetically and symbolically?

SM: I try to set up complex color relationships in my work. Setting up contrasts in color or texture or in other ways can suggest conflict. Often I will add an obnoxious object or color to a piece early on and the struggle to balance the work becomes part of the piece. The seeming chaos is controlled. I am always chasing a precarious balance in my work.



Orbital Decay, 2017, mixed media including crocheted afghan, costume jewelry, fabric trim, cord, lace, vintage sports pendants, artificial flowers, Christmas lights and string hand sewn onto window screen.

MM: I am struck by the dualities you describe in the meaning of your work - experience and remembrance, tension and release, order and chaos. Is there a catharsis, a processing of life's dualities perhaps, in your art-making that you are extending to the viewer?

SM: Catharsis is a good call. Until the works are finished, they feel like a battle, where I balance cacophonous elements and find the work's particular harmony and logic.

MM: Found objects, though used compositionally for color and line, are also rich in symbolic meaning. For example, all of the works are adorned in small circles - made mostly of rings and

nature and other trauma can and will alter a person's perspective forever. All of the mixed media textile pieces are my metaphors for our personal perspective lenses/filters that affect what we allow ourselves to see. I've always imagined these works as almost gigantic contact lenses gooped up with all the family, community, cultural, emotional experiences and influences that can overlap and impair your vision of objective reality.

MM: So if the dense layering mirrors the ways in which humans move through these personal perspectives, are you portraying our seeing through the web of this "goop" or the ways in which we are blinded by it? Or both perhaps?

SM: Yes, psychic goop can blind a person or help them to survive. It's a funny metaphor for me because my mixed media works have gotten denser and heavier over the years and it reminds me how difficult it is to have a fresh objective viewpoint. I'm carrying decades of my own experiences and belief systems and everything I experience is filtered through my personal "goop." It often makes me wonder what I am not seeing.

MM: You have said that with the exception of size and shape, very little is planned in your pieces. Can you speak a bit about your process? What compels you, for example, to go in a specific direction with a piece? What decides a work's individual tone?

SM: I do set up loose parameters as far as the kind of materials and starting colors I intend to use in the works. With the larger works in the show which date back to 2015 I was trying to make



Dura Mater, 2015, mixed media including plastic and wooden toys, buttons, beads, lace, costume jewelry sewn onto base of clothing and window screen.



the works feel more like line drawings by using more linear type objects such as electrical cords, charger cables, rope, and necklaces. These works are square or squarish because the shape seems more abstract to me than rectangles which always remind me of doors and windows.

MM: How collectively do your pieces tell an emotional narrative? Why were these specific pieces chosen to convey the overall idea of a force majeure?

SM: Force majeure here refers both to intense internal forces and overwhelming external forces of nature. This exhibition is 8 years of attempting to create abstractions of emotional landscapes while only using objects light and durable enough to sew. The earliest works contain more recognizable household objects and toys, then lots of junk jewelry and then finally linear objects like rope and string lights. The 5" x 5" pieces are part of my ongoing body of work where I use the linear elements to overlay geometric and organic compositions to create tension and release.

MM: You have described your pieces as emotional landscapes. The webbed nettings feel like sieves that catch and filter meaning. They are lush, laden, and boundary-blurring, similar to physical landscapes. Can you speak to your work in relation to types of landscape?

SM: I grew up and currently live in South Louisiana which is super lush in terms of plant life. These works are emotional landscapes. The density of the physical landscape here has always influenced my compositions.

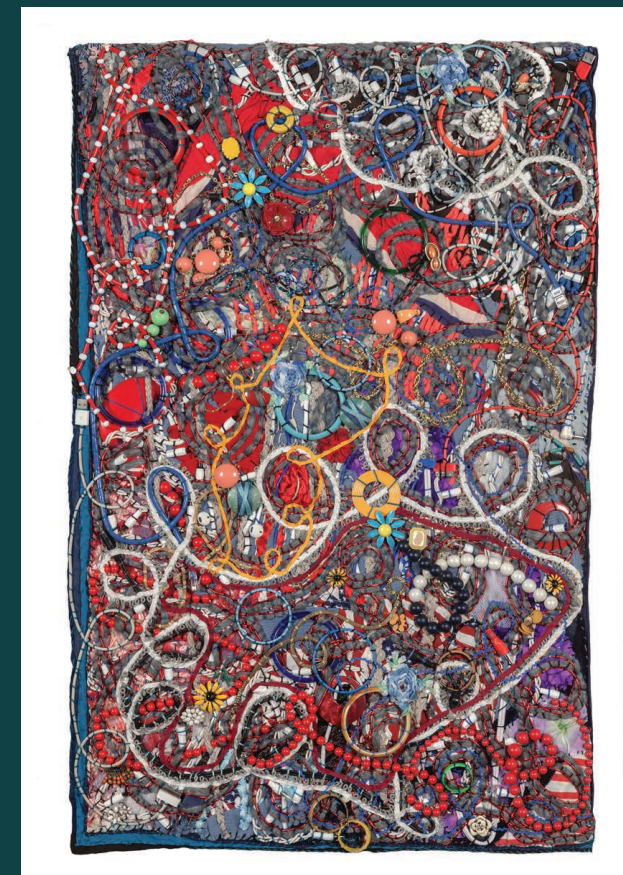
MM: Can you say more about this? How are your forms inspired by landscapes and patterns in nature?

SM: I find ideas for compositions in the layers of the systems in nature. I love gardening and I like to think about all the different animals, plants, fungi and microbes in any given area as interlaced systems. Tree rings, patterns on leaves or bark, wave marks on sand, I love the variety of repetition in nature. Nature looks like order and chaos to me.

MM: In addition to objects, you also use scale to create an emotional impact. Most of your works are human-scale, creating for viewers a way to enter the work as it envelopes their whole field of vision. In this exhibition there are large-scale pieces juxtaposed with small-scale drawings. The

drawings' intimate size, combined with their complexity, offers a different entry point. Are you pleased with the relationship between the two in the show?

SM: I think of the works on paper as metaphors for the way trauma or love or extreme emotion can freeze frame a scene in your mind that you go back to compulsively like a missing tooth draws your tongue. These pieces are representations of details within some of the fiber works. Going from abstraction to representation was like the difference between experiencing something and then trying to remember it. Parts of the story are fuzzy and parts are brighter.



Dactyl, 2017, mixed media including fabric from clothing, costume jewelry, phone charger and other electric cords, Christmas lights, plastic produce nets, yarn, cord fabric trim, hand sewn onto window screen.

MM: And this is the first time you are exhibiting your drawings together with the mixed media fiber works. Why now? And why not ever before?

SM: For several years I put all my energy and thought into my fiber works and during the pandemic I surrendered to my urge to work on paper and to work relatively fast - a year or so for the fiber work the drawing is based on. The fiber works are like the evidence of experiences, and the drawings are like old snapshots of the evidence.

MM: That is a beautiful statement. Why did you begin to draw these details? What made you want to take a "snapshot of the evidence?"

SM: I have an obsessive personality and I noticed how incidents from the past get stuck in my head for days or weeks or longer. Going back to the details of the fiber pieces and creating new art with them feels like that re-remembering where you go back to an event, even a trivial one, so much that it's changed in your head and takes on its own life. I am interested in how objects and colors trigger memories. I like when viewers are drawn in and bring their own memories to the works.