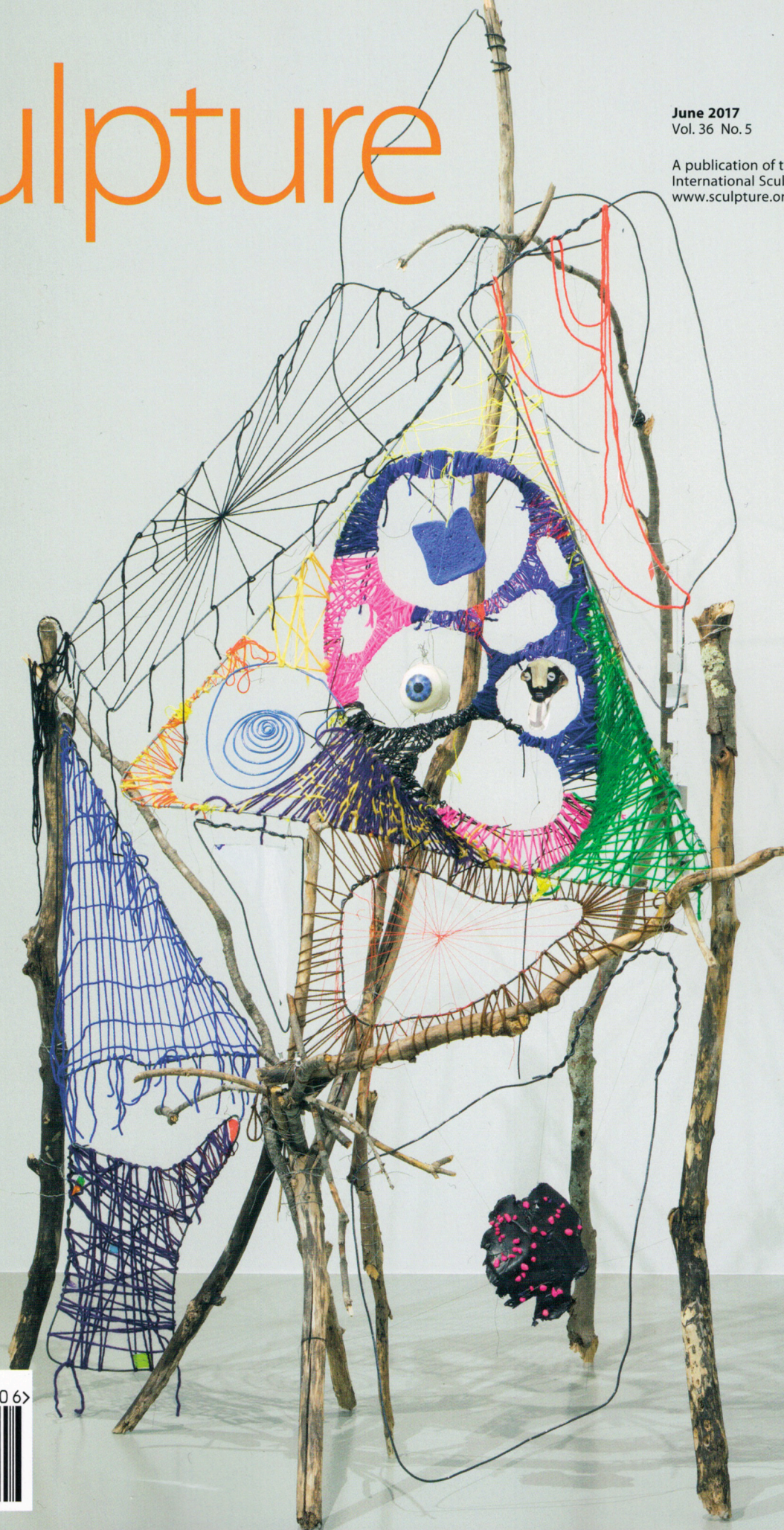


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# The Dance of Beauty and Failure

A Conversation with

Michelle  
Segre

BY MICHAËL AMY

Michelle Segre's extraordinarily eclectic work juxtaposes forms, processes, materials, textures, colors, and ideas to exhilarating effect. Hers is difficult work that comes—as far as my own experience tells me—with a steep learning curve, because it pulls the rug from under one's expectations regarding sculpture. With Segre, one suddenly realizes, again, that the time has come to shake off tradition and play catch-up. Her anti-hierarchical, handmade sculptures often engage space in new and interesting ways, using painting—which Segre studied in art school in the '80s—as a starting point. She employs a version of Surrealism that runs amok, at its fun-loving best (think Mirò) and happily devoid of excess luggage. Segre is a risk-taker—as are the dealers who show her work and who deserve praise for doing so. She rocks the boat, hard. We still need that today, surprisingly enough. Big time.



*Self-Reflexive Narcissistic Supernova*, 2013.  
Metal, yarn, thread, wire, plastic bags,  
plastic lace, papier-mâché, photos, Mylar,  
clay, screws, acrylic, modeling clay, wood,  
beeswax, dried mushrooms, and cobble-  
stone, 72 x 84 x 156 in.



**Michaël Amy:** *Could you give me an overview of the stages leading up to your recent work?*

**Michelle Segre:** I was a painter in art school, but about seven years after leaving school, I started working three-dimensionally, making little objects out of creepy detritus materials like dirt, rocks, and cat litter; I grew mold inside mounds of soil and incorporated rotting food into my sculpture. Then I discovered beeswax and started making forms using a process in which I melted wax in a double boiler and added pigments. I would then pour the liquid wax onto a tray and work it with a palette knife until I achieved the consistency of clay and sculpt it over a papier-mâché armature.

I wanted to use accessible materials that did not require fabrication or outside help, that would be both cheap and easy to use, and I wanted to use non-toxic materials that I could work with my hands. The beeswax became the skin that covered my forms. I got hooked on it, using it exclusively, and the forms increasingly referenced things from the world at large. In 1995, I made a sculpture of a cheese wedge, about five feet long and four feet high, based on the iconic shape of Swiss cheese with holes in it. The surface of the sculpture, however, is thoroughly fictionalized by the details that emerge from the wax. The interior form is built up of newspaper, cardboard, and other rubbish.

**MA:** *You remain interested in the idea of decomposition. Where does this come from?*

**MS:** I was interested in the idea of things changing, things transforming themselves, the cycles of nature as they relate to our feelings of vulnerability and to the human body. A lot of my forms—carrots, a wedge of cheese, a slice of bread—evoke the body and are anthropomorphized. I was also extremely interested in the skin of the object becoming an entryway to another world. The surface, rich with detail, was meant to be seen as a kind of fractal plane—the closer you looked at the piece, the more you would see. I was after that microscopic effect of tunneling into the inside world of a form and how to achieve that through surface. The skin was, in a sense, more important than the whole.

**MA:** *Golden White Slice and Assorted Crumbs, Golden White Slice II, and Assorted Crumbs and Half-Slice (all from 1996) almost resemble images of war—walls pockmarked with bullet and cannonball holes, architecture in a ruined state.*

**MS:** Definitely. It's about entropy. It's bread, but it's also a crumbling, eroding landscape. My last wax pieces began to look more and more abstract and funky. They started referencing fictive things, fantastical made-up forms loosely based on things in nature, such as cacti.

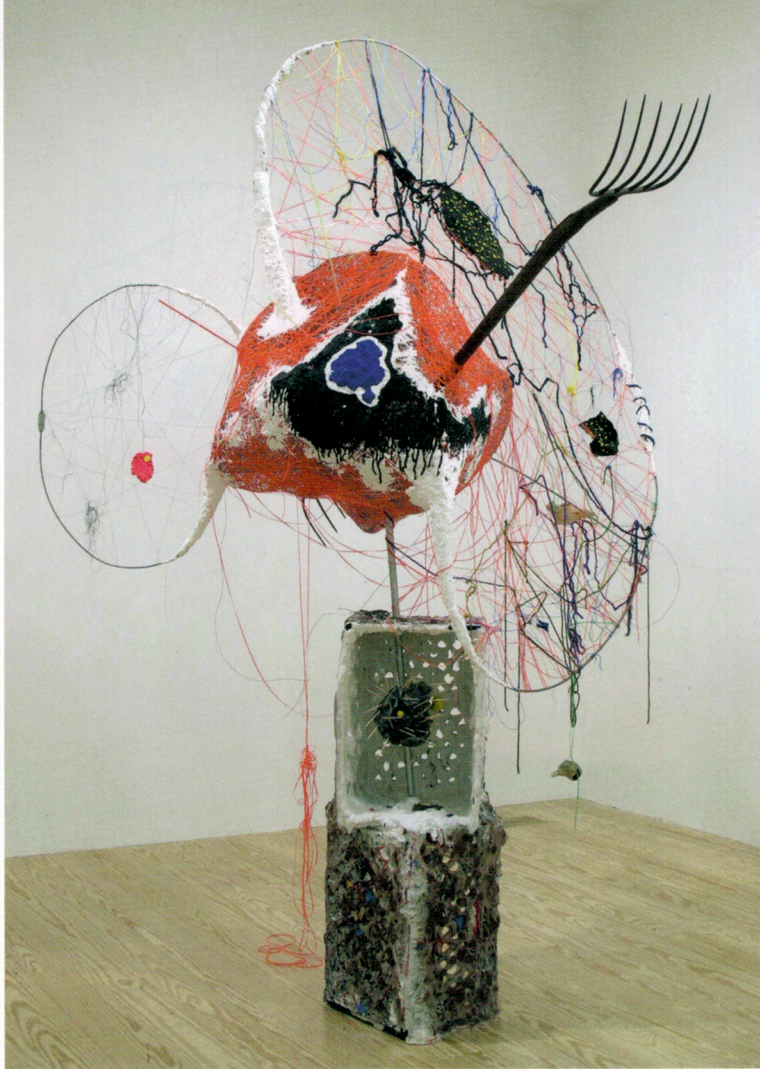


Top: *Golden White Slice and Assorted Crumbs*, 1996. Beeswax, foam, and papier-mâché, 60 x 48 x 7 in. Above: *Portal*, 2007. Beeswax, papier-mâché, foam, wood, metal, and pigment, 77 x 22.25 x 80.5 in.

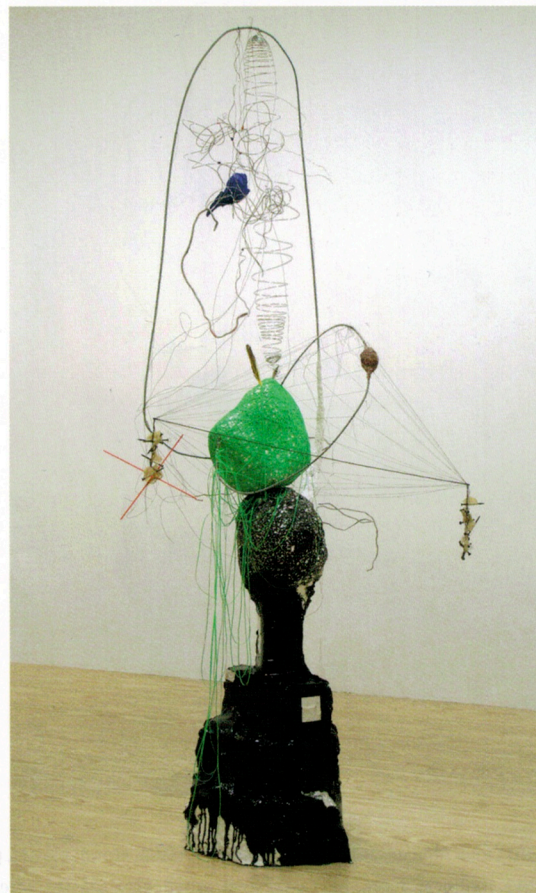
**MA:** *Do you imagine a narrative?*

**MS:** Not really. I visited Joshua Tree in the California desert before making a body of sculptures from 2002 to 2006, and I was struck by how cacti already resemble sculptures—they look like groups of people standing around. I started making forms that, when arranged together, look like family portraits. I wanted to evoke a kind of apocalyptic landscape in which the colors are warped and unnatural. I see both possibilities, though. There is the idea





Left: *The Collector*, 2012. Milk crates, plaster, paint, clay, metal, plastic lace, yarn, thread, wire, rocks, modeling clay, acrylic, papier-mâché, toothpicks, seashells, and pitchforks, 102.5 x 81 x 69 in. Right: *Oracle in Reverse*, 2012. Papier-mâché, metal, plaster, enamel, beeswax, thread, wire, clay, foam, feathers, seashell, gouache, and plastic, 86.5 x 43 x 41 in.



of looking at the world through a filter, where you can imagine another state of reality, which can be vividly enhanced and not necessarily bad; or you can look at it as the nightmare, the future. I feel like it could go either way.

After that, I made the forms more blobby and amorphous. One group referenced eyeballs—the ultimate Surrealist cliché, which I needed to get out of my system. The spirals on the surface of *Second Skin* (2007) are like wormholes. I was thinking how the piece could become something that emits energy or takes energy in. That motif runs through many of these works. The surface is intense; it becomes a kind of vortex.

**MA:** *It resembles a cross-section of a cabbage. Do you always reference nature?*

**MS:** Yes, though not always in a specific way. The shape recalls a natural form, but it does not really exist. While making these pieces, around 2007, I began to feel that using wax was becoming a burden—it is a painfully slow, very labor-intensive process. I had too many ideas constantly racing ahead of my ability to do anything, and I felt trapped by the need to cover everything with wax, though my objects would feel insubstantial without it. Those works have a very heavy psychological presence and a great deal of intensity, resulting from the amount of detail packed into them.

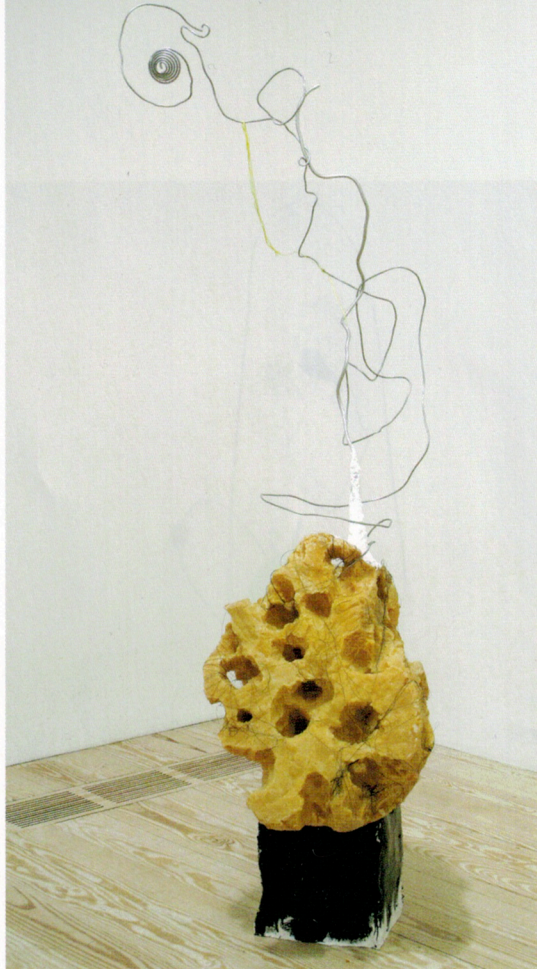
My dissatisfaction also had to do with time—having a kid, getting older, you start to feel like time is running out. I had a panicked feeling of not being able to make what I wanted to make. I had to let go of something in my work

or I would die as a creative person. I needed to let go of the wax, the material dearest to me, my biggest crutch. I would come to my studio and make armatures with the same materials I had always used—metal lath to build walls, plaster, papier-mâché, wire, and all kinds of stuff—and I would make forms similar to those I had always made, and then I would leave them sitting around for a few days or weeks and try to resist the urge to cover them with wax. It was futile.

Finally, there was a form that had been sitting around for a long time, which had nothing on it but white papier-mâché, some metal poking out, and some wire stretched across it; and one day, I entered my usual routine of staring at the work around me, and I looked at that piece and thought: “That is done. It’s finished.” *Untitled (white with red center)* (2007) marked a huge turning point for me. I finally grasped that there was a whole new universe I could go into, which would allow me the freedom to do whatever the hell I wanted with whatever materials I could use.

**MA:** *How did you decide the sculpture was finished?*





Left: *Cloud Minder*, 2012. Foam, beeswax, metal, string, plaster, papier-mâché, and enamel, 65 x 25 x 18 in. Right: *Transmissions of the Threadbare*, 1997–2012. Hydrocal, foam, beeswax, steel, wood, clay, plaster, wire, acrylic, rocks, paint, plastic lace, and papier-mâché, 80.5 x 57.5 x 33 in.

**MS:** Part of it has to do with acceptance. I had to accept it for what it was in its ugliness, its bareness, its rawness. It took time for me to process it in my subconscious, and then finally, it crossed over to the other side. It was the piece I was waiting for. With it, I could see ahead into the future. I started to incorporate older works and test pieces that were hanging around my studio, and so began to include my own history in the work. I would start with an open loop form and then build out from that—add, take away, add, take away. I work in a very improvisational manner. My work questions the idea of beauty and failure. It is important that it retains a feeling of openness. It's part of a musical enterprise in which the different elements dance around, or play around, each other.

**MA:** Do you do preparatory sketches?

**MS:** No. I produce a lot of little drawings in Moleskine books. Sometimes I make a form loosely related to a drawing, but it always ends up going somewhere else. I never know what something is going to look like until it is done, which is part of the compelling aspect of making it. I keep the drawings together with phone numbers, names, and lists of things, so they function like journals. I always carry the books with me and work on the drawings when I am waiting somewhere

or taking the subway. They are important because they constitute an activity directly related to my everyday life. I don't usually work on my drawings in the studio; I work on them out there, where there are people around me.

A few years ago, I became interested in assembling a collection of diaristic images in a book, combined with ideas for sculpture and source materials drawn from books. That project got put on hold. Instead, I photocopied images from my Moleskine books—I didn't want to take them apart—and covered a wall with the Xeroxes, interspersed with source material. I loved it. *Facsimile Drawing Wall* (2013) was painted red and spanned about 16 feet. Many of the drawings contain possibilities for sculpture. *Wall* is an ongoing piece that I re-named *Spaghetti Love*. I keep adding to it; it is getting bigger over time.

**MA:** Do your materials—such as cat litter combined with Elmer's glue or white Sculptamold—add to the meaning? What role does rawness of materials play in your work?

**MS:** The cat litter adds meaning for me, but I list it as clay because the raw material is clay. I am interested in its texture. Raw materials add tension, which is important. I don't want to create things that are safe. I want to create work that makes you think. I want you to pick up ideas you can walk away with after looking at the work. The materiality of the pieces is very important to me. That, as an experience, leads to other things to think about.

**MA:** What dominates here? Form, the play of textures, the palette?

**MS:** The palette was muted until I brought color in by incorporating older, wax-encased things. The forms were on the cusp of not looking like art, so I started to push the limits of what I could do with the material to give them a sense of being off-balance. I wanted to work against a balanced composition



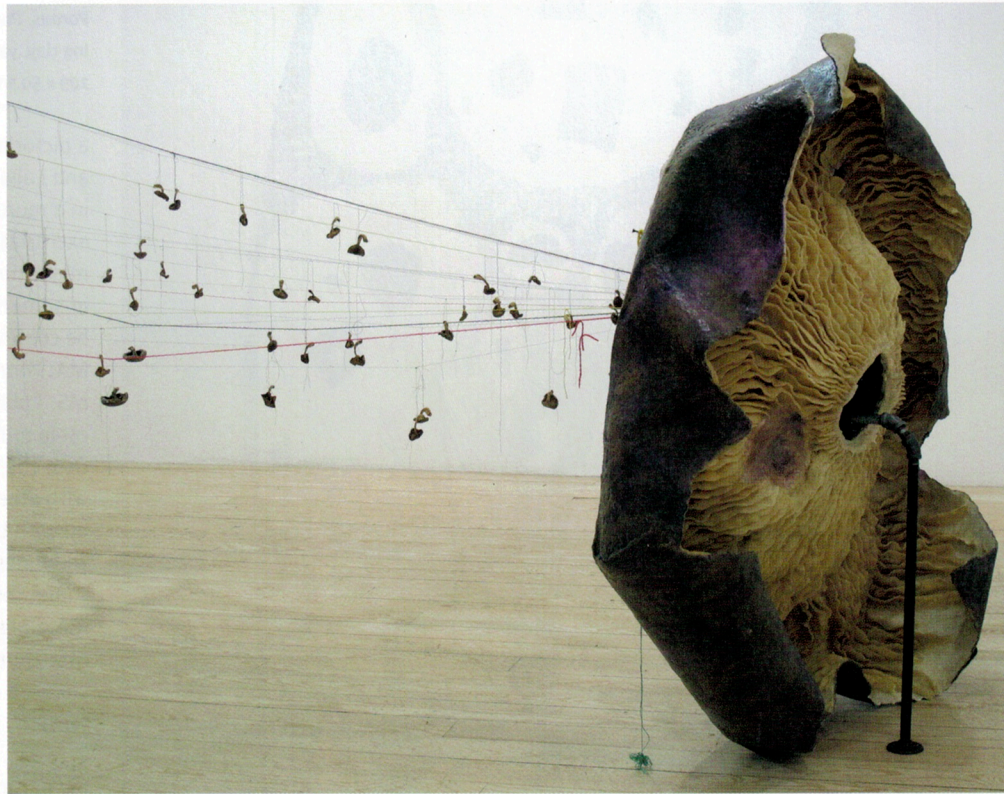
in which everything is comfortable and classically arranged. I wanted the object to be on the verge of not working at all, being almost unacceptable, keeping an edge of discomfort in place. If the object becomes too perfect, or too balanced, then I feel like I need to retract and go backward. I want the work to feel like it has a teetering-ness to it, as if it were playing with failure. I need to feel there is a cycle, that the object is not fixed, that it is constantly transforming itself. I could go back into one of these pieces and turn it into something else. I want to preserve that feeling. Part of the energy of the work comes from the feeling that it remains in flux.

**MA:** *You make oblique references to the mechanisms of nature. Is your work about climate change, the environment, and the world at large?*

**MS:** I don't just want to make art about art. I am interested in forms, structures, and geometries that allude to a universal and cosmological condition. I realized that in making these works and opening up the materials, I can make the equations more complex, with a broader context. My interests have expanded in response to my work. *Synapse* (2011) alludes to both the structure of the brain and to a solar system with orbiting celestial bodies. *Powers of Tenuous* (2014) is a nod to *Powers of Ten*, the beautiful little films made by Ray and Charles Eames. I was visualizing the scale of the object expanding infinitely and then shrinking back down in an instant, so that it would have a transference of energy going back and forth through time. I want the sculptures to be like transmitters or receivers of information, maybe conveying a kind of spiritual energy exchanged between object and viewer. The works also start looking like antennae to pick up messages from space.

**MA:** *Do you like science fiction?*

**MS:** I do—H.G. Wells, Ballard, Philip K. Dick. I was into “Star Trek” growing up. I recently re-watched every episode with my young son. In one, “The Immunity Syndrome,” the *Enterprise* encounters a gigantic, 11,000-mile-wide amoeba that is sucking up all the energy around it and destroying anything in its path. I loved



*Self-Reflexive Narcissistic Supernova*, 2013. Metal, yarn, thread, wire, plastic bags, plastic lace, papier-mâché, photos, Mylar, clay, screws, acrylic, modeling clay, wood, beeswax, dried mushrooms, and cobblestone, detail of installation.

that image and wanted to amplify the storyline's absurdity in a sculpture. *Self-Reflexive Narcissistic Supernova* (2013) includes a giant mushroom, a repurposed work from 2002. I removed the stem, retained the cap, and put it on its side. There is a point at the back, from which threads and pieces of yarn stretch out into space, and dried shiitake mushrooms hang from the threads. The mushroom is sending a reflection of itself into space.

**MA:** *The mushroom also alludes to decomposition and death.*

**MS:** The mushroom is a loaded symbol that I use quite often. It relates to decay, but it is also associated with folklore and the forest, and thus to the history of our connections to magic and pagan ritual.

**MA:** *You create a totality, and everything comes together as in a stage design.*

**MS:** I was into sci-fi and horror films from an early age. The artifice of the sets interested me. Now, I recycle my older, very detailed, and more realistic works and present them as specimens that acquire new meanings in their new contexts. Many of my recent sculptures contain elements of past failures, pieces of things that did not work out. I have always played with the idea of the antiheroic. The giant cheese pieces and the giant bread pieces were all detritus made on a grand scale. They constituted a critique of the idea of monumentality, while attempting, at the same time, to de-familiarize the familiar.

**MA:** *Is your work more about what lies beyond our world than about life on our planet?*

**MS:** I think my work is very much of the earth. I feel that when you allude to a bigger picture, you are also very consciously relating to our planet, because you cannot have one without the other. I use raw materials that are very much of this earth, such as rocks, plants, and very low-tech stuff like steel rods and yarn. They ground the work in reality, so that you can have a very real thing, but at the same time, there is the sense that you are going beyond that, into a realm of more theoretical thinking.





*Porous, Porous*, 2014. Metal, foam, wire, wood, plaster, modeling clay, yarn, thread, plastic lace, plastic bag, bread, and paint, 109 x 50.5 x 22 in.

a pictorial aspect as well. I get asked about craft a lot, and I always point out that when I try to do things in a more crafted way, the labor involved becomes so excruciating that I usually undermine it. A weaving might turn into a tangled mess that I am happy to use in something. I would rather subvert the craft than be confined to it.

**MA:** *Your work is almost always humorous.*

**MS:** I play a lot with titles. That's related to my interest in music, which started a little over a decade ago. Over the last several years, I have been making music with other artist friends—writing songs and coming up with titles for them has influenced how I come up with titles for my works and exhibitions. The language sometimes affects the direction of the work.

**MA:** *Does music inform your sculptural compositions?*

**MS:** There is a kind of musical energy in a lot of the work—a dissonance in the materials, which creates tensions similar to the atonal dissonances I play with in music. I use unexpected combinations of things in my music, too, so there is a back and forth, though no one would know by looking at my sculptures. The music we play now is a kind of prog-psycho-folk, and it is starting to get weirder, with more improvisation.

**MA:** *Your recent Driftloaf works consist of freestanding vertical arrangements of two or three distinct parts.*

*Do they allude to the human body or the portrait bust?*

**MS:** The *Driftloaf* pieces are presented, formally speaking, like portrait busts—a head on top of a plinth, with a front and a back—but they are also like small transmitters, telepathic radios of mysterious forces. Back in 1996 when I first made the bread pieces, and other realistic objects like the chicken bones and the mushrooms, I collected the actual objects and studied them carefully, like a scientist would. I had dried-up specimens all over my studio. Then I would re-create them as enlarged objects, but they would be tweaked—close to real but transformed in some way. The pores of the bread slices would be highly articulated to re-enforce the idea of the holes as pathways into a reverse universe that I was imagining. Some of the same ideas are being dealt with here, only using the actual objects.

The bread has an intensity to it that comes from it being an ephemeral thing, an organic, vulnerable entity. It's made from yeast, a living fungus, a micro-organism with a DNA and cell structure. In a sense, the yeast is like a coded lexicon of the bread's history. Even though most bread today is processed beyond recognition, there are many bakers who cultivate and keep mother yeasts around as their starter dough for

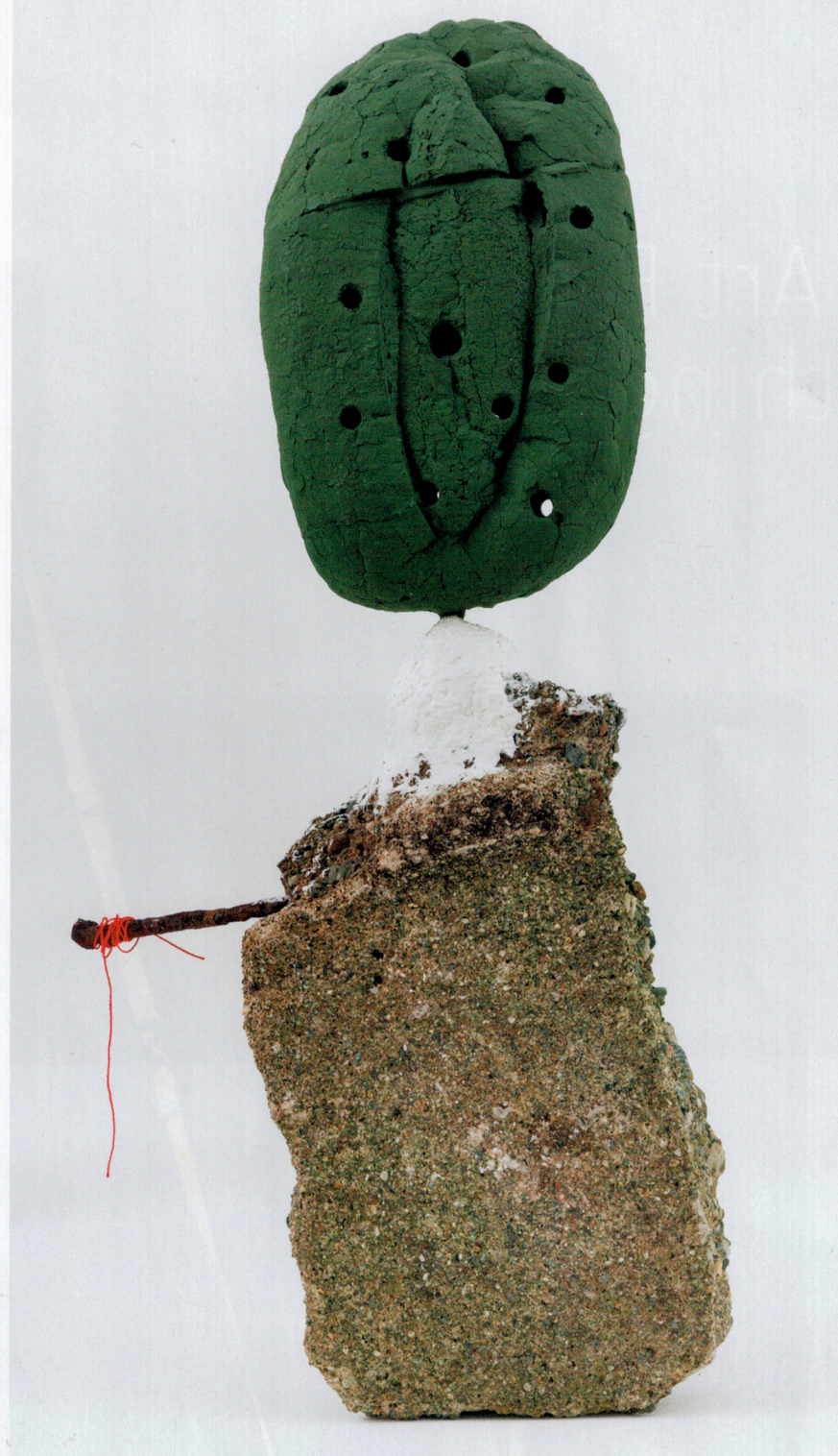
**MA:** *How do your sculptures embody the idea of time?*

**MS:** This is something I would like to explore. I want to make works that will compress time and space, so that you could look into the past and the future at the same time. You would get a kind of gestalt-experience from looking at the object. I would not want to illustrate it—instead, it would be something that you would feel through the form and the materials. I am not sure how I am going to do that.

**MA:** *For some time now, you have been exploring line and dematerialization. Using thread and yarn also brings in the history of women's work.*

**MS:** Yes, my sculptures have become more transparent, resembling my drawings more and more. I love wire, thread, and yarn for those reasons, and there is





*Driftloaf (Green Whole Loaf)*, 2015. Concrete with nail, papier-mâché, bread, paint, wire, thread, and pebble, 19.5 x 10 x 3 in.

rants, and each quadrant is like a compartment of the transporter. And there are 12 windows, each containing a colored polymer construction, so that the whole piece suggests the breakdown of a solar calendar. The highly systematized order of the weaving contrasts with the random chaos of the yarn crisscrossing through the main body of the piece. I was really pushing the linear features to function as currents of energy, and I wanted that energy to encompass and engulf the viewer.

**MA:** *Yours is an art of accretion, of accumulation juxtaposing the handmade with the ready-made. It is process- and labor-intensive. Are you looking at non-Western art, at the art of small-scale societies?*

**MS:** The Oceanic wing is one of my favorite places at the Met. I also look at a lot of so-called outsider and folk art. I saw a terrific show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art a few years ago called “Great and Mighty Things” (2013), which included some elements from Emery Blagdon’s *Healing Machine*, a gigantic construction made of wire, beads, and other materials that he worked on for over 30 years. Blagdon believed *Healing Machine* had an electrical charge that could cure people of their ailments. That’s a great metaphor for what art at its best can give to viewers, both intellectually and spiritually. This seems like an especially important quality these days when everything is so out of control—the political landscape, endless wars, rampant racism, and a thousand other problems. There has to be an outlet for peace from screwed-up turmoil. There also has to be a way, as an artist, to take one’s anger and frustration with the state of things and process it into objects of complexity and fascination—not simply an instrument to tutor viewers on the rights and wrongs of an issue, but something that gives an experience capable of lifting and inspiring.

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multiple generations. Some are more than 100 years old. I also came across some samples of dried ancient bread in the Met’s Egyptian wing. I discovered that entire loaves, more than 3,000 years old, have been found intact inside Egyptian tombs. So, there are many aspects to bread that connect it to issues beyond its consumption as a staple. In a sense, it is like the mushroom—a bridge to our biological history and our ancient past.

**MA:** *Your work occasionally resembles traps, rich with lines and orifices in which we could end up physically or visually entangled.*

**MS:** I recently completed *Satellite* (2016), which was made for the 56 HENRY space—it fits exactly from floor to ceiling in an eight-by-eight-foot room, so that when you walk into the gallery, you are essentially inside the piece. The work becomes a transporter that enmeshes you in a yarn matrix. A weaving in the middle divides the work into four quad-