

## Introducing Shawne Major

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Shawne Major grew up in Louisiana and began her career as a painter. She studied for her MFA in sculpture at Rutgers, and lived in New York in the '90s. She has been making found object assemblage "tapestries" for over 10 years.

Equally conversant in the main traditions of assemblage art since early modernism and the folk art traditions of the American South, Shawne Major creates works that seem like magical spaces created from the artist's re-enchantment of objects and materials from disposable production. Unlike quilts and tapestries from either folk art or high craft traditions, her works are remix tableaux with a three-dimensional materiality. No surface, but a density of objects. Each work is a material record of the artist's process, revealing the sewn and stitched layers of its own making. The works are formed from objects sewn onto mesh and plastic netting, and the resulting compositions are the artist's haul of disparate materials pulled into a self-revelatory pattern.



Shawne Major, *L'Argent*, 2008 (detail). 7 x 7 ft.

Viewing her works from a distance, we might read a quilt, a tapestry, a votive weaving, or a collection of fetishes. Moving closer we see an array of found objects with an abundance of cultural information, a pattern of sutured materials that defy quick categorization. Fabric as fabrication. We're confronted with a kind of sensual materiality that even harkens back to the childhood pleasure of collecting *stuff*. Buttons, electrical wiring, wood and plastic toys, beads, plastic snakes and lizards, artificial

fruit and imitation flowers, humorous kitschy surprises, multiple layers of found fabric and netting, ribbon, and appliqué—all combined in a striking and original variegated materiality. Each work is a scandalous carnival of visual and tactile pleasure, the inverse of so many abject objects filling art spaces in recent years.

Her installation of three large-scale works, each approximately 9 x 14 feet, in the Prospect 1 New Orleans Biennial revealed an artist who had reinvented assemblage for our own time: a set of complexity nets, capturing the profusion of disposable—but instantly recognizable—bits and pieces of global mass-produced culture in new, legible patterns. The intervention of the hand-made in the already-made.

### Revisiting Assemblage, Collage, Bricolage, and Remix

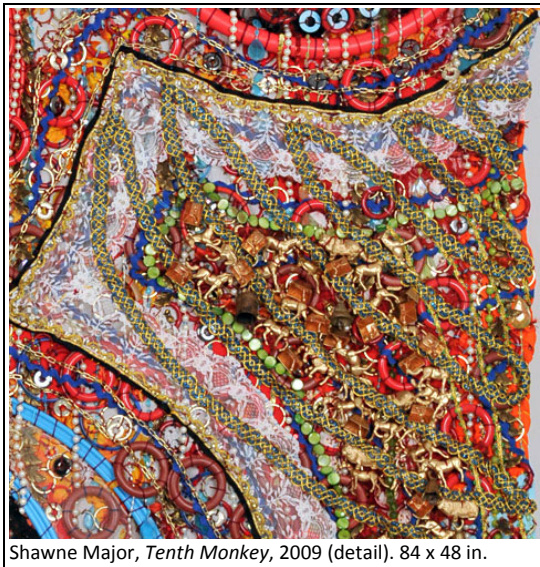
The tradition of assemblage with found objects extends from Picasso and Duchamp to Damian Hirst and El Anatsui. Artists working today have inherited many strategies for working with assemblage, collage, and appropriation, both on the formal level of content or imagery and on the material level of objects and mediums. Terms like "remix," "postproduction," and even "postmedium" are now found frequently in art criticism, terms and concepts that try to capture the sense of art-making when anything can be produced from the recombinant DNA of culture, high and low, local and global.

Donald Barthelme famously stated, "the principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the 20th century."<sup>1</sup> The parallel term "assemblage," first used by Jean Dubuffet in the 1950s, gained wider currency in 1961 from *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by William Seitz.<sup>2</sup> Seitz was at first motivated by the idea of collage, but the cut-and-paste method did not capture the move away from the picture plane and the insertion of premade objects that assemblage implies.

Seitz's operating concepts for "assemblage," drawn mainly from neo-Dadaist works and Rauschenberg, still ring true for today: assemblage involves "the use of juxtaposition without a connective," combining seemingly incongruous materials and objects, especially non-art or "low" materials, into a new form, what Rauschenberg called "random order." For Seitz, assemblage works also presented the reality of objects at a moment when abstraction cut them off from pictorial representation. Realism was replaced with the real: "intrinsic to the medium of assemblage is an entirely

new relationship between work and spectator: a reconquest, but by different means, of the realism that abstract art replaced.”<sup>3</sup> Premade objects, with their immediate associations already known outside art, could be inserted into art works as a new sign of “the real,” replacing the illusionistic picture plane and moving art objects off the wall into 3D space.

The initial Dadaist strategy of subverting the supremacy of the “high art” object with non-art materials and the re-insertion of “the real” through found objects is now, of course, old news as the common currency of contemporary art. We can trace a trajectory from Rauschenberg’s famous combine “Bed” (1955), with its quilt and pillow over-painted and mounted on wood supports, to Tracy Emin’s “My Bed” (1999), with all the found materials of the artist’s bedroom assembled as a “real” object, Anselm Kiefer’s compositions with lead, dirt, and concrete, Jason Rhoades’ installations with found objects, clothes, and fabric, and El Anatsui’s majestic tapestries assembled from reclaimed metal bottle parts.



Shawne Major, *Tenth Monkey*, 2009 (detail). 84 x 48 in.

The related term, “bricolage,” gained importance in theory and practice in the 1980s (from the French, *bricolage* and *bricoleur*). The term means working with whatever material is at hand, often in the sense of improvisation, treating all materials equally and reusing them regardless of their original purpose or origin. El Anatsui, working from the perspective of an African artist today, has said, “Art grows out of each particular situation, and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up.”<sup>4</sup> This view finds its American counterpart

in Shawne Major’s works, which gather up the materials and genres of American already-made culture as she finds it.

Assemblage or bricolage, however, are not simply formal or aesthetic qualities (meaningless in themselves), but are methods for making new arguments about what an art work can be, a strategy for embodying an idea, an intervention in cultural materials at a specific moment for a new outcome. Assemblage and bricolage are devices for improvisation, reinterpretation, and reinvention. It’s a generative grammar for working with an environment of premade materials and cultural fragments, turning scraps of the everyday into maps of the overlooked. It’s not a way to make extraneous material “arty,” not the means to reinstall the romantic touch of the artist that turns trash into treasure. Like the DJ remixing multiple tracks and samples in a live performance, assemblage is the platform, the method, the lab for making new arguments visible.

Since the 1980s, several kinds of art making explicitly proclaimed its *assembled* state, objects composed from sources and materials made elsewhere and going somewhere else.<sup>5</sup> Artists today recognize that all art forms, high and low, are each others’ source material, mutually inter-referenced catalogs or encyclopedias of styles, materials, and images to be remixed and reappropriated, since all art was always already a remix of history and sources, a remix suppressed in the name of originality and authenticity. Now, what was once a sign of the postmodern—leveling cultural sources and recombining materials and objects—is now taken for granted as simply the starting point.

Nicolas Bourriaud has pointed out what it means to live in an era of *post-production*; many new works are now eclectic remixes of the already produced, recombinations of inherited and accumulated styles, materials, and histories, a catalog of world culture inviting resampling and reassembling. Bourriaud aptly sums up:

These artists [since the 1990s] who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work. The material they manipulate is no longer primary. It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of a raw material but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects. Notions of originality (being at the

origin of) and even of creation (making something from nothing) are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, both of whom have the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts.<sup>6</sup>

And the “cultural market” today is a global flea market; it’s eBay, the dumpster from the Dollar Store, and the next Google image search, as well as the museum and accumulated art history. Mass-produced objects and materials circulate with few traditional cultural anchors. Souvenirs from Paris and New Orleans *Mardi Gras* beads are made in China. The “real” signified in premade objects now also entails missing origins; postproduction doesn’t reactivate origins of production but restarts the cultural conversation through a new way of working. In this context, Shawne Major has reinvented assemblage for our own time.

### Shawne Major’s American Assemblage

Shawne Major fabricates works of American “vernacular beauty,” in Dave Hickey’s phrase,<sup>7</sup> works that reassemble scattered fragments our great democratic and commercial carnival and that attempt to keep intact all the pagan excesses banned from official culture. Her works can be compared with the collage drawings of Tony Fitzpatrick, who was also included in The Prospect 1 New Orleans Biennial. While Fitzpatrick composes meticulously crafted, drawing-collage works from X-Acto-knife cut outs from magazines, playing cards, matchbook covers, and many other sources as poems for vernacular culture, Major celebrates similar sources in our pop cornucopia of premade objects.

Shawne Major is working at a moment when we’re immersed daily in massive flows of information and competing media content, and when the dominant image of the global consumer economy is a mega-mall of disposable objects engineered for obsolescence. Her works assemble material images of America as an end node in a global dissemination of premade objects with their complicated and conflicting histories and sources of production. Her works provide a visual index of one way to map out this moment of dispersal of objects.

Many artists now see themselves in collaboration with the makers of mass-produced objects and the producers of all kinds of images, data, and information. With work composed—postproduced—from repurposed found materials, the materials carry over with their meanings before being

reassembled into a new significant order. The works celebrate density of content: plenitude. Shawne Major shifts the valence of the mass-produced object to the intentionally reused. The works preserve the symbolic meanings of the objects—plastic grapes, appliqué rocket ships, retro toys, plastic toy soldiers, doll accessories, many kinds of fabric with all their cultural associations—and we reread them in the new contexts in the works they now become. We’re seduced into rereading from the sense of wonder and beauty that the nets of materials evoke.

The works also project a sensuality, materiality, and fetishism of objects that separate Shawne Major’s approach from other artists who work in fabric or hand-sewn structures. There has been a tendency in art criticism since the 1980s to see fabric, weaving, and stitching as a sign of “women’s work” inserted into art practice and exhibition as counter objects to masculine-encoded works like painting and sculpture. Major isn’t interested in gender arguments: her compositions are about the human condition at our historical moment, about art making as still connected to ritual, fetish, the handmade object, and the struggle with chaos, about answering the volumes of discarded consumerist objects with a personal levee against the flow.

Her works are, finally, new expressions of the great inexhaustible American potential for democratic subversion just when we need it the most.

*Martin Irvine*  
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<sup>1</sup> Collage, bricolage, and remix have also been part of American music since the jazz era, providing methods and ways of thinking for improvisation and new combinations. See Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky, *Sound Unbound: Sampling Digital music and culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1961). See also John Elderfield, *Essays on Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Seitz, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in exhibition, *El Anatsui: Gawu*, viewed at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See Jerry Saltz, Roberta Smith, and Peter Halley, *Beyond Boundaries: New York’s New Art* (New York: A. van der Marck Editions, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 2nd ed. (Lukas & Sternberg, 2005), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*, Revised and Expanded Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).