

# RAW

6/2-10/28/2018

# DESIGN

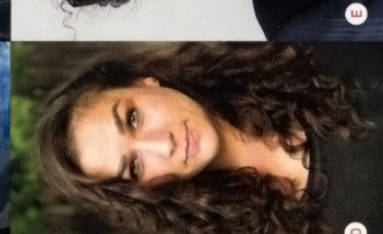
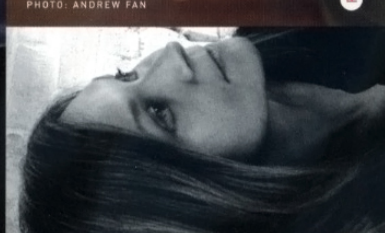
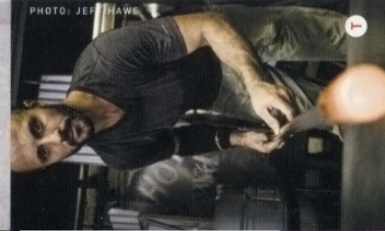
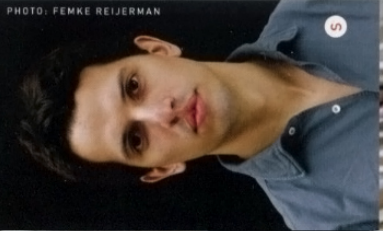


MUSEUM OF CRAFT AND DESIGN  
GUEST CURATED BY GLENN ADAMSON



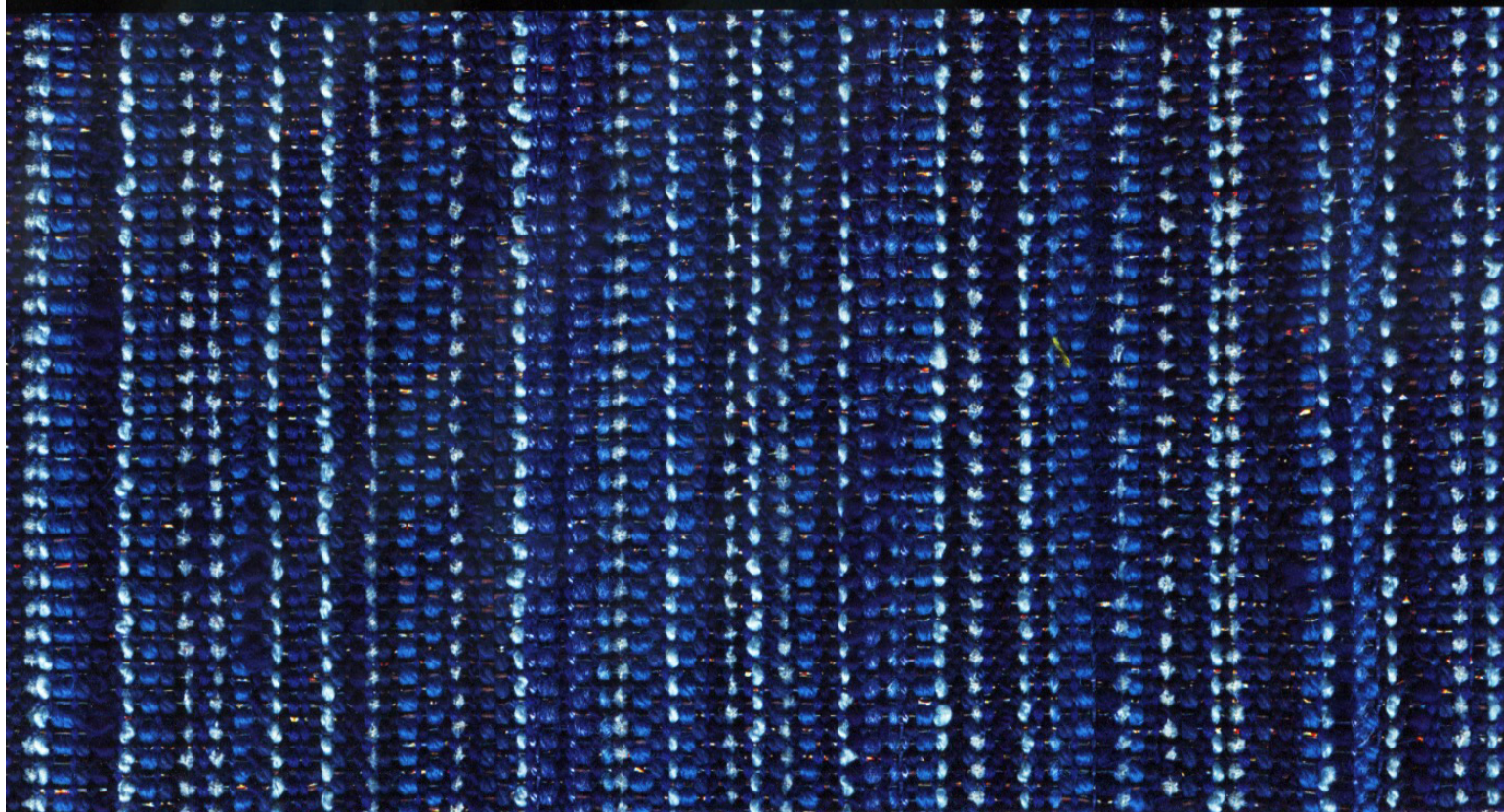
**RAW DESIGN**

- A. Omer Arbel
- B. Dana Barnes
- C. Scott Bodenner
- D. Brooke Breckner
- E. Iris Eichenberg
- F. Jes Fan
- G. FormaFantasma
- H. Karin Forslund
- I. GT2P
- J. Marlène Huissoud
- K. Misha Kahn
- L. Julia Kunin
- M. Max Lamb
- N. Beth Lipman
- O. Julia Lohmann
- P. Mieke Meijer
- Q. Myra Mimitsch-Gray
- R. Gaetano Pesce
- S. Lex Pott
- T. Jonathan Swanz
- U. Brad Evan Taylor
- V. Thaddeus Wolfe





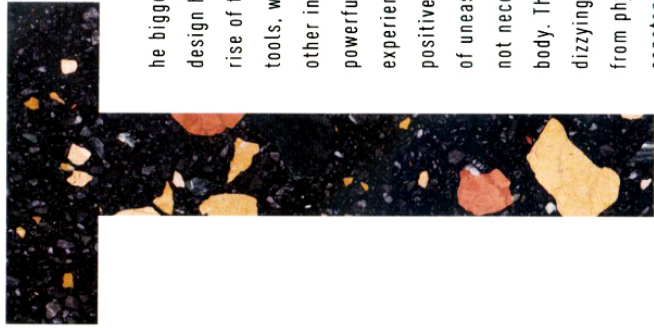
*Mixtape*; 2016, materials variable including post-consumer cassette tape, post-industrial cotton, wool, linen, silk, and rayon. Lengths can be custom-woven from tapes for sentimental purposes. Photos courtesy The Bodenner Collection.



SCOTT BODENNER



## CURATOR'S STATEMENT GLENN ADAMSON



The biggest story in 21st century design has undoubtedly been the rise of the digital. Armed with new tools, we are connecting to each other in unprecedented ways. This powerful reshaping of the human experience has brought many positive changes, but also a sense of unease. Digital experiences are not necessarily scaled to the human body. They often bring with them a dizzying sense of being unmoored from physicality, lost in a maze of constant mediation.

Consider the Apple iPhone, arguably the most impactful designed artifact of the century so far, designed in California by Jonathan Ive and his Apple team. Many people spend all their days with this smooth little companion. They peer into its screen with varying levels of attention and distraction, falling perpetually into it, although in purely physical terms, it is only a water-thin, affectless surface. Smartphones and their collateral technologies can be credited with dramatic political upheaval. Would we have had the Arab Spring without Twitter? Would we have had Trump? Design is more than implicated in these developments, both for better and for worse.

Enter *Raw Design*, an equal and opposite move to the physical. In a creative landscape as extended and diverse as ours, it is always difficult to isolate specific tendencies. What might once have been construed as an *avant garde* movement is today likely to be perceived as a marketing ploy. Yet there is little doubt that an impulse to "down tools" is widespread in current design, and that this instinct is entirely genuine. Often working in small-scale ateliers, designers are employing new, low-tech ways to make objects, embracing materiality as the primary medium of their creativity.

*Raw Design* marks an interesting moment in the history of technique. Rather than turning to long-established, complex repertoires like those of wood joinery and glass blowing, designers seem to prefer inventing new techniques, or else act as if their medium were being discovered for the first time. The attitude is mirrored in institutions too. Even as universities and art schools are demolishing their previously rigid disciplinary structures, and adding courses in such open-ended subjects as "social practice," they are also investing in materials libraries available to all students (the California College of the Arts is one example of this duality).

At its best, *Raw Design* is not just an opposition movement or a symbolic escapist gesture. It is a pragmatic investigation into new modes of working, often finding inspiration from

science, though typically carried out in a self-reliant, DIY spirit. It has been growing organically for some years now. The pioneer figure was undoubtedly the Italian artist, architect and designer Gaetano Pesce, who began casting resin and pouring it freely over armatures back in the late 1960s. This was around the time that *The Graduate* came out, with its famous exchange about plastics ("I want to say one word to you, just one word... Are you listening?"), and also of Roland Barthes' wonderful short text on the material in his book *Mythologies*, which describes plastic as exemplifying the dream of "infinite transformation." It can become anything, Barthes noted, "from buckets to jewels."

Pesce did indeed choose plastic because of its contemporaneity — but he wanted to reclaim it for expressive individualism. He therefore made no attempt to resolve his forms, as a product designer like Ive does. Instead, his objects wallow in their own messy materiality. They offer a view of plastic in its baseline

state — the very moment when it hardens into form. Since Pesce's groundbreaking experiments, many other contemporary designers have also created objects that seize on the alchemical moment when matter assumes form, thus offering a counterpoint to the seamless anonymity of mainstream product design.



Thomas Thwaites' celebrated *Toaster Project*, (on permanent display at the Victoria and Albert Museum; not included in this exhibition) was an early and prominent attempt in this direction, and a notably programmatic one: he sought to make an everyday appliance in a completely self-taught and self-sufficient manner. Unsurprisingly, the result is sad-looking and non-functional, more an abject sculpture than a real appliance. Yet the project provides poignant testimony about the limits of personal capability. In a TED talk viewed by more than one million people, Thwaites explained that he had not been interested in achieving actual self-sufficiency, but rather in tracing the process by which "rocks and sludge buried in the ground in various places in the world" turns into our finished consumer products.



is thought experiment points to one of the most valuable aspects of raw design — its clear-eyed realism with respect to sourcing. The insight here is that acts of making can be reframed as ethical research methods. By literally taking matter into their own hands, designers not only confront the preconditions of their own productions, but also explore how the world around us is generally made. This precept animates the practice of Zoë Sheehan Saldaña, an artist based in New York City. She actually accomplishes what Thwaites failed to do, reprising the processes by which everyday objects around us are made. She chooses things with a latent symbolic charge, like strike-anywhere matches, blaze orange life vests, or simple white milk paint (which suggest histories of labor unrest, alarmist politics, and modernism, respectively). Each of her projects unfolds in a patient and exacting manner, often involving consultation with relevant scientific experts. The results are eerily proficient. Instead of the slacker slapstick of Thwaites' toaster, one is presented with an item only faintly distinguishable from its commercially available counterpart. One might say that in that infra-thin distinction, the extent to which her

replicas seem "handmade." Sheehan Saldaña has pinned down the human factor of her own labor.

For *Raw Design*, Sheehan Saldaña has acted in a collaborative co-curatorial role, selecting various material specimens that are set out among the other works. She has also painted the exhibition space white, using a milk paint of her own personal manufacture. (See appendix for her recipe.) Our intention here is to stage a situation in which "authored" design objects co-exist with anonymous ones, initially blurring the distinction between the two. This puts pressure on the concept of authorship itself. Our conviction is that production is best conceived as an extended continuum, a chain of interactions. Thus design is never a simple transformation from the raw into the cooked. Materials are, of course, commodities in their own right, and before they even arrive in a designer's studio, they have typically undergone complex processes of refinement.

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his condition holds for all makers, of course; *Raw Design* is not immune to the reality of endless contingency. But it does involve a refusal of the customary passive stance. Designers working in this direction tend to position themselves as closely to the point of material origin as possible. The most dramatic example of this in the exhibition from GTZP (Great Things To People), a Chilean design collective. Though their chosen material lava, a black, porous and lightweight volcanic rock called basaltic andesite, is locally abundant from Chile's more than 40 active volcanoes, it is a challenge. Like Sheehan Saldaña, GTZP have consulted with scientists, and have successfully developed techniques of grinding and re-melting the stone so that it can be used as a casting material or a ceramic glaze.

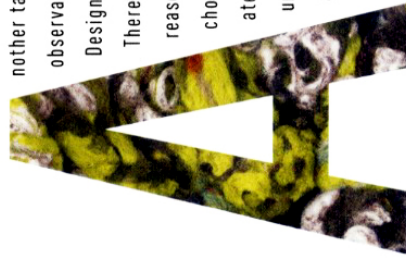


hat GTZP are doing with geology. Martène Huissoud is accomplishing through biology. Her chitinous

black objects are currently built from cocoons spun by silkworms, varnished in a resin secreted by honeybees. They are in a sense grown rather than made, somewhat recalling Tomás Libertiny's widely-publicized *Honeycomb Vase* (realized from 2006 onward), but with a greater sense of formal rigor. In an earlier series, *Of Insects and Men*, she employed found fragments of glass, positioning them like the facets of giant fancy-cut stones and bonding them together with bio-resin. Catching your reflection in these objects is like simultaneously glimpsing the deep



past — the obsidian mirrors of the Aztecs spring to mind — and a possible future in which insects have taken over our position as the planet's dominant life forms.



another tactic observable in Raw Design is recycling. There are obvious reasons for this choice: a small atelier is unlikely to be able to engage in actual resource

extraction (mining, for example), and, in any case, it is ecologically preferable to repurpose materials from the waste stream. Examples included here are Scott Bodenner's textile *Mixtape*, which (as the title implies) is made from used cassette tapes gathered from friends and junk shops; Max Lamb's terrazzo aggregate *Marmoreal*, developed in conjunction with the material development incubator Dzek, and Meike Meijer's *Newspaperwood*, which is just what it sounds like, a timber made from reclaimed broadsheets. Each of these projects exploits a quality familiar from artistic readymade practices, the wake of associations that follows a material when it is appropriated. *Mixtape* functions simultaneously as a stylish furnishing fabric and (for people of a certain generation,) a reminder of adolescent

friendships and romantic crushes. Lamb's introduction of large-scale fragments into *Marmoreal* conjures the long history of classical ruins, while Meijer's project is a mordant reflection on the disappearance of the traditional press.

For all of its immediacy, then, one of *Raw Design's* most characteristic traits is its summoning of past ways of making. Like existing materials, whole métiers can be stripped down and reprised. This creative churn is evident in the work of Beth Lipman, Myra Mimitsch-Gray, and Julia Kunin (all three of whom would probably identify more as artists than designers, as it happens). Lipman is best known for her sprawling glass installations based on baroque still life paintings, but during a recent residency at the Kohler factory in Wisconsin, adopted the new medium of metal casting. Like a Renaissance goldsmith, she selected natural specimens, directly cast them in iron or brass, then composed them into vignettes — "uncanny scenarios," as she puts it, which hover somewhere between primordial prehistory and our own anthropocene. Mimitsch-Gray was similarly inspired to take up a new technique during a Kohler residency. An extraordinarily skilled metalsmith whose work has typically involved elaborate hand raising, she is now working in enameled steel of the kind familiar from campground pots and pans. Her results

have a marvelously reduced quality, like functional objects captured in a nascent stage of growth.

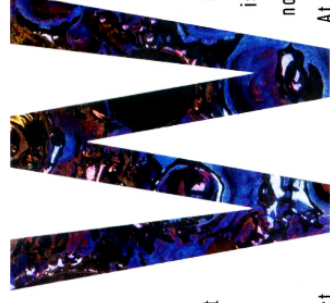


Kunin has taken similar inspiration from her long-running engagement with Zsolnay, the storied ceramic manufacturer in Hungary.

Though she is the only artist from abroad working there, she has adroitly navigated the context over a period of summer residencies, deploying their iconic luster glazes to fashion objects that somehow manage to be both lurid and delicate. Kunin's intention has been to take a traditional practice that has lost its vitality — most of Zsolnay's current products are either straightforwardly revivalist or tourist kitsch — and to reinvent it through direct experimentation. While most of the works she has produced there have been one-off sculptures, the most recent fruit of her investigations is a series of meteorite-like lamps, vehicles for the glaze, which would look equally at home in a natural history museum or a design museum.

A last group within the exhibition could be understood as performative. They invert the traditional hierarchy of design (and most fine art, for that matter), in which process is considered as subservient to the dictates of form, and instead find shapes through the act of making. I have included a wide range of these figures in

the show to demonstrate the richness of the approach and the diverse effects that can be achieved in materials both familiar (glass, ceramic and metal) and novel (ice-cast wax, fleshy latex, pigmented concrete). It is also interesting to note certain works, such as Brooke Breckner's chain and Dana Barnes' wool-impregnated blocks, in which the theme of emergence is treated both representationally and physically, in one united gesture.



Nevertheless, whatever their chosen way of working, what all the artists in *Raw Design* have in common is a certain no-

nonsense stance.

At a time in history when spin threatens to overwhelm us, this show offers another way — an alternative to "alternative facts." In the process, hopefully, it demonstrates that palpable physicality is by no means obsolete as a creative force. Most of all, this project aims to present contemporary design in its most fundamental condition — as material intervention — so that it can be seen more clearly.