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**CONFLUENCE/INFLUENCE:
MINGEI IN CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACTION**

Regina Bogat, Martha Clippinger, John Crawford, Kathy Erteman, Christopher French, Sheila Hicks, Richard Kalina, Ruth Laskey, Douglas Melini, Melissa Meyer, Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz, Odili Donald Odita, Don Porcaro, Altoon Sultan

Curated by Bridget Donlon

September 18 – December 11, 2016

Opening reception: Sunday, September 18, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

“Every artist knows that he is engaged in an encounter with infinity, and that work done with heart and hand is ultimately worship of Life Itself.” — *Bernard Leach*

Mingei, a Japanese folk craft movement that translates to “arts of the people,” contributed to the development of Abstraction in the mid-twentieth century, by finding resonance among artists out of European Bauhaus and subsequently their students at the Black Mountain College. A 2014 exhibition at Pace Gallery, NY and London posed a question in its title, “*Mingei, Are you Still Here?*” in reference to the movement, its followers and antecedents. New York-based artist Leslie Wayne responded to the titular question with a resounding “Yes! Mingei, you are still here!” recognizing similar threads of artistic inquiry in the work of many artists today, and planting the seeds for this exhibition.

The artists in *Confluence/Influence: Mingei in Contemporary Abstraction* share a deep and evident pleasure in their hands-on relationship to materials and craftsmanship, a reductive approach to formal composition, and a lack of irony—factors key to Mingei. Some of the artists point directly to the influences of the movement, while the organic nature of art-making has inspired new versions and interpretations in the works of others. In this way, regardless of intent, they are honoring a common thread of influence that once germinated out of Mingei and was later absorbed, transformed and adapted by artists from generation to generation. The artists in this exhibition also have a shared dynamic of influence inherent in the nature of their relationships to one another as contemporaries, colleagues and in some instances, former

students and teachers. In all cases, the shared conversation that exists between them is part of a rich and continuously evolving legacy.

Gesture

The field of Abstraction, developed over a century ago, remains a prevalent and essential art form today as a language of principles and approaches that now have their own relationships to the current dialogue. Likewise, Sōetsu Yanagi, philosopher, critic, and founder of Mingei, expressed sentiments about the post-war industrial age that are common today when he wrote, “America is the home of the machine; there has never been much handwork there since the beginning of its modern history.” For decades, the human hand has been steadily removed from means of production, and even more so as digital technologies become more refined, accessible, and pervasive. Like Mingei’s return to handcraft in the midst of an industrial boom, there are artists today who focus on and derive pleasure from the craft of making work by hand.

The pleasure of material, craft, and practice is evident in **Don Porcaro’s** anthropomorphic sculptures. In a meticulous process of selection, shaping and stacking, the works reveal themselves as unified forms built of colored layers of stone and brass. With its four “feet” at the base, Porcaro’s *Talisman 16* (2016) is a sculpture that elicits whimsy and dynamic movement, as figure and shrine. Porcaro hand-cuts, polishes

and layers each stone and crafts each brass element using some of the oldest materials known to man. This discernable attention and care imbues his work with humanism and sensitivity comprising a long and historic tradition.

Regina Bogat was involved in New York City abstraction in the mid-twentieth century and continues to influence new generations of artists. *Exilon* (2014) employs a return to materials and methods, revealing a deep and ongoing investigation of her own visual language. The work uses a familiar minimalist structure in a solid block of primary color intersected by straight lines of black rope cord and features apparent touches of the human hand in the visible brush strokes on the red background painting and the frayed edges where the cords have been snipped. Throughout her career, Bogat has incorporated unconventional materials, inserting a sense of warmth and personality into the cerebral establishment of non-objective painting.

Ceramicist **Kathy Erteman** embraces the principles of Mingei in her humble vessels, which are based on functional buckets and bowls but ingrained with distinct spirit and personality. Erteman’s in-



Altoon Sultan #14, 2013



Regina Bogat *Exilon*, 2014



Don Porcaro *Talisman 16*, 2016



Kathy Erteman *Swerve #1*, 2013

novative glazing processes achieves a range of effects within a restrained personal vocabulary. She sets up geometric color blocks in a limited but luminous palette or creates patterns that add graphic qualities to the surfaces of the clay. *Black/White Bucket Vessel*, *Asphalt & Snow*, *Serve #1* and *Ochre Tall Bucket Vessel* (2012-13) are an exercise in conscious contradictions that combine her own artistic intent with the willful nature of the medium, representing the coherence of an artist's vision within the history of ceramics.

Works by **Martha Clippinger** are influenced by Anni Albers' ideas that connect fine art, textiles, and architecture. She combines color in surprising combinations, emphasizing color's structural facility in creating imperfect geometries. These preoccupations are realized as small gouache paintings by the artist and then translated into traditional woven *tapetes* by indigenous craftspeople from Oaxaca, Mexico. *rigandih* (2016) features her typical bold colors and irregular structures that refer to vessels and architectural forms. In a true collaboration between artist and artisan, a handmade, familiar, traditional craft creates a contemporary artwork that oscillates between the functional object and artwork, sculpture and painting.



Martha Clippinger *rigandih*, 2016



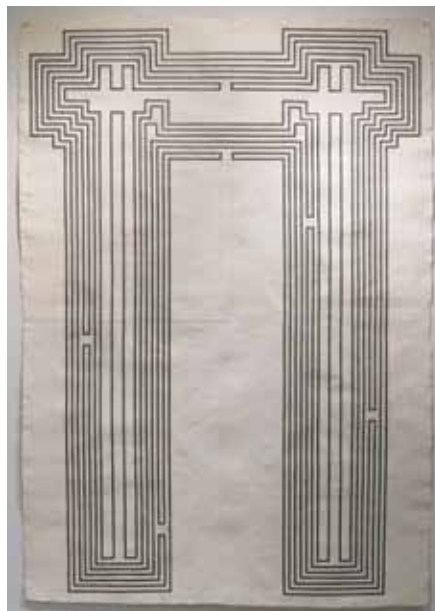
Sheila Hicks *Faceted*, 1989

Pattern

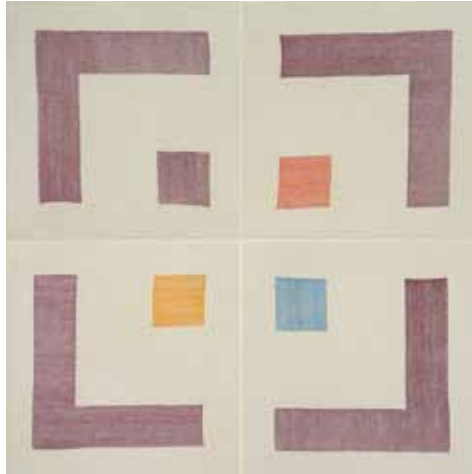
Yanagi writes that beauty is the transformation of the world into pattern. It is a distillation of images into essential form, an intellectual activity where the simplified visualization is also a form of complex non-verbal communication. In the Mingei tradition, patterns are also responsive to the materials on which they are projected derived from the unique qualities of the medium, rather than simply imposed on its surface.

Altoon Sultan's suite of egg tempera and graphite paintings of geometric forms are flora distilled to the simplest possible representation, landscape painting executed in non-objective language. The works are based on mathematically-derived patterns, executed on richly colored hand-toned paper. They share an affinity with Islamic ceramics in designs featuring arabesques and nature-inspired motifs. The group of four included in this show, #2, #9, #14 and #23 (2013), is comprised of combinations of intersecting arcs and blocks of color fields.

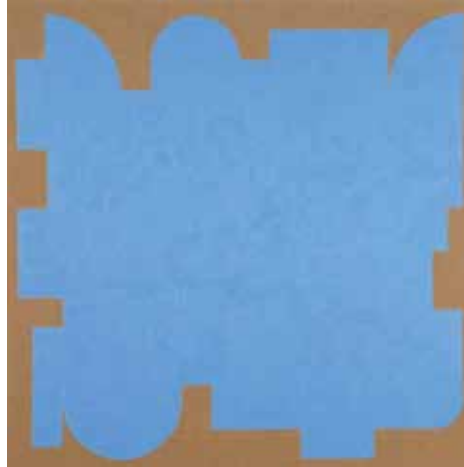
Histories of visual and spiritual cultures permeate *Station* (2010) by **Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz**, a piece rendered with exquisite simplicity. It is from a body of works meditating on the idea of a portal as a transitional demarcation between spaces, both physical and mental. The labyrinthine drawing refers to architectural volume and liminal space in its post and lintel composition. Made of graphite on handmade paper, two humble traditions of drawing and paper-making, it also evokes the rich tradition of textiles on a heroic and



Alyssa Pheobus Mumtaz *Station*, 2010



Ruth Laskey *Plain Weave Grid*
(*Solferino Violet, Indian Yellow,*
Vermillion Red, Cerulean Blue), 2015



Richard Kalina *Resting State (Blue)*,
2016



John Crawford
Pinecone 7, 2013-16
(detail)

graphic scale.

Ruth Laskey also works with traditional materials in the service of contemporary abstraction. The series *Plain Weave Grid* (2015) applies her regular practice of hand woven, hand-dyed linen to create modular prints. Paying equal attention to material, form, and substrate, each work is composed of four iterations of the same printing plate. Recon-figurations of simple forms demonstrate that slight variations create open possibility and potential for compositional structure, which imply vastly different spaces. Weaving and printmaking are slow processes steeped in historical tradi-tion, providing an interesting juxtaposition with Laskey's contemporary interest in form and color.

Sheila Hicks is another artist that applies modernist approaches to traditional textile techniques. The use of weaving and quilting processes dictate a pattern-based com-position. She studied directly under Josef Albers at Yale in the 1950s and closely researched the textile work of indig-enous people in the Andes. In addition to massively scaled installations of cascading ropes and skeins of yarn, Hicks makes intimate two-dimensional works from fiber-based materials, such as *Faceted* (1989), composed of interlocking

squares made of woven natural linen that alternate warp and weft. The piece reveals the complex permutations follow-ing the inherent qualities of the material and simplicity of form.

Odili Donald Odita paints forms of bold colors that con-vey velocity and perspective and explore complicated no-tions of politics, identity, and humanity. Thin layers of matte color bring attention to color's sensation on the body, its physicality and intensity. In the acrylic work on canvas *Alive* (2010), triangles and rectangles bisect and abut one another in a spectrum of colors, causing the eye to seek patterns of logical repetition, or to understand non-existent spaces implied by the hard-edge between colors. The relationship of representation and meaning is simplified as an exercise in abstract painting, but signifies a complex lived experience.

Structure

The Mingei model of a good artist-craftsman is one who lacks ego and arrogance, putting the work in front of per-sonal pride. For many contemporary artists, the challenge



Melissa Meyer *St. Mortiz*, 2015

lies in following self-imposed guidelines that provide a structure while finding new ways of working within those parameters.

Richard Kalina's body of work follows many sets of rules based on personal choices: a square format, a limited palette, and composition based on early Modernist preoccupations with the grid. Typically his systems apply to painting, cutting, and arranging papers in a process that integrates collage and painting. Two oil paintings on raw linen from the *Resting State* (2016) series distill his process to the essential by creating seemingly amorphous forms that are derived from his own personal memories of Modern French architectural spaces like those of Le Corbusier.

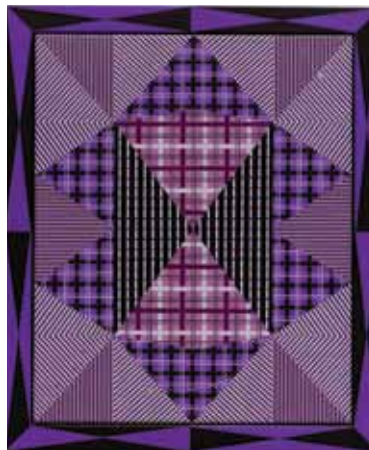
Melissa Meyer has a lexicon of gestures, marks that look quickly but deftly executed. The artist often works with an eclectic palette of vibrant hues on a lighter base color that serves to illuminate the bold lines in the foreground and establish a figure-ground relationship. She also uses the same process to make paintings in neutral shades of black and white, as with *St. Moritz* (2015), an homage to de Kooning's *Zurich* (1947). It is a diptych that creates a rhythm and structure in her personal shorthand, much as a jazz musician improvises notes and rhythms in an identifiable idiosyncratic style. The seemingly random pattern of letter and word-like forms in Meyer's painting belies a nevertheless rigorous structure.

Similarly working under self-imposed restrictions, the basis of **Douglas Melini's** "pattern" paintings, *Returning To The Sky* and *Brilliant Edged* (2016), is the print of his childhood bedroom wallpaper. A generic plaid, the artist adjusts the color choices and rearranges the grid of the print to create psychedelic compositions of nearly perfect stripes and intersections of color. Integral to these works are hand-painted frames, encompassing the paintings into complete objects and provide a structure to the field of vibrational interference of color and pattern. A final touch, also a rule, is one imperfect gesture of paint, a nod to the imperfect hand of its creator.

In **John Crawford's** early training as a blacksmith, the artist developed a vocation in the repetition of form making by an individual hand. Each component of the sculpture



Christopher French
Complicated Shadows #2, 2015



Douglas Melini *Brilliant Edged, 2016*

Pinecone 7 (2013-16) is a structural element in the work, based on a form from nature. These pieces interlock and extrude to create a freestanding column. The individual components are fine works in and of themselves, and connect as modular units creating a unified whole from many parts. This is prevalent throughout his sculpture, with singular units bifurcating, multiplying and combining together to create works that refer to and mimic the inherent systems of nature.

Christopher French's practice is also inspired by naturally occurring abstract geometries like cellular divisions and plant structures. The phenomenon of light refraction through a canopy of trees inspires the series of paintings entitled, *Complicated Shadows* (2015). Triangular forms extend from a central point and represent beams of light that filter down and overlap in segments of transparency and opacity. Variations are made in different combinations of colors referencing the qualities of light throughout the day or atmospheric changes in weather. The works are rooted in sensibilities of the American Romantics, but voiced in the language of abstraction in serious explorations of composition, color, and optical effect.

Returning to the original question and response that inspired *Confluence/Influence*, it seems clear that Mingei is still present in contemporary art practice. Especially as everyday life seems to increasingly take place in the ethereal, cyber cloud, there has been a surge of interest towards a return to direct, unmediated experience and an affinity

for objects that are individualized, handmade, and authentic. The practices of the artists in this exhibition all employ the technologies of painting, drawing, weaving, and sculpture including blacksmithing, marble carving, and ceramic pottery in the service of finding meaning through analog creation in a digital world. By pursuing their art and their craft within the tradition of Abstraction, they are also extending a dialogue that began with Yanagi and Leach to engage in an encounter with infinity. ■

— Bridget Donlon
New York, NY, 2016

BIOGRAPHY

Bridget Donlon is a Brooklyn-based, London-educated contemporary art professional with a decade of experience in curating and arts administration. She got her start at the Tang Museum, artist-run spaces in Williamsburg, and as an intern for the Guerrilla Girls. She has worked for Galerie Lelong, Tate Modern, the Fabric Workshop and Museum, and Dieu Donn . Curatorial projects have included site-specific commissions and group exhibitions. Bridget is the curator of *Pure Pulp: Contemporary Artists Working in Paper*, a 15 year retrospective of works from the organization's residency programs for the Wellin Museum at Hamilton College. The exhibition originated at Dieu Donn  earlier in 2016, traveled to the Robert C. Williams Museum of Papermaking at Georgia Tech in Summer, 2016, and will end at the Dedalus Foundation at Industry City, Sunset Park, Brooklyn coincident with the present exhibition, *Confluence/Influence*. The catalog for *Pure Pulp* features contributions by Richard Tuttle and Rachel Wolff and is distributed by DelMonico/Prestel. Bridget is currently an Assistant Manager at MTA Arts & Design in New York City.

CHECKLIST

REGINA BOGAT

EXILON, 2014
Acrylic and cord on canvas
20 x 20 inches
Courtesy the artist and Zürcher Gallery,
New York, NY

MARTHA CLIPPINGER

RIGANDIH, 2016
Hand-dyed wool
60 x 38 inches
Courtesy of the artist

JOHN CRAWFORD

PINECONE 7, 2013-2016
Forged steel
90 x 5 x 5 inches
Courtesy the artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art,
New York, NY

KATHY ERTEMAN

BLACK/WHITE BUCKET VESSEL, 2012
White stoneware with slip and glaze
15 x 13 x 10 inches
Courtesy the artist

ASPHALT & SNOW, 2012
White stoneware with slip and glaze
26 x 8 1/2 x 7 inches
Courtesy the artist

SWERVE #1, 2013
White stoneware with slip glaze and
monoprint
18 x 9 x 8 inches
Courtesy the artist

OCHRE TALL BUCKET VESSEL, 2012
Stoneware with slip and glaze
11 1/2 x 11 x 10 inches
Courtesy the artist

CHRISTOPHER FRENCH

COMPLICATED SHADOWS STUDY #2, 2015
Gouache and acrylic on watercolor paper
16 1/8 x 12 1/4 inches
Courtesy the artist

COMPLICATED SHADOWS STUDY #3, 2015
Gouache and acrylic on watercolor paper
16 1/8 x 12 1/4 inches
Courtesy the artist

COMPLICATED SHADOWS STUDY #4, 2015
Gouache and acrylic on watercolor paper
16 1/8 x 12 1/4 inches
Courtesy the artist

SHELIA HICKS

FACETED, 1989
Linen
39 3/8 x 39 3/8 x 1 1/8 inches
Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
New York, NY

RICHARD KALINA

RESTING STATE (YELLOW), 2016
Oil on linen
32 x 32 inches
Courtesy the artist and Lennon, Weinberg Inc.,
New York, NY

RESTING STATE (BLUE), 2016
Oil on linen
32 x 32 inches
Courtesy the artist and Lennon, Weinberg Inc.,
New York, NY

RUTH LASKEY

*PLAIN WEAVE GRID (SOLFERINO VIOLET,
INDIAN YELLOW, VERMILLION RED,
CERULEAN BLUE)*, 2015
Color soft-ground etching
29 x 29 inches
Courtesy the artist and Paulson Bott Press,
Berkeley, CA

*PLAIN WEAVE GRID (EMERALD GREEN,
SPRING GREEN, RUBY RED, PRIMROSE
YELLOW)*, 2015
Color soft-ground etching
29 x 29 inches
Courtesy the artist and Paulson Bott Press,
Berkeley, CA

DOUGLAS MELINI

RETURNING TO THE SKY, 2016
Acrylic on canvas with hand painted frame
25 3/8 x 21 3/8 x 1 3/4 inches
Courtesy the artist and 11R, New York, NY

BRILLIANT EDGED, 2016
Acrylic on canvas with hand painted frame
25 3/8 x 21 3/8 x 1 3/4 inches
Courtesy the artist and 11R, New York, NY

MELISSA MEYER

ST. MORITZ, 2015
Oil on canvas
30 x 80 inches, overall (diptych)
Courtesy the artist and Lennon, Weinberg Inc.,
New York, NY

ALIYSSA PHEOBUS MUMTAZ

STATION, 2010
Graphite on handmade Khadi paper
103 x 72 1/2 inches
Courtesy the artist and Tracy Williams Ltd.,
New York, NY

ODILI DONALD ODITA

ALIVE, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 40 inches
Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery,
New York, NY

DON PORCARO

TALISMAN 16, 2016
Limestone, marble, brass
60 1/2 x 19 x 22 inches
Courtesy the artist

ALTOON SULTAN

#2, 2013
Egg tempera and graphite on hand-toned paper
15 x 15 inches
Courtesy the artist and McKenzie Fine Art,
New York, NY

#9, 2013
Egg tempera and graphite on hand-toned paper
15 x 15 inches
Courtesy the artist and McKenzie Fine Art,
New York, NY

#14, 2013
Egg tempera and graphite on hand-toned paper
15 x 15 inches
Courtesy the artist and McKenzie Fine Art,
New York, NY

#23, 2013
Egg tempera and graphite on hand-toned paper
15 x 15 inches
Courtesy the artist and McKenzie Fine Art,
New York, NY

Cover: **Odili Donald Odita**, *Alive*, 2010

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The collection of essays by Sōetsu Yanagi with Bernard Leach, *The Unknown Craftsman* (Tokyo & New York: Kondansha International, 1989), was an essential resource in writing this essay. I thank Leslie Wayne for the invitation to evolve her premise into an exhibition that I have enjoyed working on immensely. Thank you to the artists for so many interesting conversations and artworks, as well as to the galleries that helped to facilitate loans. My gratitude is also extended to Deborah Rising for the excellent brochure design and to David, Noah, Karen, and Chelsea of Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs for the opportunity to bring this show to life in such a beautiful space with so much wonderful support.



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