

BURNAWAY

Distillations: Vadis Turner at the Huntsville Museum of Art

BY BRYN EVANS

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Vadis Turner, Red Gate, 2018; braided bedsheets, due, acrylic, resin, wood, mixed media, 118 by 120 by 10 inches. Photo by Wes Megyar. Courtesy the artist and the Huntsville Museum of Art.

Who should love poisonous savours more than mead,
Long for a tempest on me and grow sick
Of rest and of divine free carelessness!
Oh me, I am a woman, not a god...

Augusta Webster, "Circe"

On a Wednesday in November we gather ourselves in front of small screens. Nashville-based artist Vadis Turner and I are meeting to discuss *Encounters*, an exhibition of recent work at the Huntsville Museum of Art. We sit against white backgrounds—hers warm, mine cool—with the evidence of human life and recreation peeking out from our portraits’ fringes: a robin’s egg blue desk, a framed vintage daguerreotype, countless paperbacks arranged on a matte black shelf. Meeting for the first time, our portals form a two-paneled grid. The cameras produce windows that reflect mirror images of ourselves, and perhaps our environments exist as the residue of those deliberate testimonies, each allowing the other a peculiar glimpse into an otherwise interior world. Or at least a fragment of the truth we permit the window to bare.

The exhibition offers a fresh look at the artist’s research on the grid, a years-long engagement that Turner recently shifted to focus on the matrix’s “expressive possibilities.” In the gallery, viewers are able to feel the pulse of this departure, as networks of lines spill, weave, and aggregate in imaginative reticulations. The ongoing series, *Window Treatments*, alchemizes the grid into three-dimensional sculptures: figural variations with tortuous shadows that meld with, against, and through the window’s physical form. Somehow, Turner conceives works that are at once delicate and terrifying—towering sculptures glisten and morph like butterflies in chrysalis.



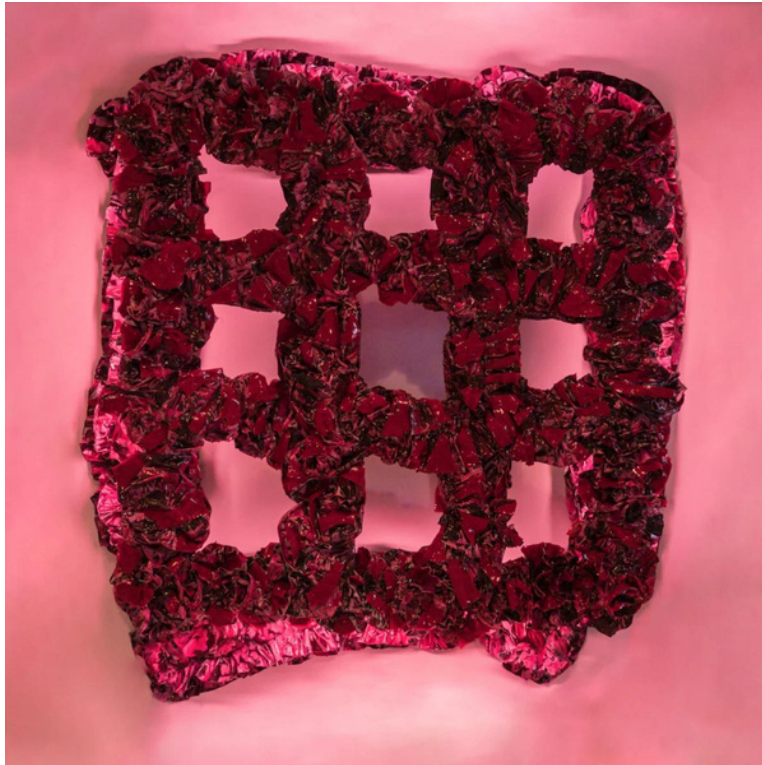
Window Figure: Circe embodies the character of its mythical namesake: enigmatic, enchanting, and enraged. The sculpture—composed of curtains, copper, gravel, resin, acrylic, steel, and a sound component by Grammy Award winning producer Emery Dobyns—resembles corroded arteries or intestines gilded by metallic flakes of lustrous and lustful affection. The window’s rope-like frame is made up of conduits that cluster and tangle in on themselves, fabricating a gnarly black and copper texture. As a free-form grid, *Circe* consists of large organic moments of negative space, yielding windows that reveal surrounding grid works in the gallery. The juxtapositions of dense materiality and open air, grid structure and natural form, attribute to the work’s inexplicable charm. Adding to the great number of pieces dedicated to the Greek enchantress, Turner deftly abstracts Circe’s mythology by elucidating her status as a tragic heroine for the misunderstood and contradicted. The work builds upon the artist’s earlier “textile paintings” which center the stories of female-identifying outcasts, such as the character Ophelia from the Shakespearean tragedy *Hamlet*, inspiration for Turner’s 2011 piece *Primrose Path Engulfed in Smoke*.

Vadis Turner, *Window Figure, Circe*, 2021; curtains, copper, gravel, resin, acrylic and steel, 92 by 64 by 45 inches. Courtesy the artist

Mounted on the left wall at the far end of the gallery, viewers find *Rose Window*, a monumental work comprised of curtains, bedding, ribbon, steel, thread, resin, acrylic, mixed media, and a sound component by Dobyns. The combination of “hard” and “soft” materials featured in *Rose Window* is emblematic of the object’s complexity. Pink light envelops the sculpture with a gentle, yet sinister glow. This sentiment is undergirded by Dobyns’ audio composition, described by the artist as a “slow hiss.” The color red dominates the work, derived from Turner’s incorporation of ribbons and a ruffled floral bedding set from her 1980s tweenhood. In our discussion of the exhibition, I proposed the idea of *Rose Window* as a memorial to a young Vadis, and the artist extended this reading to *Red Gate* with its megalithic tombstone-esque form. Both works insinuate another departure: the isolation of textiles from their functional status. In a mark of true artistic and practical genius, Turner fuses domestic materials and craft making traditions readily associated with feminine interiority with architectural meditations on the grid, the built environment’s erection, and the public sector’s forceful association with masculinity. Cheekily incorporating textiles from her personal bedroom into the sculpture, the artist simultaneously agitates, or ruffles, confining social expectations around gender performance. In this way, she effectively turns the concept of gendered space on its head.



Vadis Turner, *Primrose Path Engulfed in Smoke*, 2011; ribbon, clothing, antique textiles, and mixed media, 68 by 63 by 5 inches. Courtesy the artist and the Huntsville Museum of Art.



Rose Window, 2021; curtains, bedding, ribbon, steel, thread, resin, acrylic paint and mixed media, 84 by 80 by 18 inches. Courtesy the artist.

The vessel acts as another hallmark in Turner's creative practice. In these works, the grid reaches a fever pitch, becoming hyper-materialized. The artist manipulates the grid as figure itself—it is lines and holes, horizons and axes, mesh, gauze, panels, and webbing. When one realizes the grid's capacity as a field that one can fall through, balance on, and weave between, the "failure" of the vessels—that is, their unapologetic porosity—becomes a testament to their creative possibilities. In works such as *Dark Floral Vessel* and *The Trophy*, the grid functions as a method and a medium.

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In *Messy Vessel, The Crazy Lady*, viewers witness the aforementioned method in motion. Burnt wood, leather, ribbon, resin, and hardware form a vessel with a narrow bottom and wide, amorphous lip. Charred wood contrasts with the texture of ballerina ribbon; together both materials weave an intricate, yet inelegant lattice. *Messy Vessel* resembles a tree struck by lightning—the shock of smooth white ribbon against the thick, cauterized wood looks like the flash of a thunderous bolt. Yet the intensity of this image coexists with the work’s overwhelming fragility—the vessel unfurls as if it is a black flower, blooming. It is open, in most senses of the word: vulnerable, agape, unsettled, stripped, loose.



Vadis Turner, *Messy Vessel, The Crazy Lady*, 2021; burnt wood, leather, ribbon, resin, hardware, 29 by 32 by 16 inches.
Photo by Hannah Deits. Courtesy the artist and the Huntsville Museum of Art.

Messy Vessel troubles traditional standards of attractiveness and identifies with the looseness, messiness, and hysteria regularly demonized in American society. Drawing again on the vessels’ usage of the grid as an expressive form, Turner asks viewers to consider the inherent qualities of any given identity. What must it hold? How can we push the limits of our own conceptualizations of self and outcast? Where are the holes, gaps, and fissures? What do we risk if we leave them open? What could we gain?

In *Encounters*, Vadis Turner converses in the language of bed sheets, charged with the memory of distilled human energy and content in the mess. The new large-scale, textile-focused works featured in the exhibition expand on the artist's previous flirtations with the grid as a structural arrangement, method, and figure. Both on and off the wall, Turner's pieces offer ample space for reflections on material contradictions, specifically as they relate to the expectations, functions, and limiting assumptions placed on the South's crafts and its craft makers. *Encounters* vehemently embraces the maxim that constraints are points of departure, as observed in Turner's creation of windows we cannot see through, vessels that refuse to hold, and curtains built to let the light in. Perhaps the pervasive de-emphasis of utility originates from the artist's background as an abstract painter, a factor also in line with her decision to produce studies after—not before—works are made. Simultaneously deconstructive and constructive, this practice enables the artist to pare elaborate concepts down to their essential elements, to excavate the bones and unearth simple truths:

Every mirror is a window, every window is a mirror.

Encounters: Vadis Turner was on view at the Huntsville Museum of Art from July 31–November 27, 2022. Upcoming shows by the artist include the Tennessee Triennial, TN, January 2023; Think Pinker, curated by Beth Rudin DeWoody, Gavlak Gallery, CA, February 2023; Intent/Content, Susquehanna Museum, PA, February 2023; Hand Over Hand: Textiles Today, Mindy Solomon Gallery, FL, March 2023; Vadis Turner, She Drank Gold, Abrams-Engel Institute for Visual Arts, AL, June 2023, and Vadis Turner, curated by Emily Weiner, Whitespec, GA, July 2023.