

Vadis Turner transforms everyday materials into textural art



The Nashville-based artist, who has two works at the local House, has recently opened a museum exhibition in Alabama for her sculptures made from domestic materials

After receiving both a bachelor and a master's degree in fine art at Boston University in the early 2000s, Vadis Turner was in what she remembers today as a 'purgatory period', between art school and real life. Little did she know then that moving back home to Nashville during this transition would define her career, which has recently culminated in a survey exhibition, titled Encounters, at Alabama's Huntsville Museum of Art.

Turner's lack of a studio and materials two decades ago had led the artist to scavenge through her parents' bedroom and kitchen where she made garments from wax paper. The moment had sparked the challenge of 'turning something really common into a precious sculpture', and the answer was in manipulating the materials' utilitarian gender connotations. 'I was in the confines of the domestic sphere, but there was so much potential to speak within that space,' she says. The initial discovery of a source so accessible yet promising has over the years evolved into a series of abstract sculptures, either freestanding or wall-hung, made out of various mundane materials, such as bedsheets, lingerie, curtain, or ribbon, in addition to more traditional ones, including resin, wax, cement, and birch wood.

Colourful and energetic, Turner's loosely geometric works are demure about their sources, but her lush and malleable lexicon still hints a bed sheet's charged sensuality or the heft of a curtain. The show at the American south coincides with a pivotal moment in the artist's path. After nearly two decades in New York, she relocated to Nashville right before the pandemic and her work entered Soho House Nashville's collection earlier this year. Two bedsheet sculptures, which also feature charred wood, acrylic and resin, fit the House's commitment to exhibit works from more than 40 artists at a former factory building that was at some point inhabited by artists.



Turner lives in Downtown – ‘really close to Honky Tonks, but far enough to not hear them,’ she says – and maintains a studio right outside the city in Gallatin in a house formerly built by her grandfather, who was in the country music industry. ‘My process starts with allowing myself to make “bad” drawings to flesh out some ideas,’ the artist says. ‘And, they are welcome because I started in a place with some teeth, so today, sketching helps me handle the pressure of creating something fibrous, not only in terms of material but also content.’ She lets the work evolve towards wherever it yearns to go – ‘I never want to start at A and end up in B,’ she explains.

Soho House’s Global Art Director, Kate Bryan, is fascinated by the invitation for closer inspection in Turner’s wall sculptures with ‘instant wall power to reveal a complex dialogue about the hierarchy of art.’ During a studio visit, Bryan asked herself whether ‘these materials are worthy of fine art, or are they craft, sculpture or even a form of painting?’ Peter Baldaia, director of curatorial affairs at Huntsville Museum of Art, had first dabbled with similar questions after encountering Turner’s oeuvre. Similarly, he also came to the conclusion that, rather than rigid answers, the work carves portals for non-bodily possibilities through the promise of the distantly familiar materials’ density, sensuality, and determination. ‘The artist’s recent grid-based pieces move on and off the wall, embracing contradictions of structure and logic while they conjure new possibilities for meaning and thought,’ Baldaia adds.

Between a colour-bursting ribbon painting titled ‘Primrose Path Engulfed In Smoke’ from 2011 and colossal but airy ‘Window Treatments’ grid sculptures made this year with bedsheets and curtains, as well as copper, resin and acrylic, the Alabama show traces a trajectory that started out with searching through Brooklyn’s thrift shops over a decade ago. ‘I had a good dose of elsewhere,’ Turner says on her return to Nashville, where she is these days working with a mount of curtains from her grandparents’ home. ‘The materials come embedded with a magic,’ she adds about the lived experience a bedsheet, curtain, or piece of lingerie holds. She has witnessed the pandemic attribute further resonance to these domestic surfaces, ‘when we were comforted by the confines of the home.’



For the artist, a found bedsheet is a ‘dormant still life’, charged with hidden stories, as well as bodily traits, of their former users. Turner abstracts and complicates that absent yet lingering layer of corporal experience in a gentle determination to capture the body within. This poetic embodiment of resilience through ambitious use of historically undervalued materials recalls the legacy of feminist pioneers such as Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, and Ruth Asawa. Turner celebrates the fact that her work stands out as an extension of ‘artists who set down feminist milestones that are very meaningful in this current cultural context.’ But she also salutes the idea of twisting and turning the lineage of art’s flirt with hyper-masculinity. ‘I look at artists like Sterling Ruby or Julian Schnabel, and I want to “macho” too, whatever that means,’ she ruminates.

Along the way, ‘missteps and discoveries have all happened for a reason,’ Turner believes about the formation of her tactile and absorbing practice. ‘I have always liked to take risks and see what happens – even maybe fall onto my face,’ she says, looking back at her first time reaching out to a piece of wax paper in the kitchen. ‘I am still editing and distilling while leaving my comfort zone.’

Turner continues to invent formal possibilities for her sculptures and invite viewers for intimate inspections, but along the way her core attempt remains the same: ‘I am still pushing the transitional states of these materials to have them become something else and physically traverse from being in one space to the next.’

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