How to REMAIN HUMAN

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CURATED BY

ROSE BOUTHILLER,
ASSOCIATE CURATOR

&

MEGAN LYKINS REICH,
DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF PROGRAM,
PLANNING, AND ENGAGEMENT

WITH
ELENA HARVEY COLLINS,
CURATORIAL ASSISTANT

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ON DISPLAY IN THE MUELLER FAMILY GALLERY, MORTON AND ROSALIE COHEN FAMILY GALLERY, GUND COMMONS, KOHL ATRIUM, AND OTHER SPACES THROUGHOUT THE MUSEUM.

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On View
JUNE 12 –
SEPTEMBER 5
2015

CHRISTI BIRCHFIELD

RECONFIGURATION/PAINTING FALLING APART

BY INDRA K. LĀCIS

A certain kind of gothic cadence rises and falls in Christi Birchfield's work. Her gestural sculptures elicit a guttural response originating somewhere deep in the heart chakra, edging carefully toward your lips, fingers, and knees. Sprawling, or maybe just hanging on for its last breath, *Reconfiguration* (2014) calls to mind sooty stained glass windows, the arc of something familiar, perhaps sleeping or lost. If this work has a scent, it might be incense burning or a cotton shirt dried crisp in hot sun.

Like a painting falling apart or turning out of its skin, Birchfield's work gauges the movement and curvature of human bodies. In turns reductive and additive, her process demands a tenuous, psychological kind of labor. It involves mirroring, the uneasy feeling of wanting to look over your shoulder but resisting the urge, or the futility of untying a knot that will not come undone.

Birchfield's most recent sculptures begin with yards of commercially dyed black canvas and bleach paste appliqué. As the solution sets, she folds the fabric to create a Rorschach effect, searing and tattooing these thinly drawn lines with the weight and warmth of an iron. The first part of this process happens on the floor, recalling the horizontality that freed easel painting from its position as a window on the world.[1] Then Birchfield moves the work to a table, where like a surgeon or seamstress she cuts the sinuous forms into new structures. The final installation again reformulates the composition, this time a play between two and three-dimensions—the flatness of the cut-out canvas itself and the muscle of the work as a whole, with arms and legs that either collapse or elongate, depending on the view.

Like a cocoon unraveling, the effect of Birchfield's canvas sculptures reveals her nimble sense of line, her depth as a printer, and a dialogue with histories of both painting and sculpture. These wall-based works fall into a genealogy that might begin with Henri Matisse's mid-twentieth century cut-outs of flora and fauna, made when the artist was bedridden and nearly blind.[2] If these late career works by Matisse had a dark side, however delicate and oblique, Birchfield seems to have discovered it. Her canvas sculptures play purposefully on the instability of silhouettes and shadows, channeling not permanence, but the perpetual changeability of lines and mark making.[3]

Displaying a quiet concern with the natural world, Birchfield's work suggests a loose engagement with bio-mimicry, processes that adopt nature's innate organizational tactics as a model for problem solving at all levels. In her earlier work, Birchfield frequently incorporated dried flowers. In *Tear* (2010), for instance, she ran a bouquet of parched blooms, stems still in tact, through a printing press, a pressurized process that unintentionally tore the paper, revealing its fleshy, pulpy skin with a sort of flirty recklessness.

This "happy accident," as Birchfield refers to it, now inadvertently summons Eva Hesse's *Hang Up* of 1966, a work that both favored and questioned the concept of framing as central to painting and sculpture alike. Like Hesse's *Hang Up* (whose title also bears double meaning), *Tear* begins ordering our view of the work's form and subject via one slender strip of folded aluminum foil, draped delicately along the edges, and sagging, just so, at the bottom; as if the work's content had been stolen or spilled, the gash on the left side remains despite the shiny frame's modest effort to bandage or contain it. This defiantly wounded work, with its pure physicality and the abject absurdity of its brittleness, confounds our processing of its shape and contour with a dose of sly, sad humor, the kind of irony Hesse might have admired.[4]

Like the wilting frame in *Tear*, the tug and pull of gravity-- our inability to avoid it--guides the syntax of Birchfield's wider vernacular. The artist's most expansive canvas sculptures conjure the simple motion of something strung up, suspended, or caged: a creature or a carcass whose exposed rib cage appears at once disjointed and intact. Elsewhere in the work, innocuous and more purely decorative referents take hold: we see tangled vines, scarab shells, rusted pulleys and belts, or Victorian-era wallpaper. A multi-tiered layering effect deploys again and again with constancy, here and there winking coyly or taking as its distant touchstone classic post-minimal obsessions with supple materiality-- the tumbling effect so pronounced in Robert Morris's 1970s felt wall sculptures or the fragile density of Faith Wilding's immersive *Crocheted Environment* (1972/95).

In Birchfield's largest pieces, the body becomes the frame in greater or lesser ways, requiring that we "see" and understand not with our eyes, but with our whole physical selves. Nearly impossible to understand from only one point of view, the work's intricacy demands circumambulation, as if it were a shrine protecting something unspecified but revered. Although a slightly sinister sensation occasionally creeps up in Birchfield's work, the feeling is elusive, fleeting; it forces looking closely at the work itself, at these tightly woven ellipses, turning over and sliding past one another seamlessly, like water molecules might. Birchfield makes order from structures that at first feel congested and chaotic. This work both accepts and relies on the stability of variability, its echoes and the unpredictability of how it might all sound together. In this sense, Birchfield's canvas sculptures are nuanced with a bold, repetitive tempo that reads like a perpetual cleaning of the slate.

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1. In his late teens, Walter Benjamin outlined the idea that the horizontal orientation is an axis at odds with the verticality of the body. In her analysis of Jackson Pollock's paintings, Rosalind Krauss takes up the implications of this issue, writing: "The floor, Pollock's work seemed to propose, in being below culture, was out of the axis of the body, and thus also below form." See Krauss's musings on the matter in her entry about "Horizontality," in R. Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 93-103.

2. See the recent catalog *Henri Matisse, The Cut-Outs*, Karl Buchberg, Nicholas Cullinan, Jodi Hauptman, and Nicholas Serota, eds. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).

3. In Birchfield's work, painterly effects haunt and deceive, evoking also a distant camaraderie with the cardboard and burlap cut-outs Claes Oldenburg used in performances of *The Street* (1960), which celebrated the crude grit and complexity of Manhattan's lower east side. Far more eloquently crafted than Oldenburg's tattered *Street* pieces, Birchfield's work nonetheless shares a kinship with these brutally honest, flat, theatrical forms.

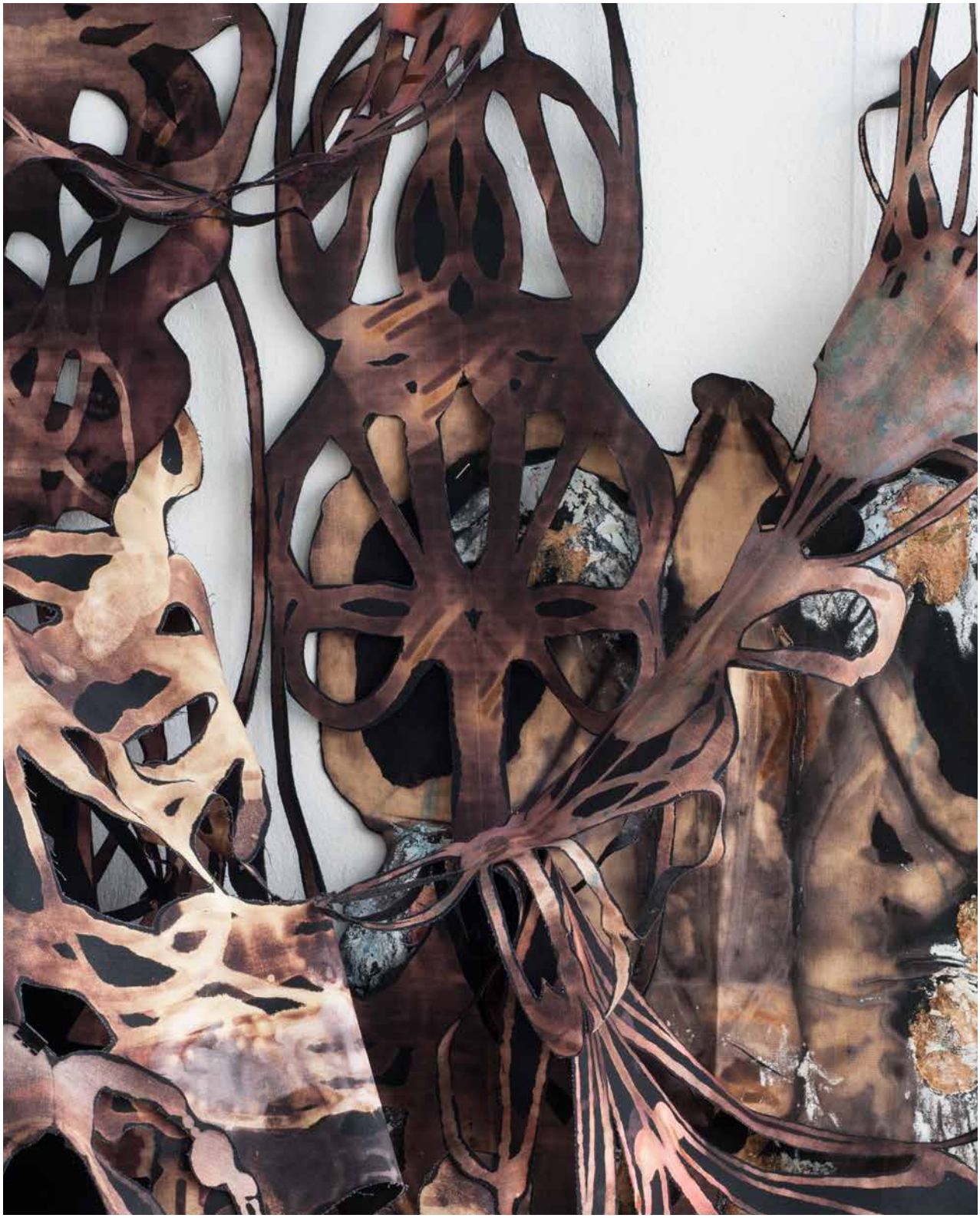
4. For more on this see Cindy Nemser's "Interview with Eva Hesse," originally published in Artforum in May 1970 and reprinted in Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 196-199.

Christi Birchfield
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland
Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics

Christi Birchfield
Slab, 2015
Bleach paste, black canvas
65 x 20 x 8 inches
Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics

1.

Christi Birchfield
Reconfiguration, 2014
Bleach paste, black canvas
80 x 57 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist



Christi Birchfield
Reconfiguration, 2014 (detail)
Bleach paste, black canvas
80 x 57 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist

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This catalog is intended to expand the scope of conversation and interpretation, with 14 writers from outside of the institution contributing their knowledge of, and ideas about, these artists and their work. We are grateful for all of these authors, as well as our many colleagues, near and far, who have shared their own insights and suggestions for studio visits. Ry Wharton's sensitive design for this volume gives the exhibition a lasting visual record. And we couldn't have done it without Elena Harvey Collins, our talented Curatorial Assistant, and MOCA Cleveland's stellar Exhibitions team: Ray Juaire, Senior Exhibitions Manager; Kate Montlack, Registrar; and Paul Sydorenko, Preparator. Many thanks to the lenders to the exhibition, including the artists; Ed Fraga; Susan Goethel Campbell; Wayne State University Art Collection, Detroit; the Estate of Mary Ann Aitken; the Brooklyn Museum; Kent State University Department of Special Collections and Archives; and the d.a. levy Collection at Cleveland State University Library. Finally, we extend a deep gratitude to the artists, who have been extremely generous in their participation and our conversations.

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Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland
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