

# ROUGH MATTER



REBECCA MURTAUGH

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New Works by Rebecca Murtaugh

March 17 - April 16, 2017

Essay by Lilly Wei

Stout Projects  
56 Bogart Street, Suite 1C  
Brooklyn, NY 11206

Director's Foreword:

It feels like I've known Rebecca Murtaugh forever. In reality, it's been less than 5 years. But that's the thing about Rebecca – time stands still when you are with her. Endlessly curious, she is never boring. And she makes you feel like you couldn't possibly be boring either. That's the secret of her charm. She makes you feel like you are the most important person in the room.

I've hosted her students and fellow Hamilton College faculty at Stout Projects and I've seen how Rebecca engages with the world in a similar vein to her teaching – it's all about bringing out the best in everyone, whatever that may be. I have never seen Rebecca at an artist talk or discussion group where she didn't have a million questions – one thought seeming to lead immediately to another. I suspect this is where her continuous sense of wonder and discovery come from – all those questions, some unanswerable, all of them important. And each student, each audience member, each artist is given the same respect and serious attention as every other.

Her sculptures are infused with this same spirit of discovery, the same effortless charm, the same driven questioning. Each piece is treated with due respect, even when there's irreverence at play as well. Rebecca is a maker of things. And her work never lets you forget it. She collects fallen branches from her yard in upstate New York and then debarks the wood herself. And many of the tools she employs were either made by or first used by her father many moons ago. She has a sense of history without ever repeating it. And in her fearless sculptures, you recognize the woman and nature collaboration – it isn't nurture versus nature, it's both.

A one-time pastry chef, her work resembles cottage cheese or cream cheese frosting or any number of edible concoctions. But there's also a reference to nature – the way lichen grows on a tree, for example. Though she isn't drawn to natural palettes. Her colors are all what she calls "undesirables," the cast offs from designs gone awry. "Gaudy in a good way," as a viewer describes it in an NPR interview from 2016. Yet, somehow the works stand as formal abstractions, no matter how enticing or organic. They are thoughtful and intuitive. The alchemic result of all she has learned and done and uncovered.

Rebecca's artistic evolution is a wholly natural and confident progression - from studying nutrition and science as an undergrad, to being a pastry chef and a caterer, to making ceramics and sculpture in the studio. It's a continued experimentation, only in different types of laboratories.

As she says herself, there's a fine line between art and science. And they both begin with questions.

Robin Stout, Director

See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me, Heal Me

by Lilly Wei

Running my eyes over Rebecca Murtaugh's recent sculptures, I was tempted to run my fingertips over them as well although it's not something I would advise viewers to do. But I was curious; I wanted to corroborate the optical by means of the tactile, to determine whether or not those color saturated surfaces were hard or yielding, their texture grainy and coarse or nubby, soft. I wanted to read them again through touch, tracing the artist's hand, following its progress, its imprint.

I didn't touch them. But in an age of mechanical and digital production and reproduction, we have become more and more fascinated by the authority, singularity, and authenticity of the hand-made, increasingly a rarity, increasingly radical. Murtaugh is an advocate for objects made by hand, a process critical to her practice, considering it historically, conceptually, and formally. Making to her is synonymous with making by hand, challenging dominant modes of contemporary artistic production. But perhaps she is motivated even more by the primal pleasures that it provides, a mind/body gratification that is lacking in the moving of a mouse and clicking.

Artists have bedecked her family tree for several generations and while her background is multifaceted, one common thread is her instinctive desire to work with her hands, involved with projects based on sustenance in one way or another. This includes a stint as a pastry chef, studies in sustainability and nutrition and an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University, all of which has found its way into her work. As an axiom acknowledged by many artists today— inherited from the groundbreaking precepts established by the feminists of the 1960s and 70s—creativity is not conceived in a vacuum but springs from the circumstances and realities of life, however that is manifested or mediated.

Murtaugh favors candor, her work's appeal corporeal, painterly, weighted, sensuous. She explores a range of found and recycled materials, deftly combining the natural and industrial. That includes branches that she retrieves regularly from the woods of upstate New York, stripping off their bark, clay, Styrofoam packing peanuts, timber ties and leftover paint the colors of fruit loops thickened with salt and other coagulants. The sculptures are often categorized in series, constructed



"Aperture: Lover's Knot and Heartbreaker", 2017, paint and mixed media, 19 x 13 x 5 inches, detail



"Rolled and Folded: Startling Orange" 2017, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media, 10 x 7 x 8 inches

from an idiosyncratic language of forms that are often playful, hovering between the organic and fantastic, even the alien, but also the domesticated. They might recall Yves Klein's monochrome sponges, stuffed toys, barnacled artifacts, fragments of coral, food that has been slathered in frosting, petrified botanicals or an assortment of other configurations that seem vaguely familiar but slip away into the mystifying, the unidentifiable. They can be funky and disconcerting, charming and adorable and make you wonder from what realm of the artist's psyche they originated.

Some recent works include those from her "Accretion" series. Her titles signify, she says, and are informational, based on a physical aspect of the work followed by the commercial name of the house paint used. These sculptures are coated with a dense paste of crunchy paint, emphasizing their material immediacy. Her titles do not fix the image, which can be parsed variously, but they get you started. *Accretion: Gladiolus and Ultra Violet* (2017), shifting in color from coral to violet, is a piece I find goofy and lovable; an irresistible combination. It might be thought of as a *rara avis*, tentatively roosting in a semblance of a tree or a spit (is it a haven or a trap?) consisting of three naked branches, really just sticks, precariously braced against each other. The sturdy, ungainly form is

humorously, unsteadily cradled, its weight and size almost too much for the delicacy and vulnerability of the branches, adding tension and a sense of suspense (and an innovative solution to the sculptor's perpetual dilemma—that of pedestals and support.)

*Three Leaners: Orange Peel, Blueblood and Red Hot*, 2016, from her "Leaners" series, is more evocatively titled, even if still the given names of the paints used. While essentially an iteration of modernist yellow, blue and red, these colors have been endowed with an assortment of intimations, from the culinary to social status to a state of being. The life-sized branches, casually lounging against the wall—through the power of text in collaboration with image—have morphed into something that looks human, bursting with personality.

Another series, "Feelers," using colors named Morning Glory, Heartfelt, and June Berry in addition to those already mentioned, again direct us toward more narrative modes, modes that have been psy-

chologized, emotionalized. The plump, two-toned duos—some like doughnuts split in two—are posed together, either in an embrace or antagonistically; who knows? They remind me of young, inquisitive creatures, circling, tumbling over and sniffing each other, their mass circumscribing a void of varying dimensions. For Murtaugh, sculpture is both solid and void.

Some of the newest "Apertures," on the other hand, suggest ritual masks, plaques, reliefs or more sexual forms, an abstraction of female genitalia, perhaps. The title comes from the circular opening that characterizes these rose and violet-hued works, the grittiness of the heavy, hardened paint contradicting the pastel sweetness, complicating the notion of voluptuousness. It seems a redirection of the feminine into something more resistant.

The last group consists of ceramics. Murtaugh is enamored of clay because it is earthy and as old as civilization but also because it is malleable, capable of recording the impress of the hand directly and assuming any shape. Called "Paddle and Burrow" and "Rolled and Folded," the titles in this instance describe her process, followed, as always, by the colors present. In "Rolled and Folded," the layers, underglazed and glazed, are irregularly, eccentrically furled and stacked to create upright totems or hive-like objects of approximately a foot in height with an opening through them that is encrusted with her trademark paint mixture. On the one hand, it is reminiscent of a gem-studded geode, on the other and more figuratively allusive, it evokes a friendly monster face with an open mouth or a Cyclopean eye.

Murtaugh's sculptures slyly, evocatively straddle the line between abstraction and the representational, hybrids that toggle between the natural and the manmade, the sophisticated and the naïf. It's a kind of dialectics that is central to her practice. While she sets some predetermined rules for herself, she just as often permits intuition to range freely, even recklessly, letting her sense of the harmonious and the humorous rumble with her sense of the dissonant and absurd. In what are difficult, complicated times, her ability to play, in tandem with a heartening optimism is of greater value than ever.

Lilly Wei is a New York-based critic and independent curator whose focus is global contemporary art.

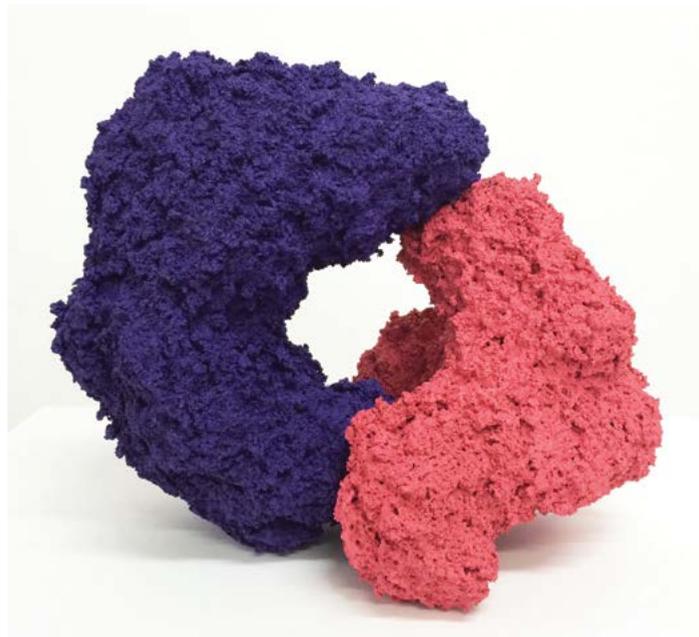


"Aperture: Heartfelt and Orchid Blush", 2017, paint and mixed media, 18 x 13 x 5 inches



"Accretion: Gladiolus and Ultra Violet", 2017, paint, wood, and mixed media, 47 inches in height





"Feelers: Red Hot and Ultra Violet", 2016, paint and mixed media, 9 x 15 x 9 inches (top)  
"Feelers: Heartfelt and Morning Glory", 2016, paint and mixed media, 12 x 15 x 12 inches (bottom)  
"Feelers: Gladiolus and June Berry", 2016, paint and mixed media, 9 x 15 x 9 inches (right)





"Aperture: June Berry and Gladiolus", 2017, paint and mixed media, 12 x 10 x 3 inches



"Aperture: Lover's Knot and Heartbreaker", 2017, paint and mixed media, 19 x 13 x 5 inches



"Paddle and Burrow: Tangerine", 2016, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media, 16 x 8 x 8 inches



"Paddle and Burrow: Blue Lapis", 2016, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media, 10 x 8 x 8 inches



"Three Leanners: Orange Peel, Blueblood and Red Hot", 2016, paint, wood, and mixed media, 79 inches in height



Installation view of "Paddle and Burrow" series (above)  
"Paddle and Burrow: Red Hot", 2016, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media,  
10 x 7 x 7 inches (left)



"Paddle and Burrow: Forest Green", 2016, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media, 14 x 8 x 8 inches



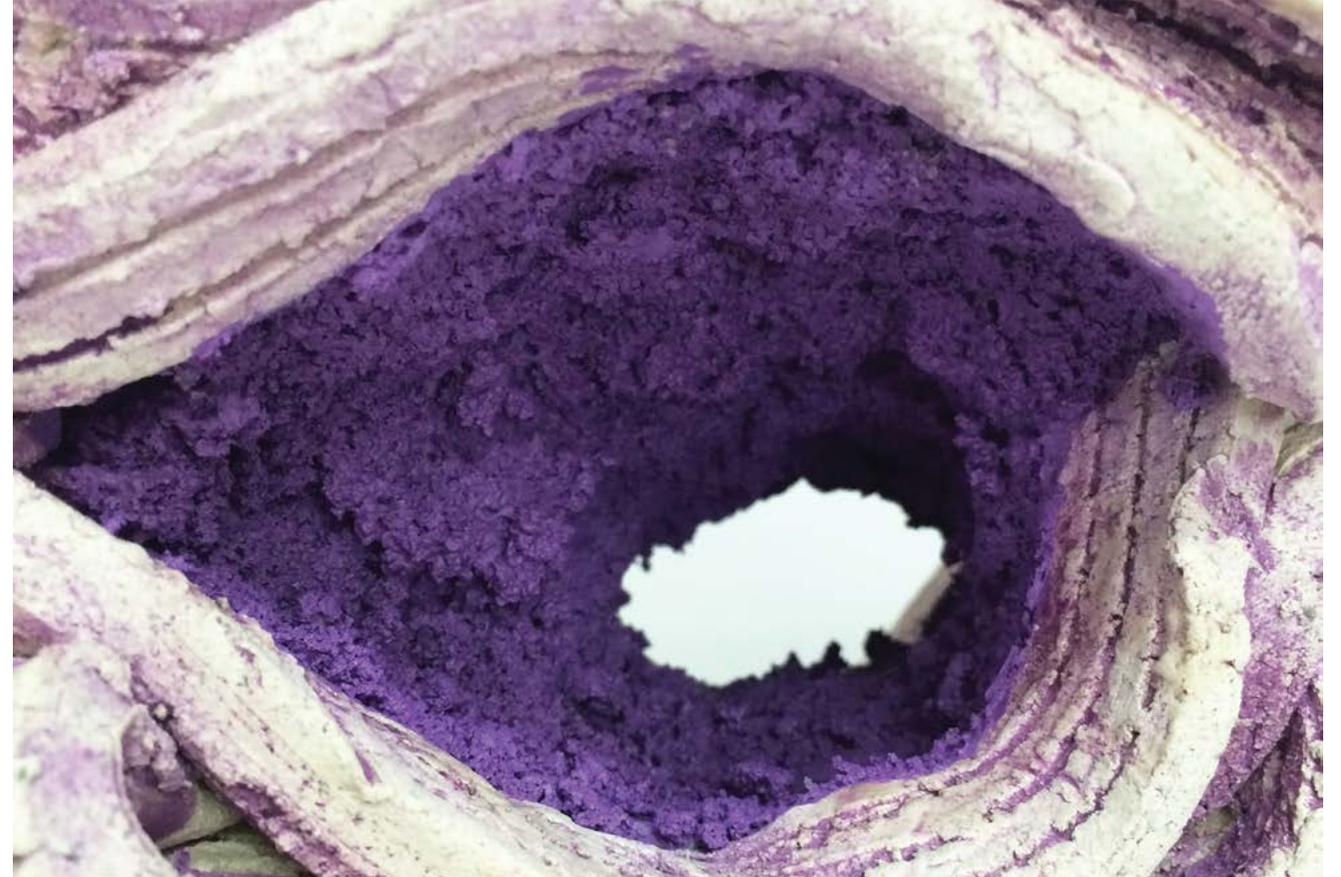
"Paddle and Burrow: Sunburst", 2016, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media, 16 x 7 x 7 inches



"Three Leanners: Tempo Teal, Orange Burst, and Morning Glory", 2016, paint, wood, and mixed media, 79 inches in height



"Rolled and Folded: Startling Orange" 2017, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media, 10 x 7 x 8 inches



"Rolled and Folded: Orchid Blush", 2017, underglazed and glazed ceramic, paint, and mixed media,  
10 x 8 x 7 inches



Rebecca Murtaugh earned a Master of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2001, a Bachelor of Science from the Pennsylvania State University in 1995, and attended Maryland Institute College of Art in 1999. Her work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in venues such as Tiger Strikes Asteroid (Brooklyn, NY), Trestle Projects (Brooklyn, NY), The High Line (New York, NY), Pentimenti Gallery (Philadelphia, PA), Everson Museum (Syracuse, NY), Frist Center for Visual Art (Nashville, TN), Urban Institute of Contemporary Arts (Grand Rapids, MI), Delaware Contemporary (Wilmington, DE), District of Columbia Arts Center (Washington, D.C.), MIT Museum (Cambridge, MA), and San Jose Museum of Art (San Jose, CA). Her work has been shown internationally at the Vitra Design Museum (Weil am Rhein, Germany) and the Science Museum (London, UK). Murtaugh's work has been included in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Huffington Post*, *The New Criterion*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *BUST*, and *Bushwick Daily*. She is represented by Stout Projects in Brooklyn and splits her time between Queens and Upstate New York where she is an Associate Professor of Art at Hamilton College.

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56 Bogart Street Suite 1C

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Gallery hours: Friday, Saturday, Sunday from noon-5:00pm, and by appointment

<http://stoutprojects.net>

<http://rebeccamurtaugh.com>

Essay by Lilly Wei

Gallery Director and Curator: Robin Stout

Images appear courtesy of the artist.

Cover image: "Red Hot and Ultra Violet", 2016, paint and mixed media, 9 x 15 x 9 inches, detail

*The artist extends special thanks to Robin Stout, Matthew Neil Gehring, Paul Behnke, Alison Sirico, Sam Pellman, and Hamilton College.*

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