



HOUSTON CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

# BREAKING TRADITION: CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE DECORATIVE ARTS

FALL EXHIBITIONS 2020

#BreakingTradition @CraftHouston

# BREAKING TRADITION: CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE DECORATIVE ARTS

Historically, the decorative arts have been classified as functional and beautiful objects—from furniture to vessels—by a Western world perspective that is governed by dealers and collectors. The decorative arts market privileges purity of form, material, and a prescribed demonstration of skill over individual creative expression and ingenuity. But this narrow view of the genre excludes a wide array of perspectives from the makers that produce these objects and the communities with whom they identify.

Decorative arts objects have an impact far beyond monetary gain, serving to bridge cultural divides by representing shared interests. As artifacts, these objects reveal the belief systems, social status, and affiliations of their first owners. Through the emergence of global trade routes, different countries began to adopt decorative motifs and forms from other parts of the world, signifying the complex history that is embedded within the objects.

By investigating how they identify with the decorative arts as makers, the three artists featured in ***Breaking Tradition*** provide an alternative context that allows this antiquated genre to be seen in a new light. With an in-depth knowledge of their craft, furniture maker Sophie Glenn, ceramicist Steven Young Lee, and glass artist Beth Lipman draw upon their understanding of material and technique to question the decorative arts hierarchy, while connecting the loaded histories of these objects with the present. Poking holes in the purity of this genre, they challenge the rules that have guided the field since before the turn of the 20th Century and offer up different ways for all to identify and investigate decorative arts traditions.

—Kathryn Hall, Curator

To learn more about the exhibition, please visit [crafthouston.org/exhibition/breakingtradition](http://crafthouston.org/exhibition/breakingtradition).

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Cover: Steven Young Lee, *Gourd Vase with Bats and Clouds*, 2019. Porcelain, cobalt inlay, glaze. Courtesy of Duane Reed Gallery. Photo by the artist.

# BREAKING TRADITION: CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE DECORATIVE ARTS

Históricamente, las artes decorativas se han clasificado como objetos funcionales y hermosos, desde muebles hasta vasijas, según una perspectiva del mundo occidental que se rige por comerciantes y coleccionistas. El mercado de las artes decorativas privilegia la pureza de forma, material y una demostración prescrita de habilidad sobre la expresión creativa individual y el ingenio. Pero esta visión estrecha del género excluye una amplia gama de perspectivas de los creadores que producen estos objetos y las comunidades con las que se identifican.

Los objetos de artes decorativas tienen un impacto mucho más allá de la ganancia monetaria, ya que sirven para salvar las diferencias culturales al representar intereses compartidos. Como artefactos, estos objetos revelan los sistemas de creencias, el estatus social y las afiliaciones de sus primeros dueños. A través del surgimiento de rutas comerciales globales, diferentes países comenzaron a adoptar motivos y formas decorativas de otras partes del mundo, indicando la compleja historia que está incrustada dentro de los objetos.

Al investigar cómo se identifican con las artes decorativas como creadores, los tres artistas que aparecen en ***Breaking Tradition***, brindan un contexto alternativo que permite que este género anticuado se vea bajo una nueva luz. Con un conocimiento profundo de su oficio, la fabricante de muebles Sophie Glenn, el ceramista Steven Young Lee y la artista del vidrio Beth Lipman, se basan en su comprensión del material y la técnica para cuestionar la jerarquía de las artes decorativas, mientras conectan las historias cargadas de estos objetos con la presente. Al exponer los puntos débiles de la pureza de este género, desafían las reglas que han guiado el campo desde antes del comienzo del siglo XX y ofrecen diferentes maneras para que todos puedan identificar e investigar las tradiciones de las artes decorativas.

—Kathryn Hall, Conservadora

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# SOPHIE GLENN

(Starkville, Mississippi)

[sophieglenn.com](http://sophieglenn.com)

“At first glance, it may seem as if the relationship between my work and the decorative arts is readily apparent, considering I make furniture. But upon closer inspection, my work is heavily rooted in the materiality of furniture, and how a change of material can change one’s whole experience of a work. I think in the decorative arts particularly, there is this immediate and often exclusive association between an object and the material in which it is made (furniture and wood for example), and these associations often downplay the unique transformative properties of any given material. By making my furniture pieces out of steel and having them appear to be aged wood, I want to begin to rid viewers of these associations, so they can see and experience materials and objects in new ways.”

— Sophie Glenn

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*Rebel Rebel*, 2017

Painted and rusted steel, annealed wire

Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Glenn mines auction websites to find easily recognizable furniture forms for inspiration. *Rebel Rebel* (2017) resembles a wooden ladder-back chair, characterized by the horizontal slats of the seatback and a rush-woven seat. Once the steel is shaped, Glenn spray paints the surface and sands away the paint before treating the steel with a salt and vinegar solution that encourages rust. This combination of surface treatments mimics the surface characteristics of wood. For the seat, she weaves flexible annealed wire in the same manner as one would weave rush, a natural fiber material known for its durability and commonly used for woven seats.



Photo by Sophie Glenn.

## **SOPHIE GLENN**

(Starkville, Mississippi)

*Moonstruck*, 2020

Rusted steel

Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Glenn's steel furniture tricks the eye by closely resembling historically respected wooden furniture styles, like her drop-leaf table, *Moonstruck* (2020). The French name of the drop-leaf style, demilune, translates to half-moon—a reference to its unique semi-circular shape. This type of table was first made popular in the 18th Century as a piece of furniture designed for narrow entryways. Glenn's table includes two hinged legs that can swivel out to transform the side table into its full circular shape, giving the table more versatility.



Photo by Sophie Glenn.

# SOPHIE GLENN

(Starkville, Mississippi)

*Purple Reign*, 2019

Painted and rusted steel

Courtesy of the artist

Sophie Glenn challenges traditional fine furniture making conventions that privilege woodworking by replicating wooden furniture forms out of metal. In *Purple Reign* (2019), Glenn shapes and welds sheet metal into a Windsor-style bench. This well-known style typically includes turned spindles made by a method where wood is spun and carved into rods on a machine called a lathe.

The cheeky title is a pun that references the American music legend Prince's groundbreaking track, *Purple Rain* (1984), as well as the British monarchical origins of the furniture form. While the origin of the style is unclear, a popular belief holds that it was developed in the early 18th Century in the Royal home of Windsor, and English settlers brought the form to North America. Here, Glenn paints the steel purple, one of the royal colors of the British monarchy, before rusting away its surface. Just as a well-used wooden bench might lose its paint over time, the rust will wear through the purple of Glenn's metal bench.



Photo by Sophie Glenn.





Photo by Sophie Glenn.

# STEVEN YOUNG LEE

(Helena, Montana)

[stevenyounglee.com](http://stevenyounglee.com)

“Making pottery is a way for me to process the world I live in. Creating things out of clay has always felt natural to me, even in my earliest memories as a child. However, like many Asian Americans whose parents struggled to provide a quality education for their children, I was urged to pursue a tangible and respectable career (hint: not art). In high school, I was introduced to ceramics and became obsessed in a way I hadn’t with anything in my life to that point. At first, I enjoyed focusing on something that no one was pressuring me to, but as I researched the history of pottery, I became deeply interested in how cultural identity is encoded in these objects. The choices I make as a potter help me frame my own questions about identity and race.”

— Steven Young Lee



Photo by Steven Young Lee.

*Maebyeong Vase with Birds, 2020*

Porcelain, copper inlay, glaze

Courtesy of the artist



Photo by Steven Young Lee.

## **STEVEN YOUNG LEE**

(Helena, Montana)

*Jar with Scroll Pattern*, 2017

Porcelain, cobalt pigment, glaze  
Courtesy of Duane Reed Gallery

Steven Young Lee subverts traditional ideals of beauty by intentionally creating vessels that will crack and change during the firing process. In *Jar with Scroll Pattern* (2017), Lee references the Joseon dynasty (1392 – 1910 CE) moon jar, a Korean pottery form that is symbolic of Korean culture and was featured in the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics held in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Traditionally, this vessel is created with Korean white porcelain, which is designated imperial ware. To create the jar, makers joined two identical halves together to form a slightly uneven spherical shape, mimicking the moon in color and form. Lee has chosen to split the center of the vessel, allowing one half to rest on top of the other, drawing attention to its symmetry and revealing the raw material behind the blue and white scroll pattern.



Photo by Steven Young Lee.

## **STEVEN YOUNG LEE**

(Helena, Montana)

*Vase with Yellow Glaze and Lobed Rim, 2020*

Porcelain and glaze

Courtesy of the artist

In Steven Young Lee's monochromatic vessels, he investigates how a color's meaning is shaped by cultural associations. In particular, Lee looks at the strong connection between color and identity as colors signal race, gender, and even patriotism in some countries. In *Vase with Yellow Glaze and Lobed Rim* (2020), Lee paints a vivid yellow color over a Chinese begonia-shaped vessel form, exemplifying how objects serve as powerful mirrors that reflect a culture's values, prejudices, and ideals. This hue resembles the imperial yellow color of the Chinese Qing dynasty (1636-1911 CE), a prestigious color once reserved only for the emperor. In majority White, English-speaking countries like America, the word 'yellow' has been used as a racial slur since the 18th Century to categorize Asian people. Today, some Asian Americans have reclaimed this color to call attention to this racist history and underlying racial divides in the United States.



Photo by Steven Young Lee.

## STEVEN YOUNG LEE

(Helena, Montana)

*Gourd Vase with Bats and Clouds*, 2019

Porcelain, cobalt inlay, glaze

Courtesy of Duane Reed Gallery

As a Korean American, Steven Young Lee addresses the cross-cultural appropriation of Asian and American motifs in ceramics. Lee says, "Growing up as a second generation Korean American, my identity has felt neither fully Korean or American, and it is through my work where I investigate topics of place and belonging." Having taught in the United States and in China, Lee draws upon his own relationship to the history of Asian ceramics. Once his pieces are fired, Lee uses porcelain painting techniques, combining traditional Asian decorative motifs with pop cultural references.

Historically, Chinese craftspeople combined different symbols onto porcelain decorative objects to create visual messages. In Chinese culture, bats are a common motif that symbolize happiness or good fortune. In *Gourd Vase with Bats and Clouds* (2019), Lee uses the symbol of Batman, his favorite comic book hero, as a contemporary interpretation of this motif. As a child, Batman resonated with Lee because he is a hero without super powers in comparison to other popular American comics, like Superman, that idealize white male figures by giving them unrealistic superhuman powers.

# BETH LIPMAN

(Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin)

[bethlipman.com](http://bethlipman.com)

"The work is anchored in a multitude of decorative art histories and processes. Engendered occupations such as embroidery, theorem painting, and miniature house scrapbooking are used as departure points to explore parallels between the past and the present. Decorative arts function primarily in the domestic realm; Distill and Ephemera series refer to and investigate the idea of home.

Components are fabricated with long established techniques that have been utilized by artisans, guilds and industry alike. Craft demarcates the passage of time through manual labor; a common denominator of decorative arts applications."

— Beth Lipman

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*Still Life with Candlestick, Cheese, and Figs, 2006*

C-print face mounted to acrylic

Edition of 8

Courtesy of the artist

*Gazing Ball with Lemon and Fly, 2014*

C-print mounted to aluminum with gloss laminate

Courtesy of the artist

*Chalice at Priest's Rock, Lake Clark, AK, 2014*

C-print mounted to aluminum with gloss laminate

Courtesy of the artist



Photo by Beth Lipman.

*Chalice at Priest's Rock, Lake Clark, AK* (2014) is part of a body of work called *Alone in the Wilderness* (2014) that explores the connections and disconnections that humans feel towards nature. By combining the genres of still life and landscape in her photography, Beth Lipman considers 'wilderness'—an uninhabited and inhospitable piece of land— as a construct. Recognizing a division between civilization and nature, the Westernized notion of 'wilderness' encourages an appreciation of nature from a safe distance through the consumerism of photography, paintings, and other decorative objects, as well as in controlled environments such as national parks for recreational enjoyment.

This photograph was taken at Lake Clark National Park in Alaska by Priest Rock, first known as Hnitsanghi'iy in the Native Dena'ina Athabascan Culture. Following World War II, European-Americans began traveling to the park seeking an escape from civilization. In this photograph, the chalice serves as a form of looking glass, a stand in for our perception of nature. The photograph was taken en plein air, outside, allowing light, weather, and living creatures to influence the final photograph.

## **BETH LIPMAN**

(Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin)

*Distill # 10, 2015*

Cast iron, enamel, chrome with rust patina

Courtesy of the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects

*Distill # 12, 2015*

Cast iron with rust patina

Courtesy of the artist

*Distill # 14, 2015*

Cast iron and chrome with rust patina

Courtesy of the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects

Beth Lipman's *Distill* series (2015) represents a compression of the Anthropocene era, the geological time span dating back to the Neolithic period (10,000 BCE) when humans were known to have first affected the Earth's environment. This series reduces humanity down to the essence of the things that we leave behind, making a mark on the land.

Lipman created this series while she was a resident at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's Arts/Industry residency in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, a residency funded in part by the American manufacturing company Kohler Co., known for its plumbing products. This residency provided Lipman access to Kohler's industrial machinery, allowing her to experiment with cast metal, bearing an interesting connection with the fossilized domestic remnants of this series. As dioramas, Lipman first arranged plant life from ferns, conifers, and lichens along with miniature decorative objects and furniture into small cardboard boxes. Through the metal casting process, the materials in her dioramas burned out, fossilizing their remains, an imprint of human existence.





Photos by John Michael Kohler Arts Center/ Kohler Co.

## BETH LIPMAN

(Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin)

*Cheese and Fruit*, 2013

C-print face mounted to acrylic

Edition of 3

Courtesy of the artist

As part of her *Ephemera* (2010-2013) series, in *Cheese and Fruit* (2013), Beth Lipman draws strong parallels between the Dutch Golden Age and the current age of capitalism by referencing the visual imagery of 17th-century Dutch still-life paintings. As portrayed in the 17th-century Dutch still-life painter Pieter Claesz's *Still Life* (1643) below, it was common for the wealthy to proudly display their riches in their home. In art history, this genre of painting is called vanitas and references change and mortality through objects that signal the temporal quality of things on earth.

Lipman first blows and shapes glass replicas of modern day decorative arts objects—fine stemware, a decanter for wine, and serveware—for her still life photography. In her still lifes, she captures the concept of ephemerality by photographing, and thus memorializing, a particular moment when the glass reflects light and casts shadows. In *Cheese and Fruit*, glass fruit spills over a bowl near a partially-eaten wheel of cheese and a used candlestick—objects that symbolize impermanence. In photographing her glass installation, Lipman transforms her three-dimensional sculpture into a two-dimensional form, much like how Claesz captures a fleeting moment in his painting. In today's home, owning artwork continues to reflect social status and so Lipman's sculptures become their own symbols of wealth, as the photograph further underscores the vanity that lies behind capitalism.

Pieter Claesz, *Still Life*, 1643. Oil on panel. The Eldridge C. Cooke Fund. Accession Number 45.10. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Source: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/10450/still-life-pieter-claes-z>.





Photo by Beth Lipman.



# HOUSTON CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

## About Houston Center for Contemporary Craft

Houston Center for Contemporary Craft (HCCC) is a nonprofit visual arts center founded to advance education on the process, product, and history of craft. Since opening in 2001, HCCC has served as an important cultural and educational resource for Houston and the Southwest, one of the few venues in the country dedicated exclusively to craft at the highest level. HCCC provides exhibition, studio, and garden spaces to support the work of local and national artists and educators. Visitors learn about craft by viewing innovative exhibitions, engaging with on-site resident artists, and participating in hands-on educational programming.

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For more information, please visit [www.crafthouston.org](http://www.crafthouston.org) or call 713-529-4848.

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