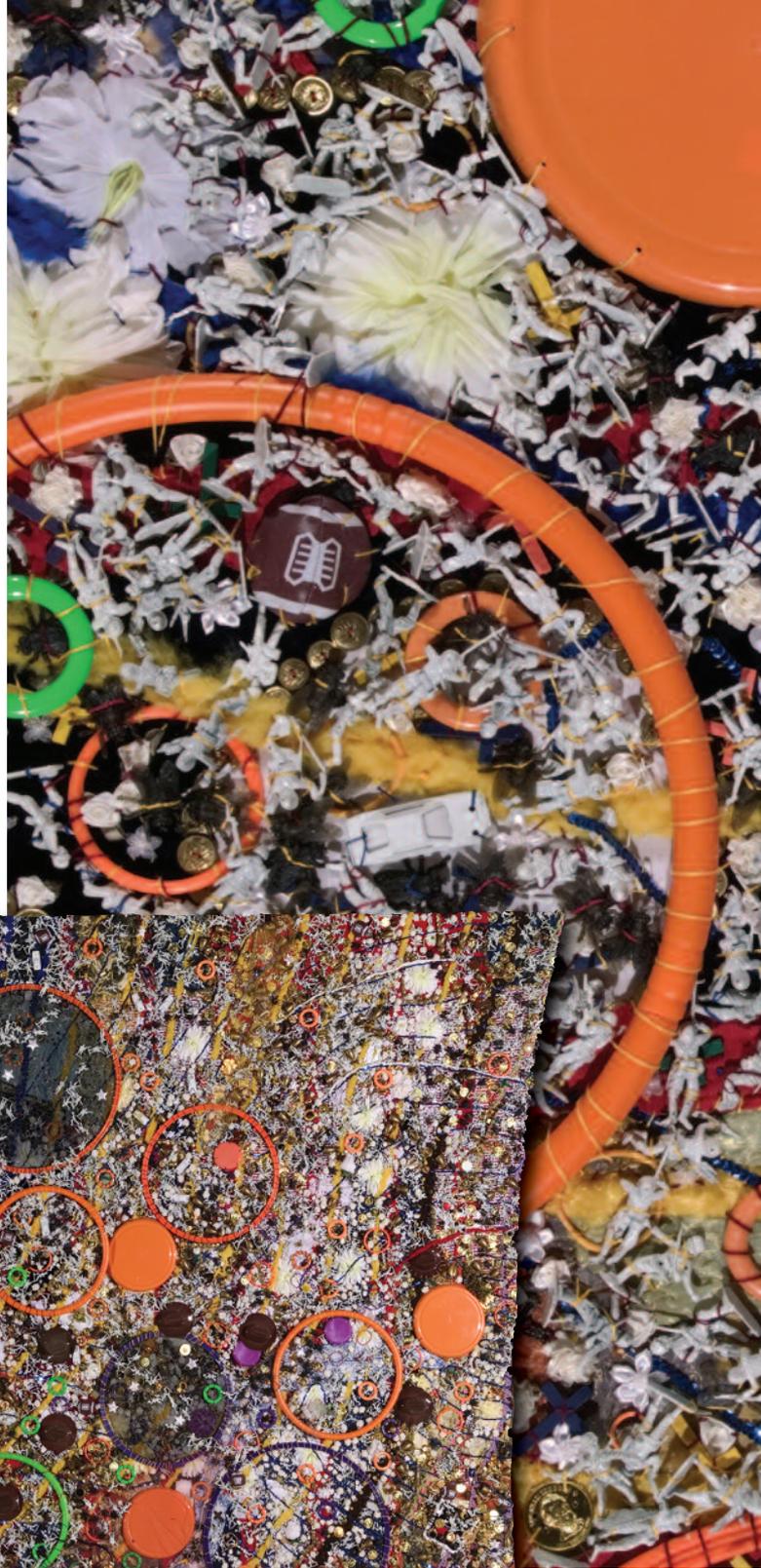
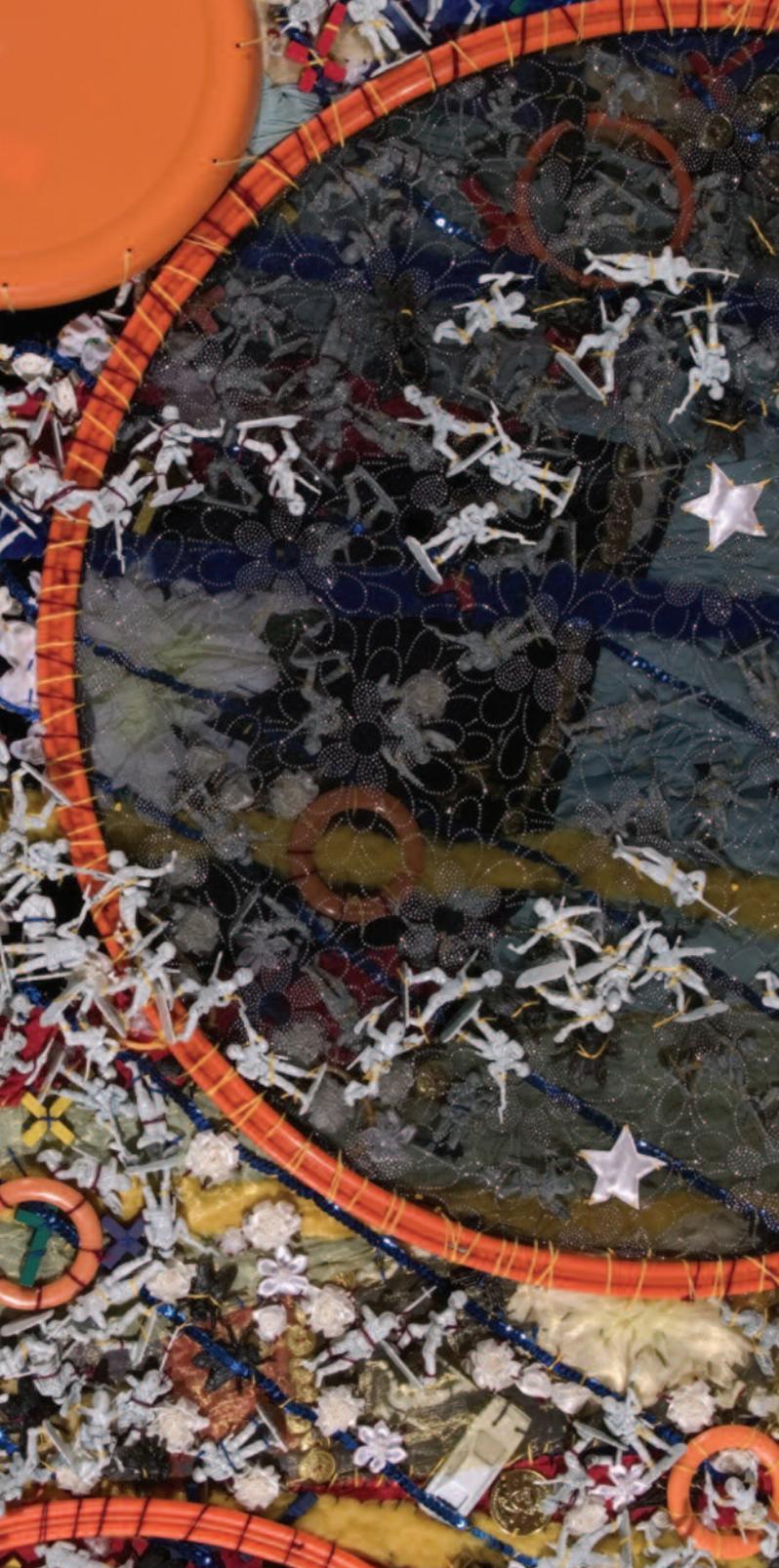


S h a w n e
M a j o r
Colossal
Collage

by Nick Stillman





From across the room, Shawne Major's *War Channel* is abstract and alien, a landscape of barnacle-like encrustations and neon rings clinging to a strangely limp grid. A recent acquisition of the New Orleans Museum of Art, the piece is a behemoth, impossible for the eye to take in without some separation. Collapse that space, though, and *War Channel* registers very differently. Neither the grid nor the circles are rendered in paint, as they appear to be from afar. The crosshatched pattern is made from fabric, and the circular shapes turn out to be garish plastic jewelry surrounded by an abundance of cheap toys. Tiny brown cowboy hats are everywhere. An upside-down Raggedy Ann doll is seamlessly integrated into the dense surface, with tiny plastic flies swarming its torso. Those scabrous patches of white? Thousands of identical gun-toting soldier figurines and pale fake flowers.

Major began developing the sculptural assemblages she refers to as "physical paintings" in the late 1990s. An attraction-repulsion dynamic has defined her work. On one hand, her ability to blend mass-produced readymade objects to achieve subtle tonal gradations and pulsating surfaces is best appreciated from a distance. But the guts of a piece like *War Channel* are its essence, beckoning you to get so close you can smell the plastic.

A graduate of the Rutgers MFA program, Major lived in New York and New Jersey for several years before returning to the South in 2003. The cultural diversity and density of the Northeast mimicked the environmental density of her native southern Louisiana. These radically different ecosystems collide in her gnarled, packed surfaces.

Major is a collagist who approaches each composition as a painter might. With her sinuous lines and dense surfaces, the iconic drip paintings of Jackson Pollock feel like an apt point of reference. In fact, Major's painting practice in the early 1990s was the point of evolution for her current work. But she achieves painterly effects in her assemblages without using anything but prefabricated objects—hundreds if not thousands of them in each individual piece.

Beginning with an initial backing of mesh, netting, or fabric, Major sews tchotchkes selected for their color, shape, or connotations to a ground layer and to each other. The accumulation usually eradicates all visual evidence of the starting point. A large piece may take up to two years to finish. If the process sounds unruly, the

SHAWNE MAJOR *War Channel* Mixed media: plastic toys (soldiers, coins, trophies, flies, cowboy hats, rings, bracelets, hoops, Frisbees), wooden crosses, silk flowers and satin ribbon roses, fake fur, beads, disassembled crocheted afghan, military buttons, watches, sequin chains, costume jewelry, broken watches, crocheted craft items and appliques sewn onto a base of fabric, clothes and poultry netting, hand embroidery, 9' x 14', 2008. With detail. All photos by Mike Smith.

...Major evokes how gendered identities are codified and defined by capitalism.

results are absolutely exacting; her work is maximalist, but utterly calculated.

A solo exhibition at the Mary C. O'Keefe Cultural Center in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, in 2012 allowed for the gamut of connotations suggested in Major's work to emerge. In a grand sense, works like *War Channel* or *Charybdis*—a grandmotherly snarl of pearls (faux and not), beads, buttons, and dozens more plastic products fashioned into the shape of an animal pelt—function as microcosmic portraits of global capitalism. The toy soldiers of *War Channel* are clearly tattooed with the origin stamp CHINA. All this

plastic naturally places Major's work in dialogue with a manufacturing economy that takes advantage of virtually unregulated factory conditions to produce cheap disposable products. But Major's works are not blanket condemnations of capitalism. Her packed-to-the-gills tapestries are about surfeit as a cultural value, about handcraft in an industrial age, and, ultimately, about the psychology of stuff.

Take *Maelstrom* for instance: cords, necklaces, tubing, beads, and any number of other linear elements snake from an off-center node to the edges of the nearly seven-foot-tall



SHAWNE MAJOR
Maelstrom Mixed media: electrical cords, chains, plush toys, beads, plastic toys (snakes, bats, horses, balls, Frisbees,) costume jewelry, baby shoes, shell necklaces, ribbon, braid, dissected umbrella, dog collars, Christmas lights, scarves, plastic tubing, oxygen mask, dolls, sprinkler tubing, hats, dissected crocheted afghan, and doll hair sewn onto a base of prom and bridesmaid dresses on poultry netting, hand embroidery, 81" x 66", 2012. Detail *RIGHT*.



piece, trapping and negotiating a hurricane of plastic products. As with most of her pieces, the list of materials is comically extensive: costume jewelry, oxygen masks, baby shoes, a dissected crocheted afghan. . .one could go on. But Major's sense of excess isn't an exercise in randomness. *Maelstrom's* gnarled appearance evokes the aftermath of cataclysm, but the objects also seem intentionally chosen to conjure associations with childhood and gender. There are at least 16 different dolls, stuffed animals, or figurines visible on the surface; tufts of doll hair are visibly—creepily—entwined with the glut of objects.

Conventions of girlhood and stereotypical associations with femininity are consistently woven into Major's work. *Maelstrom's* backing is a mix of prom and bridesmaid dresses, signs of the passage from childhood to young adulthood. The many objects forming the surface of *Leucosia* are sewn onto a wedding dress. The initial layer of *Charybdis* is a bustier. The prominent element of

Electra is the dense buildup of plastic hearts in various pink and coral hues. *Calisto* is loaded with tiny high-heeled doll shoes, some of them veiled behind a very different signifier of the feminine—nylon stockings.

Laurie Simmons and Todd Haynes are two other artists who have used dolls to demonstrate how early childhood toys work to prescribe gender expectations. Senga Nengudi's installations, made from sand-filled pantyhose, elegantly manifest the construct of femininity as a type of entrapment. By overlaying two symbols of femininity and fetish, Major evokes how gendered identities are codified and defined by capitalism. Like Major's practice itself, the fetish object is one of attraction and repulsion, powerful and tortured. This duality may influence her affinity for titles after Greek mythological characters.

Zooming in on *Dragoon*—arguably one of the artist's most impressive feats of labor—the effect is a sliding-away from a fixed point.

Her art is a product of the golden era of stuff.

Christmas decorations, poker chips, various fabrics, and all manner of plastic stuff seems like it is being purged from an entropic midpoint. As brawny as her final products are, Major's process of literally sewing her pieces together certainly invites associations with "feminine labor." The gendered connotation of various forms of labor is among the issues her work touches on most acutely. But to define it entirely along lines of gender seems too restrictive. It is also a product of its moment. If Major's studio practice is enabled by the current era of manufacturing, it also seems both tributary to and melancholic regarding its lack of distinct human qualities.

Most mass-produced items are now designed either to be disposable or immedi-



ABOVE: SHAWNE MAJOR *Dragoon* Mixed media including fabric, rope, ribbon, dolls, Xmas lights, plastic Xmas tree branches, beads, plush toys, fake foliage, hoses, electrical and computer cords, scarves, poultry netting, hand embroidery, 76" x 70", 2013.

ately obsolete. Objects no longer contain the psychological import to their owners that they once held. Major's investment of labor transforms their value. Hers is a creative response to the marketplace, not a passive one. It is not the act of production that Major seems obsessed by so much as the dilemma of the consumer. To make these pieces, she begins as a collector, and collecting—creating order, compensating for loss, preserving histories or memories—is a deeply human impulse. Ultimately, Major's work is about the morality of consumption, and all of the issues of self-identification—gender, class, geography—that inform and are produced by that act. Her art is a product of the golden era of stuff. Never before has it been possible for so many to have so much that means so little. This is the legacy and hubris of a generation.

Shawne Major's website is www.shawnemajor.com. Her work is included in *Front & Center* at the Mobile Museum of Art in Mobile, AL (through February 14, 2014), www.mobilemuseumofart.com.

—Nick Stillman is a New Orleans-based writer.



LEFT, TOP: SHAWNE MAJOR *Dementophobia* Zippers, plastic circles, bracelets, fake foliage, ribbons, plastic cocktail lids, inflatable pool toys, scarves, string, fake fur, Frisbees, plastic toys, beads, buttons, fabric trim, butterfly kite, part of show saddle, netting sewn onto a base of prom and bridesmaid dresses on poultry netting, hand embroidery, 2012. Detail ABOVE.