

# MOUSSE

MOUSSE 55  
R. GOLDBERG, W. MCCARTHY

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Rochelle Goldberg organizes sculptural environments starting from living, ephemeral, and synthetic materials, from crude oil and chia seeds to ceramic and steel. Win McCarthy stages his installations using organic matter as well as vinyl, Hydrocal, resin, and acetate. These similarities could make someone think that their practices are close. But are they?

## A PERCEPTUAL GAME BETWEEN AN ABSENCE AND A PRESENCE

ROCHELLE GOLDBERG AND WIN MCCARTHY IN CONVERSATION

Rochelle Goldberg. *Hands Replace the Deck*, 2016. Rochelle Goldberg: *The Plastic Thirsty* installation view at SculptureCenter, New York, 2016. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Kyle Knodell



Born in Vancouver, **Rochelle Goldberg** currently lives and works in New York City. In 2016, Goldberg had her first institutional solo exhibition at SculptureCenter in New York. In the spring of 2016, Goldberg showed a large-scaled installation work in *Mirror Cells*, curated by Christopher Lew and Jane Panetta at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and this fall has a major participation in the Okayama Art Summit, an exhibition organized by Liam Gillick across multiple venues in Okayama, Japan.

**Win McCarthy** (1986, Brooklyn, NY) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. McCarthy has had recent solo exhibitions at Off Vendome, New York and will be exhibiting forthcoming at Boatos Fine Arts, Sao Paulo. Recent group exhibitions have included *Pure Fiction* at Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, *Mirror Cells* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Puddle, pothole, pothole* at the Sculpture Center, New York and *THE SECRET LIFE* at Murray Guy, New York.

Rochelle Goldberg, *No Where, Now Here*, 2016, *Mirror Cells* installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artist; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo: Thomas Müller



Rochelle Goldberg and Win McCarthy, 'A Perceptual Game Between an Absence and a Presence', *Mousse Magazine* 55, 2016

## ROCHELLE GOLDBERG

There was a time when we resisted the idea of our work overlapping.

## WIN MCCARTHY

I think there were more similarities in the beginning than there are now.

## RG

I think there are more similarities *now* than there were then.

## WM

But we were treading similar ground in terms of material. Organic matter. Glass. Clear plastic. Definitely clay. There's probably more. Not to say that we were wielding them in the same way, but you can see how, from an outside perspective, it might have been easy to lump us together.

## RG

At the time I felt that the materials we used were inscribed by very different ideologies. So my concern was that placing our work in context carried a potential infection, not just in terms of reception, but at the origin of transmission, which might cause us to—feel confused.

## WM

Right.

## RG

But the viral agents clarified themselves over time. The ciphers our work subscribed to somehow intersected—your use of plumbing, my use of digestion, both of which are circuitry winding through an evolving surface.

## WM

But somehow, at the core, the point of crisis was always different.

## RG

Definitely.

## WM

On some level, I've always been interested in the boundary between interiority and exteriority, and that boundary being a point of crisis. Of friction. Whereas your work has been pointedly exterior, often with landscapes where the human body is conspicuously absent.

## RG

I am interested in where interior and exterior collapse—the boundary is always leaking. If exteriority is in crisis, that puts pressure on interiority. This pressure feeds back into it, and vice versa.

## WM

Whereas my work is operating within a solipsism. So that pressure happens in reverse. Maybe that was the core difference. At the beginning, when one first starts showing, the formal stuff weighs in heavily because you haven't yet been able to demonstrate all the more multivalent, thematic stuff. So our work got grouped together because of material or formal similarities, rather than intention. But in these small group shows there was always some thought that the work might get confused. Or, as you said earlier, a perceived danger that the pieces would infect one another. Yet I always thought there was something important about that proximity.

And anyway, we weren't the only people working with organic matter, or clear plastic—that stuff was in the air. Ultimately it was generative for us. There's certainly something alarming about a shared formal vocabulary, since everybody's always telling you to be yourself. But I think what it did was force us to be definitive about what that vocabulary was trying to describe. Maybe *because* of that possibility of infection, we were able to articulate ourselves better. That would be the hope.

What was the first time we ever showed together? Wasn't it the 2014 Christmas show *Turnkey of Forever After*? I showed a faucet.

## RG

It was hanging out with my toilet.

## WM

As if it was spouting into the toilet. The toilet thing is funny because I had been making poop paintings, so there was definitely a "scat" overlap.

## RG

In this abject tendency, both faucet and toilet are fixtures that burrow into an exchange space for body fluids. Somewhere in there was my initial impulse to articulate a space that could both span and

breach a threshold—enact a *cordon sanitaire* so that thresholding itself, as a kind of perversion, could become an active experience. Perhaps even as the cannibalization of space through its displacement? Can you devour your way out of it?

I wanted to ask: If you designate a space, even a space that is divided by walls, as inherently porous, does it then equally disperse the contour of the self? As if all at once you could be on either side of the wall, or both inside and outside of the cave? I used the hybrid space of species to perform the externalization of what might feel deeply foreign, and force an encounter toward an understanding. The fact that the toilet seats were snakeskin is significant because it implies direct contact with a surface that is other than human. In order to provoke the question: How far could you walk away from that limit and still have a trace of self?

## WM

Like, how far away you can get before you start to have to squint. And then all of a sudden, it's completely out of sight.

## RG

And are you still here, if recognition implies a return? Regarding your floating scrim, at first I thought they were all about you, the idea that you had to see yourself everywhere in order to secure the idea. But then I started to understand that if an aspect of yourself is floating in thin air, then maybe you've invited it to get a little lost?

## WM

That's a nice reading. The intention was for them to act as perceptual reminders, reminding you that you're looking. A lot of them had big holes cut out of the clear plastic sheeting. And the difference between the transparent material and the transparent hole was, you know, nearly imperceptible. Absence was indistinguishable from presence.

## RG

"Clearly" [laughs] we are provoking a perceptual game between an absence and a presence through the use of liminal lines and transparent materials. My frames are purposefully empty, and you made a hole in clear plastic. To layer absence on absence is a strategized redundancy. What does the gap or the hole in the transparent space achieve? Does it leak? I think it establishes what we were just talking about—an active porosity that insists that these veils can be crossed.

## WM

I've always been interested in different kinds of transparency—glass, plastic, clear resin, water—arranged in a way where there's a perceptual slippage such that it is impossible to tell which material is which. Your brain is quietly making all these assessments of what things are made of: How heavy is it? Is it solid? Is it liquid? The hope in these pieces was to slow those functions down, so that your conscious brain actually has to deliberate about what's what.

We were just looking at those clay coils you make, the snakes. Your sculptures are all made of these thousands of snakes that seem to have been put under a spell or hypnosis to gather into this figure or this foot. You realize that the briefcase is made of snakes, the pelican is made of snakes. Even the crocodile. As if the snakes are some kind of atomic building material. In just the way that all matter is made of essentially the same stuff, and it happens to organize for a brief time and then disperse. The snakes in your work seem like they're just passing through, from entity to entity. But how about the snakes—or snakeskin? I mean, obviously, there's something about molting that's pretty powerful. But how did you end up there?

## RG

The shed skin is the ghosting of a body—the serpent's body that is no longer there. The discarded skin becomes an analog to the snake's former presence. It has a physical immediacy. The molted skin is the farthest-most exterior aspect of this living thing.

## WM

Almost like a veil, in that sense.

## RG

When the snake sheds its skin, the discarded skin is inside out. And so you already have...

## WM

...this reversal.

## RG

Exactly. The action of something turning in on itself with the potential of being turned and turned and turned. I felt as though the

Rochelle Goldberg, *No Where, Now Here*, 2016, *Mirror Cells* installation view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2016.  
Courtesy: the artist; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson





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skin reintroduces the physical body, which becomes the tangled coil, and through this action different aspects of its absent image emerge. The exterior moves back into the realm of an interior that pushes up against the contour of the mold. The mold itself being the impression of an absent object. The tangle then teases the idea of its impossible return. Everything gets caught.

I think the tangles speak to the unstable flux of the object's status. Or, if anything, they undermine whatever coherency it ever had. And as for the crocodile, I wanted to introduce a predatory orifice—a tangible threat through a bite with consequence or a bite that could continue to bite—a bite that suggests an insatiability. The staging of digestion, then, offers a broad metaphor for all modes of sensorial acquisition, particularly processes in which external reality is consumed, and then internalized, in order to be pushed back out again.

**WM** You get this cyclical process where inside becomes outside becomes inside becomes outside. Dizzying.

**RG** Like you, I think of it as synaptic. That one thing touches the other touches the other touches the other. That dizzying space of recuperation becomes a labyrinth.

**WM** The tangle. Something we've been alluding to all along but haven't brought up specifically is landscape, or environment. We've both made contained sites—sites that seem particularly hostile to their inhabitants. Perilous landscapes, like just after a disaster, when the normal function of the habitat is in a tangle. And how the protagonists—I hate to keep using narrative terms, but—how the protagonists are struggling to find their place within a larger world.

**RG** Well, in *Mirror Cells*, the protagonist functions as the interlocator for the narrative. It signals how to read these worlds by designating the terms. The world seems anxious because your protagonist is anxious. He has this gnarly factor that invites one to scrutinize the space that he inhabits as hostile.

Similarly, these hybrid birds are essentially cannibalizing themselves—it's the fraught-ness of their consuming action that indicates that this space within which we have encountered them has gone completely awry. Both zones wield a psychological barrier. You don't want to enter, but you want to know how this happened. Well, maybe I don't agree with that—maybe it occurs more duplicitously. You *do* want to enter. But upon entering you leave yourself behind. There's something to be said for the fact that these realms are not necessarily hostile because of what they reference outside of themselves. The protagonist is initiating this chain of relations.

**WM** They're defined as such expressly through the subjectivity of the protagonist. Be it in my protagonist's actual writing, which is essentially stapled directly onto the face of the piece, or in the sort of bizarre activities of yours. Right? The pelicans eating a suitcase? One would assume that means that things aren't functioning as they're intended to.

**RG** Right, pelicans don't devour attachés, especially ones made of the same substance as they are. I think that circuit is so tightly wound that it's bound to collapse. But there's more to be said about the status of identity in fray, or the contour of self unraveling, that is being enacted here. I identify with your protagonist as the frazzled narcissist who wants to know that he's here while he also wants to fall off the plateau of where "here" is. Which is played out by the fact that he sits at the edge of his known reality—

**WM** New York.

**RG** This edge is limited. Of course he wants to escape it. We identify with the desire to leave and we identify with his ugliness. He is also very hairy. If he moved between those structures, he would get caught, his hair would be ripped out by the staples. For him to reenter his world would be very painful. So it's not even a question of where do we place him when his identity is in fray? Likewise my hybrid birds, writhing between states of "pelican" and "snake," won't commit to a form. The zone from which they emerge

is labeled *No Where Now Here*, in order to speak to these evolving dislocations. All in all it becomes a question for the viewer: Where do we place ourselves, where do we belong, if the exteriority is uninviting? How do we—without any invitation for intersubjective exchange—navigate this terrain? Where do we go with that when we can no longer see ourselves, when we don't want to be here?

This opens the door to a diffractive space for self-recognition, where the contour of self can occur in excess of what we would usually know (in a refractive model). Maybe that's the escape.

**WM** My impulse to make any of this stuff came from the feeling that I was always going to be in my own way. Like standing behind yourself in a crowd. Like there's this fucking tall guy in front of me. I can't see. That I myself was a blockage. Your own mind starts to feel like a precipice. That boundary between interior and exterior starts to feel—impermeable. Just a few minutes ago we were talking about the hostility of an environment being defined through subjectivity. We have something in common there, in feelings like fraught-ness or hostility or anxiety that we both want to transmit.

**RG** I agree that hostility is subjective. I think of it like the underground-ness of a worm's habitat—which isn't hostile for the worm. But the worm's motion upward, which is the ungrounding of my ground, is hostile for me. The ground beneath our feet is destabilized by the fact that anything can burrow through it.

**WM** And then this word "adjacency" becomes interesting again. It's a negotiated adjacency. That's what being a neighbor is. There's another person in the next apartment, and on paper they are more or less the same as you. The proximity is almost intimate, but at the same time it feels like an unspannable chasm.

**RG** And it's specific to the environment that we both find ourselves in—an ugly urban landscape.

**WM** Right, like the feeling of being alone on a crowded subway. It's absurd.

**RG** I've been thinking about this because it's humid, the season of the waterbug. Even on the third floor of a building you can't escape the defilement from the ground below. If a cockroach can crawl upward from a subterranean position, trespassing through both pipe and wall, then land on your kitchen floor, and again through your wall onto your neighbor's kitchen floor, that nasty navigation of a vertical undermines the allocation of space altogether. A wall becomes another ground, and it's all inherently permeable. While I respect this in principle, it feels like an invasion. I can't rely on a wall or a floor. Likewise, anything we designate as private, one way or another is—

**WM AND RG TOGETHER**  
—constantly being invaded.

**WM** I suppose that's just what consciousness feels like.

**RG** I think we're more forgiving of the invasion when we're less stressed.

**WM** But here you get used to the constant bombardment. So you have to create new ways of feeling alone.

**RG** There's a repetition to this confrontation that interferes with daily and bodily habit. Choices are made in response to all of these things. In a sense it becomes part of who we are. How we inhabit these spaces is part of how we define ourselves.

**WM** What's that sound?

**RG** It's a truck.

**WM** It sounded like more than a truck.

**RG** A big big truck?

**WM** Should we take a break?