

## MICHELLE SEGRE *Lost Songs of the Filament*

by Sharon Butler

DEREK ELLER GALLERY | JUNE 1 – JUNE 30, 2012

A great deal of recent art found in global biennials and blue-chip galleries (think of Damien Hirst's spots or Kehinde Wiley's portraits) is made by teams of acolytes under an art superstar's supervision. By definition, this kind of outsourcing is not possible unless the work is formulaic—which means the artist must subordinate the risk-taking, experimental phase of the artmaking process, the stage in which an artist asks the simple question "What if...?" Replacing this is a corporate model that implicitly values production and efficiency over inspiration and insight. In a recent *Art in America* article, Ossian Ward suggests that these marquee artists, making ever bigger and more extravagant projects, are engaged in a kind of super-monumentalism. "I think artist colleagues fear that they will be pushed in the corner and forgotten," Thomas Schutte tells Ward. "It's competing with Hollywood: Who has got the biggest? Who has the longest? Who is the richest?"

Arguably, the inner need for discovery that compelled the artists to make art in the first place has given way to a penchant for spectacle. For artists working in this theatrical mode, making work is about many things—ensuring placement in museums and prominent collections, perpetuating fame, maintaining a lifestyle—but perhaps not so much about the work itself. There is no question what the materials will be used for. The final outcome is a given.

From this perspective, Michelle Segre is gratifyingly old-school. The question "What if...?" permeates each piece in *Lost Songs of the Filament*, her affably invigorating installation at Derek Eller. Large-scale, idiosyncratic sculptures handmade with wire, thread, metal mesh, rocks, shells, and more, some areas slathered with paint, clay, and papier-mâché, converge precariously in the gallery, teetering above the viewer with plenty of attitude yet no malice. Segre's process involves craft techniques such as wrapping, weaving, and knotting, but she applies them with a resolutely intuitive, what-the-hell inventiveness that cheerfully rejects the customary rigidity of craft.

This is not to say that Segre's pieces lack calculation or intent. Indeed, the show's title, referring to what might emerge undetected from the thin fiber that conducts energy in a light bulb, pretty clearly summons the everyday wonders we might overlook. Repurposing unusual materials for the bases of the sculptures, she effectively joins eclecticism and imperfection. In "Godzeye" (2011), for instance, she turns a found cedar mailbox, decorated to look like a horse barn, on its side, fills it with plaster, and sticks the spine-like pole the rest of the sculpture is built around into it. Before drying, the wet plaster seeped out of the mailbox seams, leaving little hardened pools of plaster behind.

For "The Collector" (2012), she stacks two milk cartons vertically, gobs on some plaster and paint, and sticks the pole through the crate's latticework. By this paradoxically self-conscious and casual process, the inside of the crates become little niches for objects, one of which is a big glob of wax (or plasticene?), crudely painted and frenetically assaulted with toothpicks, like a fifth grader's three-dimensional model of a microscopic organism. "The Collector" looks like a big spider web in which objects, including two pitchforks, small rocks, a large red plaster-and-string orb, and seashells, have gotten hopelessly stuck. Unlike the other pieces, "Once Upon a Time the End" (2011) is low to the ground, and rests on the floor. The title, which leaves out the fairy tale's substantive middle, captures both the visual openness of the piece and Segre's open-minded approach.

Her unflagging belief in following her intuition in the moment conjures Rauschenberg, and, visually, the snaking, clotty lines, punctuated with odd colorful shapes, recall Miró's Surrealist paintings and Calder's wire sculptures from the 1920s. But her work, fundamentally different from that of contemporary high-yield art superstars, is at least reactively of our time. Like Rachel Harrison, Segre embraces an anti-monumental approach to traditional sculptural forms as she ties, shreds, and tangles her way through dozens of spools of thread, balls of string, and strands of Gimp to arrive at each piece. In the future, such reliance on non-archival materials and precarious construction techniques may give conservators palpitations. But today, when it's brand new, illuminating the rewards of impulsive abandon next to so many formulaic, soulless contrivances, *Lost Songs of the Filament* is just right.



Michelle Segre, "Once Upon a Time the End," 2011. Metal, acrylic, papier-mâché, clay, thread, wire, plasticine, plastic, rocks. 59.5 x 38 x 41".