

Art **Reviews**

Yarn Against the Patriarchy

Michelle Segre's art is truer to the actual world we live in than to the ideal one proposed and refined by the art world and its institutions.



by John Yau
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Michelle Segre, "I Talk to the Trees" (2021), yarns, canvas, muslin, acrylic polymer, wire, thread, sponges, and lotus root, 144 x 187 x 33 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, NY. Photos by Adam Reich)

Two associations came to mind when I saw Michelle Segre's exhibition, *Night Chorus*, at Derek Eller Gallery (April 28 – May 28, 2022). The first was the title of a Moby song, "We Are All Made of Stars" (2002). The second was an image of the Helix Nebula, which has been dubbed the "Eye of God." At the same time that I was making these and other connections, I recognized that I could not separate any cosmological intention from the work's formal strengths, quirky use of materials, and bold color. This opened up another line of questioning: Are Segre's works hybrid sculptures that are also line drawings? Or are the wall-mounted works of bursting

color hybrid paintings liberated from the rectangle? What does her use of yarn, dried food, and weaving say?

The fact that Segre's works resist conventional definitions such as sculpture and painting is not new, nor is her interest in worlds that require scientific instruments to be seen. In 2014, when I first reviewed her work, I wrote that her "sources seem to be science fiction movies and television programs, along with molecular biology and crystallography." I was particularly intrigued by her interest in sculpture as a transmitter capable of communicating and receiving messages, and in the 16th-century English Kabbalist Robert Fludd and his [diagram of the mind](#).

As far as I can tell, Segre has stayed true to these preoccupations, which seem to have little to do with her contemporaries. What has changed over the arc of nearly a decade is scale and color. The work has gotten larger and the color has gotten bolder. Essentially, Segre has gone from being a really fascinating sculptor who used unlikely materials (i.e., moldy bread and carrots) to embodying an audacious and engaging alternative to consumer culture's love of permanence and shiny materiality. She has achieved this by refusing to accommodate her work to the marketplace and make it more salable.



Michelle Segre, "Red Sun" (2021), canvas, acrylic polymer, acrylic ink, yarn, thread, wire, and lotus root, 125 x 125 x 9 inches

Made of canvas, acrylic polymer, acrylic ink, yarn, thread, wire, and dried lotus root, “Red Sun” (2021) is an eye-like structure composed of red lines radiating from a central red disc to a surrounding double-circumference band of yarn stretched between two rigid, linear structures. The suspension of the disc (or star) within a frame is a form that Segre explores in the exhibition’s three large sculptures, two mounted on the wall and one freestanding. In the wall-mounted “I Talk to the Trees” (2021), I read the blue circle in the middle of the bright yellow egg-like disc, rimmed in red, as a pupil. The yellow eye is suspended by strips of yellow cloth within a woven blue frame-like structure, but as I have come to expect Segre does not stop there. Two more sections extend out from the blue frame: a series of rectangular bands, each a different color of yarn, and netted triangles extending from the yarn rectangles.

Yarn is flexible, durable, vulnerable, and pre-industrial. It is the opposite of Corten steel and mirror-polished stainless steel. Segre makes no claim that her work can withstand the effects of time passing. Yarn is better suited to sweaters than sculpture. And yet, I do not think that her art can be seen just through the lens of feminism or hybridity. Rather than working within the parameters of an established discourse or connecting herself to the legacy of Minimalism or Postminimalism, or restating one of sculpture’s essential forms, the column, she has gone deeper into a territory that she first opened for herself more than two decades ago.

Yet, for all of her use of unorthodox material and rejection of perfection and literalism, I think it would be wrong to see her as working on the margins. There is something central about her rejection of the celebrated model of timelessness that Richard Serra and Jeff Koons espouse. Her use of impermanent materials, such as foodstuffs, in her work underscores that we exist in a zone of constantly shifting contingencies. Her art is truer to the actual world we live in than to the ideal one proposed and refined by the art world and its institutions.



Michelle Segre, "Eight Body Chorus" (2021), yarns, wire, metal, acrylic polymer, papier-mâché, plaster, beeswax, and dried mushrooms, 144 x 166 x 54 inches

Although nothing explicitly connects them, it seems to me that Segre and Robert Smithson share something in their view of impermanence and time. However, whereas Smithson focused much of his attention on geological time and entropy, Segre mushrooms to stars and eyes, from small bodies to massive ones, the eye to shamanic projection and traveling via dream and hallucination. She celebrates altered ways of seeing, and of being, in the world. Whose eye is she framing in "I Talk to the Trees"? Is her sun red because of pollution and smoke in the environment? What does it mean to make a structural sculpture out of yarn, threads, and strips of cloth? Doesn't Segre's brilliant replacement of the patriarchal aesthetics of masculine permanence subvert an oppressive legacy?

Instead of looking in awe at the latest testimony to precision fabrication, we stand in front of a large handmade object in which craft is neither obvious nor fetishized. What about the fact that the yarn and the loose, impermanent weaving of frayed strips of colored cloth invite viewers to closely examine how the work was made, as we might do while looking at the layered skeins of paint in Jackson Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" (1950)? What do we make of the disarray, the unfixed weavings and joinings? I cannot think of anyone else who makes artworks like Segre's, particularly on this scale. And yet they don't feel monumental or overwhelming. The freestanding "Eight Body Chorus" (2021) is 12 feet high, but

doesn't feel it. There is so much going on in Segre's work that in touching upon her use of materials, how we define objects in a Postminimalist time, and what subjects she might be addressing, I have only scratched the surface.

Michelle Segre: Night Chorus *continues at Derek Eller Gallery (300 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through May 28. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

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