



## MICHELLE SEGRE: TRANSMISSIONS FROM A LAND ONCE UPON A TIME

JENNIFER KABAT

Sunday, October 7, 2012

ROBERTA SMITH PRAISED Michelle Segre ebulliently in the [Times](#) this spring going on about her “porous, freewheeling somewhat crazed assemblages.” [The Brooklyn Rail](#) began its piece on her with a long disquisition about art that gets bigger and slicker and ever more market driven, then cuts to the chase and says Segre is none of the above. She most definitely is not. She is the fairy tale gone awry, and her work sports giants gods eyes and chicken bones. It’s somewhere between folk art and the Watts Towers or, as she puts it: Eva Hesse, Time-Life Science books and Star Trek. There is a weirdness to her work, with the handmade made giant, and she will use whatever is to hand. Witness her last show with a mailbox and milk cartons and pitchforks. There’s trash and found objects. “Even,” she says, “an object my eight year-old has attacked with nails and hammer. Everything is up for grabs.” Including her own work. It is ready to be digested and repurposed. That chicken bone, say? It was originally from a series she did in 1997 of giant chicken bones. All to scale. Now It looks like it’s been given conduit pipe arms and is holding hands with string. The piece is called “Transmissions of The Threadbare, 1997-2012.” She fully admits, “I didn’t literally work on that for 15 years, the dating is a little joke on seeing artists [with their grand claims and monumental aims] date their work with five year time spans.”



Michelle Segre, Transmissions of the Threadbare  
1997-2012, courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery



*Godzeve*, metal, plastic lace, yarn, thread, rocks,  
acrylic, plasticine, plaster, mailbox. Courtesy of the  
artist and Derek Eller.

She calls her work the Anti-Monumental Monumental (itself a joke on the anti-monumental art movement), and I find her sense of humor a huge relief. Beyond that, there’s a raucous surreal summer camp craft vibe, that’s both funny but also feels so apt for this moment of recession where craft is resurgent (yes, that’s you, Etsy, and you can put your bird back on it, Portlandia) and the world is fucked. So, to make anything by hand, by yourself, seems a stab in the dark at a connection and perhaps a statement against slickness and money. In these straightened times there also seems to be a group of women artists taking on various isms of art’s not-so-distant past: surrealism and minimalism and pop, but handmaking pieces, questioning that past and pursuing a dialogue with their forebears. You can see that in Megan Whitmarsh’s work and in other artists I’ll be profiling over the next couple months.

In part I'm writing about them because it resonates with me. In part I want to understand why women of my generation are exploring that past now. Plus I see something akin to a feminist statement in their work, while it also seems to be questioning the feminine, which, yeah, I know is a tricky word to use describing anyone's work, particularly a woman's. And, let's be clear Segre is hardly girly. Spooky and apocalyptic is more like it. But, in using wax and string, those humble materials that seem to "belong" to women, something both interesting and funny and weird is going on.



The Collector, milk crates, plaster, paint, clay, pitchforks, plastacine, rocks, acrylic, paper maché, plastic lace, yarn, thread, wire, toothpicks, seashells. Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery

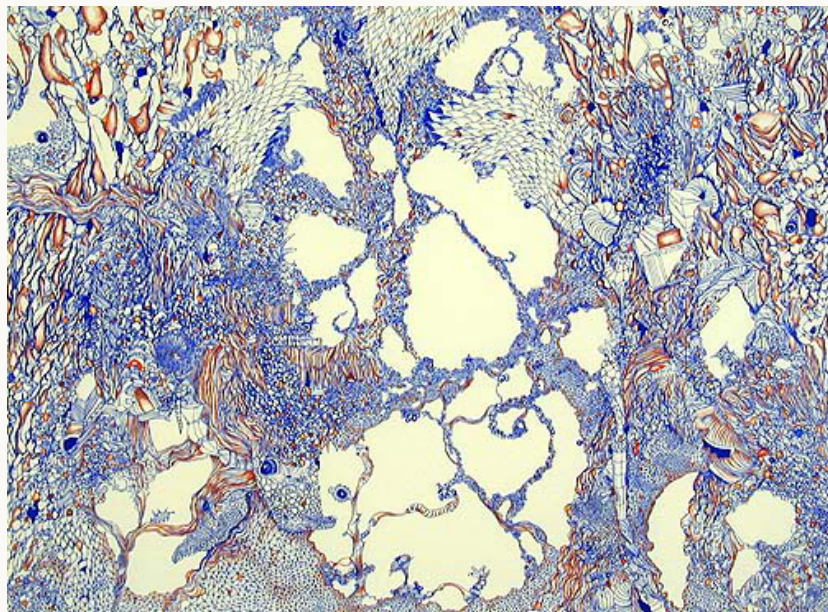
For years Segre (like the late, great Eva Hesse) labored over a can of wax waiting for it to heat in her studio, that is until the allergies the process produced made Segre change her work. (Hesse exploded what was thought of as sculpture by using what were then considered unorthodox materials). And, Segre says about her materials: "When I first started making sculptures years ago, I made the decision to stick to materials that were cheap, easy to use with my hands, and non-toxic. This was mostly out of economic necessity, but also a reaction to all the high-budget, fabricated work I kept seeing being shown around. I wanted the materials to be something I could easily manipulate on my own, and so found myself drawn to papier-mâché, metal lathe, soil, Elmer's Glue, plaster, hand-made armatures, and, at the time, beeswax, used as a coating over the papier-mâché or sculpted by hand directly on to a form. I didn't really know how to use any of this stuff, so it was kind of fun to invent and figure it out on my own."



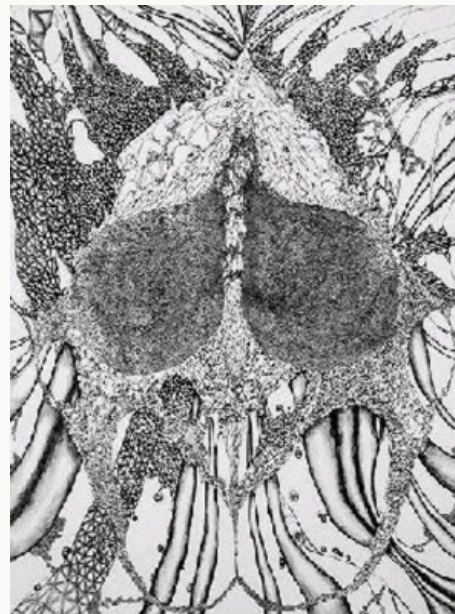
Once Upon a Time the End, metal, acrylic, paper maché, clay, thread, wire, plastacine, plastic, rocks. Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery



Now she says, “I like objects and fragments of things that conjure up a memory or have a little history in my mind, which is one of the bonuses of recycling old work. I like the plastic lace for the associations I have with it from my summer camp arts & crafts memories of the Seventies. A lot of the work references craft, though these days my patience tends to run pretty thin for anything requiring endless repetitive behavior, hence any time I’ve tried to incorporate real crafty moments like weaving or macramé, I get frustrated pretty quickly and it disintegrates into a tangled, chaotic mess.”

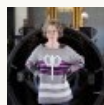


Swamp Eyes, gouache, color pencil on paper 22 x 29.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery



Face Head, gouache, pencil on paper 29.75 x 22 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery

Indeed, her work can have the feeling of someone who came to Joann Fabric on acid, while her earlier drawings from 2004 have the feel of the heavy metal kid at the back of the class. Now, with names like “Once Upon A Time The End” (coined by her kid) her work suggests a fairytale that cuts to the chase – and to all the attendant darkness the Grimm brothers bring. Her work can feel like allegory laid bare and made into 3D. It’s humorous and apocalyptic too, but when the apocalypse is the every day; money is tight and times tough and recession a fact of most people’s lives, what she is making makes sense. It’s humble on the grand scale. It’s a kind of minimalism pulled through surrealism with the quirky feel of folk art to it.



#### ABOUT JENNIFER KABAT

A recent finalist for Notting Hill Editions’ Essay Prize, Jennifer Kabat ([@jenkabat](#)) is working on a book called *Growing Up Modern*, exploring art, ideology and the landscape from the modernist suburb where she grew up to the Western Catskills where she lives now. She’s been awarded a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her criticism and teaches at NYU. She contributes to *BOMB*, *The Believer* and *Frieze* and was once an editor at the legendary style magazine *The Face* in London.

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