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And the Load Doesn't Weigh Me Down at All¹

To spin the web and not be caught in it, to create the world, to create your own life, to rule your fate, to name the grandmothers as well as the fathers, to draw nets and not just straight lines, to be a maker as well as a cleaner, to be able to sing and not be silenced, to take down the veil and appear: all these are the banners on the laundry line I hang out.

—Rebecca Solnit, "Grandmother Spider"²

In *Salv.* Lily Cox-Richard hangs her own banner: a web, a net, woven like a basket or like an aggregate of questions mingling value, feminism, labor, and stewardship. She takes us on a winding account involving the National Park System, accidents, art historical bravado, asphalt, copper, and geological specimens. The narrative begins in 2013, when someone cut the catalytic converter out of Cox-Richard's car to be salvaged for the small amount of platinum inside. The street value of this platinum ranges from \$20 to \$50, while the cost of replacing a converter is astronomically more. This bizarre act of theft was the impetus for Cox-Richard to consider how we can responsibly delineate value—of one another and of the materials that surround us.

Her questioning starts with *Old Copper Futures*, which investigates another sought-after commodity: #2 scrap copper. Global metal recycling is big business, especially for copper, which is infinitely recyclable. Over the past year, Cox-Richard has amassed more than three tons of copper, and working with scrapyards in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Texas, she created a compacted bale for each state. The bale form is used throughout the recycling industry (copper from heating and cooling elements, tubing, and conductive wiring is made movable through compaction into stackable units), and also within the

history of sculpture (referencing minimalist objects of industrial materials by artists like Carl Andre and John Chamberlain). But there is more to these bales than their material and historical references. Each of the three bales sits on a pallet-like plinth, designed for the practical purposes of moving the sculptures and lifting them from the floor to protect them. Two of the plinths are cast concrete, one with orange moving blankets cushioning the copper and the other with oozing blue silicone rubber as padding, while the third pairs yoga mats and steel. Here Cox-Richard takes this value-based material and elevates it by removing it from the cycle of commodification and instead taking tender care of it. The bales, emboldened by their new status as art, stand as softened sentinels, reminding us to be protective of our resources while we still can.

The plea for the stewardship of resources brings us to the second story animating Cox-Richard's installation. In the summer of 2016, she visited Big Bend Ranch State Park, along the Rio Grande in far west Texas, where she saw a crumpled trailer lodged in the steep side of a rocky ravine. Wondering how and when it became embedded there, Cox-Richard did some detective work, learning the story of asphalt truck driver Bobby Wayne Caughorn. On October 1, 1985, Caughorn suffered a broken axle, which caused him to lose control of his truck. Asphalt spewed from the falling truck, causing rockslides and resulting in the deaths of Caughorn and his passenger, Michael S. Mayfield. In 1989 a jury found American Petrofina negligent in the death of Mayfield, and awarded \$879,700 to his mother. Asphalt, a material made from petroleum, scars the landscape through paving, but here it more viscerally becomes evidence of loss, together with the trailer, which remains lodged in situ. In her research Cox-Richard also found that any trash left in a national park for more than 50 years technically

becomes "historic litter." But in Big Bend, the trailer and asphalt residue become more than litter; they become monument and memorial, creating a site that questions just how we assign value.

Cox-Richard made a series of works in response to this unearthed history, starting with *Asphalt Manifest (Landscape)*, a photograph printed on aluminum showing the truck wreckage. The image is abstract, with landscape merging into truck-scape as the reflectivity of the aluminum shines through like the radiant blue of the cloudless sky. Alongside this photograph is *Asphalt Manifest (Evidence)*, an open legal folder into which two images are pinned. Printed using asphalt, these photographs have a rich brown and sticky surface. The lefthand image depicts a curve in a road, and the righthand image, asphalt running down the side of a mountain. At first glance, the two images seem directly related. However, while the image of the curved road comes from the Big Bend incident files, the other image does not represent the accident's spill, but rather is a sly nod to artist Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969). For this work Smithson hired a truck to spill asphalt down the side of an abandoned quarry in Rome, Italy. Here Smithson took a site already marked by time and human intervention and added to it his own narrative about entropy. It is chilling to reflect on that work in tandem with Cox-Richard's retelling of Caughorn's story, which somehow renders Smithson's gesture all the more impotent.

Cox-Richard further highlights this futility and frustration in *He's not heavy, he's my sister*, in which a truck rearview mirror hangs high on the wall. In the mirror viewers see a tiny video showing Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* in a perpetual loop—truck pouring, asphalt sliding. However, Cox-Richard



stops the video short, cycling the clip before the asphalt reaches the ground and thus denying Smithson his climax. By withholding this gesture, Cox-Richard reminds us that not only is entropy more complicated than a single act but also the legacy of sculpture can no longer remain solely with men. Subverting the title of the song “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother” for her title, she reminds us that art history belongs to women too. With this simple pronoun shift, Cox-Richard opens the door for us to consider the work of women like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*³ addresses caretaking as a feminist and labor-based act, or Nancy Holt, whose *Sun Tunnels* (1976) near Wendover, Utah, offered both protection for and enhanced viewing of the desert landscape. These women, plus others like Alice Aycock and Agnes Denes, all managed to consider the landscape (both urban and rural) and take care of it concurrently.

The integration of feminism into minimalist forms, as practiced by these artists, becomes a tool that Cox-Richard uses throughout *Salv*. For example, in *Thunder Egg*, a giant, split-open rocklike sculpture sits on the floor, propped up by a crushed “National Park green” trash can, like a wayward geological specimen. The object and title refer to a type of rock formation that is similar to a geode but is made from volcanic ash, with an intricate and colorful core. But as we examine the interior of Cox-Richard’s sculpture, we recognize cast-plaster baskets and pockets of bubble wrap. Baskets have a long history—they are used for sifting, carrying, and domestic decoration—and are woven for durability. Bubble wrap has a much shorter history and is used for cushioning and protection. By infusing the core of *Thunder Egg* with both strength and protection, Cox-Richard turns stewardship into a domestic act, tenderly reminding us to take care of what we value. *Thunder Egg* thereby becomes a support system, a gift that holds together the artist’s stories, creating a new aggregate form.

The last work in the exhibition is *Hot Mix*, a ball of gypsum cement on top of which sits a found piece of aluminum slag. There is a rough beauty to this work, as



Lily Cox-Richard. *Thunder Egg*, 2016. Gypsum cement, concrete, trash can, acrylic. 30 × 60 × 56 in.

the handmade bottom—speckled with pastel bits—supports the by-product of manufacturing waste in a delicate balance. This work reminds us that we cannot reverse entropy—not through recycling, not through art, and not through politics. But what art can do is make the systems of landscape, natural resources, stewardship, and cultural histories visible, bringing their causes to the forefront and making room for the consideration of progress and of the value of stewardship.

Salv. is at once anxious and generous, and throughout the exhibition Cox-Richard exhibits urgency about how art can function in the face of our current political climate. She writes:

Visibility seemed to have the power to create new understandings, to reveal foundations, to expose injustice. But it cuts both ways. A different kind of visibility is now legitimizing bigotry as political discourse. The masks have come off, and it’s difficult to gauge the swell because visibility is blinding. . . . This won’t easily be rebottled. We can’t put the asphalt back in the tank.⁴

It’s true, we cannot put the asphalt back in the tank. But as 2016 comes to a close and we sit in the “hot mix,” uncertain if beauty or the slag will win, Cox-Richard compassionately reminds us that we must fight for balance. Balance is the salv(e)—the balm that makes certain the load doesn’t weigh us down at all.

—Denise Markonish

NOTES

1. “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother,” written by Bobby Scott and Bob Russell, was originally performed and recorded by Kelly Gordon in 1969. Later that year the Hollies released their own version, and it became a huge hit. The title of this essay is a lyric from this song.
2. Rebecca Solnit, “Grandmother Spider,” in *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 82.
3. It is an all-too-lucky coincidence that “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother,” *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, and *Asphalt Rundown* are all from 1969.
4. Lily Cox-Richard, artist’s proposal sent to the author, Sept. 2016.