



Weaving and Unweaving the World: Lily Cox-Richard's Weep Holes

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"Magic is an art of changing trajectories, of weaving fate into a form that works for us—a form that works with us."

—Aidan Wachter¹

What does it mean to weave our own fate, to manifest how we want to see the world? Does this literally involve mending materials together to assemble a new whole? These acts of reconstruction, tenderness, and care lie at the heart of Lily Cox-Richard's work. Since 2015 she has been contending with threat and care in her projects, most often in the form of sculptures as aggregates, projects that build upon each other like stones gathering moss. Aggregates are crafted by compacting various materials into a whole, like asphalt. The result is that stones and a binder merge, yet, when viewing a cross section, it is clear that all the parts still retain their individuality. In many ways, aggregate is a way of looking at how society can function when working at its best. This concept is particularly poignant to Cox-Richard at a time when the world seems to be increasingly polarized, and, for her, it becomes a way of trying to mend a future.



In 2015, Cox-Richard participated in the Recycled Artist in Residence (RAIR) program, located on a three-acre site in Philadelphia where 400 tons of material that have been diverted from landfills are processed on a daily basis. There, the artist closely watched materials move through the system—getting sorted, shredded, and compacted—emerging as new aggregates of their own. There she began thinking about scrap copper—as both discard and source of value. Following that, in 2016, she produced the exhibition *Salv.* at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas. This project merged multiple narratives, including the theft of Cox-Richard's catalytic converter for scrap, the theft of copper for resale, and the story of Bobby Wayne Caughorn, who in 1985 lost control of his asphalt truck in Texas' Big Bend Ranch State Park. Following the death of Caughorn and his passenger, Michael S. Mayfield, insurance settlements were calculated on the lives of the men.² Together, these stories ask us to reckon with the value of things.

Salv. contained three sculptural bales of #2 scrap copper, from Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Texas. Each sat on a custom-designed platform, referencing both industrial pallets and the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s. At the same time, Cox-Richard questioned the predominantly male art canon, in particular artists such as Robert Smithson³ or Carl Andre. Instead, she created minimalist forms that are aggregates, whose binding materials are stewardship, feminism, and care. In 2016, Cox-Richard described this process, stating: "I've been wondering about how the contours of landscape—their density or use—affect our relationship to natural resources, labor, and time. The possibility for certain goods to be indexed to a commodities market makes determining the value of things like life, labor, and love feel all the more impossible. During this fall's hot mix of queasy politics, I felt solidarity in crafting meaning with remnants—dirt, rubble, bodily fluids—and claiming space for the details and scraps."⁴



Lily Cox-Richard, *Old Copper Futures: 951 lbs. of #2 scrap copper from Revolution Recovery, New Castle, DE*, 2016. From the exhibition *Lily Cox-Richard: Salv.* Copper, concrete, blanket. 42 × 26 × 39 inches. Photo by Adam Schreiber

Cox-Richard continued thinking about the fate of objects during the 2016 presidential election and subsequent administration. *Salv.*, which opened just days after the election, addressed how notions of care, stewardship, and feminism were all dangerously in peril. Cox-Richard persistently pondered the notion of stewardship and how we can mend the damage done, while responsibly getting to a future in which care can take center stage. Now, in 2022, her new work has been completed against a whole new backdrop of conditions that are ever changing, from the tension around the 2020 election to the divided politics of America, the continual violence against BIPOC communities, a global pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The 2016 invitation for Cox-Richard to exhibit at MASS MoCA was a beacon for the artist, who, upon hearing the show would be mounted in 2021⁵, stated that “we’ll have a new



president by then,” but also added that while it felt good to be planning for that future, “first we have to get there, to the mess on the other side.”⁶ Despite the election results—or perhaps because of the events around the election—we know more than ever how badly we are still in need of care. To that end, Cox-Richard weaves together the possibility of willing a new future into being, one where tenderness can be a form of political action and resistance.

The result of this trajectory is the exhibition *Weep Holes*, which weaves together new forms that hold the potential to change ideas through matter transmuted. The phrase “weep hole” is visceral, conjuring a repository for collective sorrow, and the vulnerability of our bodies. In reality, the phrase is a construction term for the holes placed in buildings, in particular in masonry, which allow the façade to breathe and water to escape safely. This alleviation of pressure, both materially and metaphorically, is the starting point for Cox-Richard’s new works, as is the mess on the other side (of life, of politics, of destruction), and what it may look like or grow into. Cox-Richard began conceptualizing her exhibition by posing a series of questions to herself: “How do we get to the future and do so while taking care of one another; how do we mend the damage that is already done; and what are the tools needed for this dismantling?”

This questioning began when Cox-Richard was at RAIR and saw a 1,200-pound bale of tinsel in the backyard, an object that has not escaped her imagination since. She was taken by its continual transformation—it would be rendered nearly invisible when covered in dirt and then, after a cleansing rain, would sparkle once again. It is reminiscent of the Charles Dickens character, Miss Havisham, from *Great Expectations*, who spends her whole life wearing the wedding dress she was once jilted in, until it becomes the tattered remains of hope, yet with hints of beauty lying beneath the ruins. Of the first glimpse of her, Dickens writes: “But, I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost

its luster, and was faded and yellow”⁷ The bale, much like the form of the copper bales in *Salv.*, becomes a beacon of how to find hope amidst the pile of hopelessness—the sparkle under the grime—and it makes appearances throughout the exhibition like Virgil to our Dante, transcending the ruins of its Dickensian forbearer.

Throughout the exhibition, the works on view shift in scale and play off the existing architecture, while making the presence/absence of the viewer’s body palpable in relationship to the objects present. This expanding and contracting of scale begins in the smaller front galleries. In this space, we see materials pushing against the architecture of MASS MoCA’s old mill buildings. A series of sandbags, usually utilized to help abate floodwater, becomes a wall bursting forth with sandcastles made by dribbling wet sand rather than molding it into shape; and a series of columns becomes the site for weavings of decommissioned fire hoses, drawing together the forms to create new architecture. Half of the columns are additive, and some



Tinsel bale, RAIR Philadelphia, PA, 2018. Photo by Sharad Kant Patel



are held up with capitals sculpted to look like five-gallon buckets with mushrooms growing from their sides, like Corinthian columns. Behind these permeable barriers is a series of prints made from scans of papers once used to separate candles packed in boxes for shipping. The wax and dyes of the candles stained the paper, resulting in soft seepages that vibrate and dissolve before our eyes.

All of these works mend and tie together disparate materials to create new forms and connections, while elevating the residue of daily life. The notion of mending is key to these pieces; you can see the patches in sculptures, the marks from temporary walls removed but still ghosting on the floor, or the remains of ash from rituals. In Cox-Richard's hands these subtle clues and purposeful materials become like spells, conjuring the benevolent witchy magic of collective repair. The sculpture's aggregate nature and inability to be



Lily Cox-Richard, *Sculptures the Size of Hailstones*, 2018. From the exhibition *Lily Cox-Richard: Sculptures the Size of Hailstones*. Gypsum cement, concrete, found materials, mixed media. Photo by Sharad Kant Patel

easily categorized reference the notion of willfulness as discussed by writer Sara Ahmed in her blog *Feminist Killjoys*. She states: “Willful stones do not stay in the right place ... they move around. That their movement begins with dissatisfaction tells us something ... when the stones do not stay in place, they bring our walls down. Willful stones would be those that bring the walls down.”⁸ This willfulness and the scattering of objects and ideas as stones is central to Cox-Richard’s exploration of sculpture as aggregate—casts of objects mixed with plaster and other materials to create a new kind of building material, one now woven together.

Willfulness was also evident in Cox-Richard’s *Sculptures the Size of Hailstones* (2018) at the Old Jail Art Center in Albany, Texas. For this exhibition, she began with the “hail scale,” or how we determine the size of hail in relationship to known objects like golf balls, softballs, walnuts, or teacups. Cox-Richard notes that what may be large for hail is relatively small for sculpture, so she built an oversize pedestal into the architecture of the gallery and placed divots in it that would hold small sculptures—again with the aggregate whole becoming larger than the sum of its parts. Alongside the “hailstones” Cox-Richard embellished a series of antique lightning rods—impotent indoors, but still retaining the energy of the outside world. One is reminded yet again of Ahmed, who writes: “Perhaps stones are willing inasmuch as what they do not let us do; in how they resist our intentions. They can be checking powers; reminders that the world is not waiting to receive our shape.”⁹

Just like the hailstones, *Weep Holes* functions like a breadcrumb trail, with the works in the front galleries leading us—as if through a path in the woods—to the final gallery, which is divided into two parts. A series of starburst-shaped sculptures, made from tomato plant cages woven with the invasive vine kudzu, exist in both the front and back spaces, like constellations or thrown toy jacks connecting the rooms. Next, we encounter a two-story high hand-tied



broom so huge it becomes architecture, or grows out of the existing building materials—something sprung forth from the weep holes. The broom serves as a metaphor for all we need to sweep up. Additionally, for Cox-Richard these materials aren't discarded; they are reconfigured, rewoven into new forms. Even the broom itself is a recasting of materials, made from backer rod, a material consisting of small strips of foam used to back joints and help control the amount of sealant used in construction, functioning similarly to weep holes. The material is the same foam also used in floating "pool noodles." Cox-Richard worked with a zero-waste company, Nomaco,¹⁰ which both fabricates the product and melts down and recycles the waste. The material for the broom will be recycled yet again after the exhibition.

The inspiration for the broom also comes from the history of broom-making itself. In his article "How the Broom Became Flat," J. Bryan Lowder states that "before the 19th century, broom-making was an idiosyncratic art; most were fashioned at home from whatever materials were at hand. The basic design involved binding the sweeping bundle to a wooden stick with rope or linen twine."¹¹ In Western culture, it was the Shakers who later transformed the broom into a bundled handle radiating into a flat-shaped whisk, creating a more efficient cleaning tool. The Shakers, a radical spiritual community, were formed in England in 1747, coming to the United States and settling in Albany, New York, in 1776, before establishing the community in New Lebanon, New York (about an hour from MASS MoCA) in 1782. They are a unique utopian society that practices celibacy, but also encourages equality between the sexes; they believe in frugality, hard work, feminism, and pacifism, and abide by the adage, "Put your hands to work and give your hearts to God." Cox-Richard's broom uses the frugality of recycling as it sits in the gallery—we can even see the trace of its efforts to sweep up in gestures across the floor, before observing that a doorway has opened up, as if the broom has broken through the walls.



Lily Cox-Richard's studio, Richmond, VA, 2020. Photo by Sharad Kant Patel

Just as *Salv.* made reference to the history of minimalist sculpture, so too does *Weep Holes*. For, along with the kudzu sculptures, the broom is also accompanied by a series of handcrafted firepits. The summer prior to her exhibition opening, Cox-Richard made the firepits from concrete (most using casts of basket interiors that exist both throughout her body of work and in *Weep Holes*, serving as punctuation points in the exhibition). These sixty-plus objects were distributed to friends and collaborators to use for warmth, for ritual, and, for this author, as a watering hole for birds and squirrels. Cox-Richard then reconvened the firepits; having generously given the gifts, she asked to borrow them back before returning them to their forever yards at the end of the exhibition. After making and distributing these pieces, Cox-Richard remembered seeing an untitled Donald Judd work from 1977 installed in Münster, Germany, for which he created two concrete concentric rings.¹² The form in Judd's installation references the sloping park around a lake as each ring sits slightly askew to the other, and it has become a gathering space, much like huddling





Detail of the firepit after use. Photo by Lily Cox-Richard

around a firepit. Once again, Cox-Richard humanizes the austerity of minimalism by placing the firepits in two piles, as if swept to the corner by the broom. But the firepits here literally hum with a soundtrack of cat purrs, created by collaborator Michael Jevon Demps, resulting in a rumbling comfort permeating the room.

Uniting the elements in the large gallery is a drone that swings across the ceiling. The first appearance of this curious object is in the form of a video of it interacting with the tinsel bale, made collaboratively by Cox-Richard and Sharad Kant Patel—the drone holding the desire to sparkle and rest, and the bale harboring the urge to fly. Just as the tinsel no longer adorns a Christmas tree, this is not your ordinary drone; instead, it has a new vocation, which is to produce rainbows. The drone is embellished with crystals, turning it into a drone carrying a chandelier—shifting what was once a stealth object

into a producer of prisms, as evidenced by its kaleidoscopic projections around a window in the gallery. In the video, both the drone and the bale glint as they catch the sun, two new friends forging a path forward from their intended fate. And finally, at the back of the gallery, through the doorway cutout that resembles the shape of the broom sculpture while also functioning like a drawn-back curtain, the tinsel bale itself sits on a platform that seemingly hovers above the floor, resolute in its objecthood and gleaming like a sentinel of the future, a future we can all weave together.

Feminist theorist Audre Lorde states that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”¹³ This signaling for change is Cox-Richard’s call to arms: arms that embrace, take care of each other, and can take down the houses they did not build. These stones become the tools; they are not for throwing, but instead aggregate to build a new future from their fallen past. In the artist’s hands, these stones betray their lithic nature, instead becoming pliable, weaving together a new fate as if by magic. In the end, Cox-Richard acknowledges the collective effort toward resistance, channeling Katie West, who writes: “I see you, I know you’re tired. I know the world is a hard place to navigate. And you are right to have hoped it would’ve been, if not easier, at least better by now. Instead you’re left waiting (for equal rights, for gender to be recognized as a spectrum, for reconciliation, for self-acceptance, for the right to choose, for the patriarchy to burn, for universal health care, for access, for it not to be audacious to demand decency and kindness). I see you. And I’m glad you’re still here. Still struggling, resisting, fighting, yearning for all the above and more. And I want you to know, like so many witches already know, that you’re powerful. Find your rituals, find your power, find your reason. Become dangerous.”¹⁴





Recording cat purrs with foster kitten Shea, Lily Cox-Richard's studio, Richmond, VA 2021
Photo by Lily Cox-Richard

ENDNOTES

1. Aidan Wachter, *Weaving Fate: Hypersigils, Changing the Past & Telling True Lies* (Red Temple Press, 2020), p. 19.
2. Caughorn's truck had suffered a broken axle. A jury found American Petrofina negligent in the death of the passenger, Mayfield, and awarded \$879,700 to his mother. No information was provided by Cox-Richard on compensation for Caughorn. The artist saw the crumpled trailer still lodged in the steep side of a rocky ravine in 2016. See www.lilycoxrichard.com/texts/#Markonish.
3. Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) serves as a footnote to Cox-Richard's work in reference to Caughorn's asphalt truck.
4. <https://artpace.org/exhibitions/salv/>.
5. The exhibition was originally set to open in March 2021, but the Covid-19 pandemic postponed it for a year.
6. From Cox-Richard's email to the author April 3, 2018.
7. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London, 1861; New York: Race Point Publishing, 2016), p. 56.
8. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/01/29/willful-stones/>.
9. Ibid.
10. www.nomaco.com/.
11. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2012/06/broom-history-how-it-became-flat.html>.
12. Cox-Richard was reminded of the Judd work in a conversation with Mike Bianco, who is a friend of the artist and currently lives in Australia. Due to this distance he couldn't receive a firepit, but contributed to important conversations about the project over its development.
13. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1983), in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1981), pp. 94-101.
14. Katie West, "Introduction," in *Becoming Dangerous: Witchy Femmes, Queer Conjurers, and Magical Rebels*, ed. Katie West and Jasmine Elliott (Newburyport: Weiser Books, 2018), p. xvii.

