

*Fungible Materialism—
Heather Goodchild & Naomi Yasui, 'Last is First' at Eastern Edge*

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Fungible. A word I like the look of, only recently noticed, and had to look up: with origins in the Latin of legal language, it describes an item “[...] which precisely supplies the place of another [...],”¹ an equivalent thing. In the original, legal use of the term, it was important for the distinction to be made that an item to be considered as fungible was one that did not need to be delivered “in specie,”² i.e. specifically the one item, but that it was a thing replaceable by another item considered to be identical—one bushel of wheat for another, one coin for another, etc. This is an operation not particularly innate to the idea of the artwork or art object—flattening as it can concepts of aura, value, distinction between medium, study versus finished work, and original versus iteration.

I am applying ‘fungible’ to Heather Goodchild and Naomi Yasui’s collaborative installation at Eastern Edge, *Last is First*, as a means to consider their simultaneous use and dismissal of historical hierarchies of material and method, toward an engagement of the material itself—ceramic, textile, painting, photography, and sculpture—and a concomitant blurring of object and subject.

It is discursively handy that *fungible* comes from classical Latin, as it is within the canon of ‘classical’ Western art (Ancient Greek and Roman) that distinctions between different areas of production—including mediums that are currently commonly divided into either craft or art—and even more germanely, hierarchies between an ‘original’ and its repetition, were moot, and that it was intrinsic to the power of the work and its meaning that such hierarchical distinctions were not present, nor important.³

This point was compellingly made in the twin exhibitions *Portable Classic* and *Serial Classic*, mounted respectively at the Fondazione Prada’s Venice and Milan spaces in 2015,⁴ and the accompanying publication: “for generations and over centuries classical art concentrated all of its energy on the creation of repeatable models capable of

¹ “Fungible.” The Compact Oxford English Dictionary. (2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 269.

² *ibid.*

³ Salvatore Settis, “Supremely Original: Classical Art as Serial, Iterative, Portable.”, in Serial / Portable Classic: Multiplying Art in Greece and Rome, (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2015) 51-72.

⁴ Portable Classic, Fondazione Prada, Venice, May 09-Sept 13, 2015, curators Salvatore Settis, Davide Gasparotto. Serial Classic, Fondazione Prada, Milan, May 09-Aug 24, 2015, curators Salvatore Settis and Anna Anguissola.

embodying collective values.”⁵ In particular in the *Serial Classic* iteration of the project, curators Salvatore Settis and Anna Anguissola, in their stunning, Rem Koolhaas-designed presentation of classical Greek statuary, Roman iterations, and contemporary scholarly reconstructions of the same, curate the artifacts into an embodiment of their thesis that the repetition or serialization of a work across multiple iterations was innate to the power of the ideas it held and represented. The curators demonstrate that it was in the iterative production, and inherently serial nature of originals and copies, wherein each work represented aspects of the ethos of the *polis*—meaning an independent city governed by its citizens, but also the group of citizens themselves, and the resultant powerful and inextricable symbiosis of the two—that ancient statuary served to reinforce the social ethos it literally embodied.

Last is First is a selection of recent and new works by Yasui and Goodchild that the artists have assembled into an installation, sharing form, pattern and reference in a conversational flow across individual elements. A hooked rug and an adjacent painting portraying the same still life (importantly including portrayal of a ceramic tourist tchotchke of unknown age done in the manner of classical Greek black-figure pottery, and purchased by Goodchild while in Italy). Another hooked rug, this by Yasui, twinned with a photo, both representing the same spare, adroit *nature morte*. Watercolour paintings that feature the minimal, tastefully modern patterning discernible on hand-printed fabric hanging in the centre of the gallery—the design of which also evokes reanimation of modernist styles in 1980s design—which itself repeats the pattern of Yasui’s fingers imprinted on a nearby pinch pot.⁶ A photo of a self-aware still life. A ceramic vessel of Yasui’s on a high Plexi shelf. Another ceramic vessel, this one by Goodchild in her own iteration of black-figure pottery, pointedly weighing down the corner of the print of another photographic still life. Perhaps not as dizzying or discombobulating as a *mise en abyme*,⁷ but a deft repeating, considering, and re-animating of multiple styles, mediums, and methods that reference the archaeological, as much as decorative fad, serial production, and the handmade. It is palpable to the viewer

⁵ Settis, 51.

⁶ There are levels of reference here, the formal intelligence of which—alluring ceramic forms, skillful installation strategies, attractive forms that graze on art and vernacular aesthetic references manifesting as sculptures—summon feelings of familiarity from both domestic and institutional settings: the simultaneous thoughts “I’ve seen you on the shelves of my friend’s mom’s kitchen,” and “I’ve seen you on the shelves of the V&A.”

⁷ *Mise en abyme*, from the French, literally meaning “placed into the abyss,” with reference to the visual, referring to an infinite repetition of an image, often in diminishing scale; its more vernacular counterpart, the ‘Droste effect’ named in reference to the Droste cocoa packaging featuring an image of a woman with the same package, reproduced within itself multiple times.

that the use by the artists of archaeological and vernacular style references are not done in a post-structuralist move toward critique as much as an engagement and skillful elision of a gap between subject and object, neatly sandwiching the two with the distinction being reduced to what Duchamp called the *infra-mince*—the ultra-thin.

Experimental, interdisciplinary liberal arts school Black Mountain College—one of the Camelots of modernism—was founded in 1933 by educator John Rice. Later that same year, influential German educators and artists Josef and Anni Albers—out of work since the famous Bauhaus art school “closed to avoid accepting Nazi teachers”⁸—were successfully courted to begin teaching at this new institute, and moved to Asheville, North Carolina. Curator and critic Helen Molesworth, in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957*, published in conjunction with the eponymous exhibition chronicling the work done by the school’s founders, faculty, and students, and those it influenced, quotes masterful textile artist Anni Albers, writing in 1938 for the school’s bulletin: “Material, that is to say, unformed or unshaped matter, is the field where authority blocks independent experimentation less than in many other fields [...].”⁹

What Albers described as “authority”—studied facility with material and medium—is palpable in the individual practices of both Heather Goodchild and Naomi Yasui, as well as in their collaborative work. Goodchild could perhaps somewhat grandiloquently be referred to as a compulsive autodidact, invested in learning the skilled application of the materials and methods she employs in her practice—ceramics, textile work including rug hooking, watercolour painting, oil painting, and others. Yasui shares this tendency toward the harnessing of material-based skill, expressed most obviously in her ceramic work—the field in which she received her professional training—and her textile pieces.

Ideas surrounding material and materiality have lately been identified as areas in which to coalesce discussions of the current moment in art production. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the Winter 2016 issue of *October* wherein the magazine’s editors asked 41 artists, critics, and curators to respond to their proposition that: “Art history, in the wake of post-structuralism has relied heavily on theories of subjectivity. Recent philosophical tendencies [...] have profoundly challenged the centrality of subjectivity in the

⁸ Helen Molesworth, “Imaginary Landscape” in Helen Molesworth, ed. *Leap Before you Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2015) 33.

⁹ Anni Albers, “Work with Material” in *Black Mountain College Bulletin*, 5, 1938, as quoted by Molesworth, 25.

humanities [...]”¹⁰ toward an attempt “to theorize a new materialism or objectivity.”¹¹ Considering ideas including that “humans and objects [may form] networks or assemblages across which agency or even consciousness are distributed”¹² are of course not so much ‘new’ as newly involving existing ideas such as animism in contemporary art theory.

Yasui and Goodchild, engaging a pan-materiality so characteristic of, for instance, the work of Black Mountain College and other productive modernisms, while summoning formal reference to archaeological models in certain of their installations, and in some of their specific artworks, deftly animate these references as art objects, while making them their subjects as well. But it is in their materially-focused production, that the subject is not a critique, but a consideration of the proposals possible in such forms. Here individual works lead to a next or another, in an overlapping, continuing conversation. Here we see the result of a collaboration wherein the two artists involved are focused on consideration of material, form, and idea inhabiting reference to, and the guise of, known styles and forms, but in a refreshing proposition wherein histories of material and form are deftly called up, in a—yes—fungible way.

The object = the subject = the iteration = the study = the print = the whole installation, etc. The part is the whole. The last is first.

¹⁰ David Joselit, Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Hal Foster, eds. “A Questionnaire on Materialisms.” October 155, Winter 2016 (Cambridge: MIT P) 3.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*