

Mendelson | Haggarty

Chroma - Forma

Shari Mendelson
Catherine Haggarty

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November 7 - December 12, 2019

Essay by Nancy Princenthal

Flecker Gallery
Suffolk County Community College
Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

Director's Foreword:

Flecker Gallery is delighted to host this two-person exhibition of recent artworks by Shari Mendelson and Catherine Haggarty. The exhibition includes sculpture by Mendelson and paintings by Haggarty; a pairing that resonates as harmonious, rhythmic, thoughtful, and moving.

Mendelson creates her vessel-sculptures primarily out of consumer-discarded plastic bottles and epoxy putty to hold it all together. They are carefully constructed to resemble vessels from antiquity, but in fact they are not vessels for utilitarian use, rather objects of contemplation and vehicles for the artist's values and critical voice. The translucent plastic and paint surfaces result in objects that become luminous beacons in our tragic present, at the precipice of irreversible and catastrophic climate change. They are spirit-forms, especially those works that integrate animal forms. There is a palpable feeling that these beautiful, sacred urns and ewers are carrying forth an unpleasant truth. But they remain balanced, open, and light - multifaceted artworks with as much formal elegance as critical discourse.

Haggarty references vessels and architecture in her largely abstract paintings, if there are kernels of information to assemble content from, these are the largest and most apparent. An interest in connecting ideas across multiple artworks through repeated forms and smaller-cropped floating layers is a hallmark of her practice. Canvases that share identical scale with other, usually prior paintings in a sequence, makes growth and evolution palpable and manifested as another key to engaging meaningfully with her work. She is riffing on or flirting with bas-relief sculpture, creating shallow plaster elevations on some more recent canvases that disorient our perception of space. There is a wonderful figure/ground interplay and atmospheric feeling that comes from the extensive use of translucent layering. Haggarty also frequently invokes waveforms, and compositions that read as sets of waves rolling into the shore.

There are numerous connection points between these artists' works: vessels, translucency, structure, and fluidity. But there is something more, something in the energy that is palpable but beyond language. It fills me with hope, despite the times and the precipice that humanity is facing. In my view, this is the highest function of art - to create hope. And it is augmented and made even greater when it presents us with a vision that changes our thinking, thereby changing our reality. As you engage with the show, I hope you will feel encouraged to marvel at the beauty of the work, and remain aware of where it takes both your thoughts and feelings.

Nancy Princenthal, esteemed critic and author brings her depth of knowledge and poetic grace to the exhibition through her elegant catalog essay, *Compound Interest*. Here Princenthal illustrates precisely what a great writer can bring to bear – revelations and connectivity that are insightful and fresh, often revealing even to the artist.

I sincerely hope you thoroughly enjoy the catalog and this fabulous exhibition.

Matthew Neil Gehring
Director

Compound Interest

By Nancy Princenthal

Different though they are, the sculptor Shari Mendelson and the painter Catherine Haggarty share a few important interests. The first is the vessel, or container, which shows up in Haggarty's work as one of several recurring motifs, all highly abstracted; Mendelson draws upon ancient flasks and similar objects for forms mostly made of recycled plastic bottles.

The second, broader shared concern is with historical sources. Invoking them is of course itself an established tradition; repurposing existing idioms has always been crucial to art's development (although its age-old prevalence was obscured by postmodernism's critical reframing of such borrowings). But Mendelson and Haggarty have developed compound languages that are rare in their subtlety and surprise.

At a glance, an exhibition of Mendelson's work suggests a slightly dusty alcove—the more inviting for its hiddenness—in the Greek and Roman wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Indeed, she has spent a fair amount of time there, although her source material spans the Mediterranean and includes ancient cultures of the Middle East and North Africa. Rather than celebrated masterworks, she is attracted to objects with imperfections that betray the hazards of creation and time; she leans toward those that are intimate in scale, and modest rather than ornate. Another inclination is toward chimeras—the oldest form of hybrid, in which animals are conjoined with pots, or ewers, or other animals, including people. Mendelson has created bottles, cups, bowls and beakers that take the form of, or sit atop, ducks and rams, a camel and a hippopotamus. Handles sprout from horns and antlers, and are sometimes abloom with leaves. There is an askos in the shape of a seated deer, its neck and back a baroque curve. Mythical Figure with Earrings is a primly formal female centaur with a narrow vessel balanced on her haunches. In *The Offering*, a distinctly human ox humbly extends a big, slightly wobbly beaker clasped in his two front hooves.

Chimeras are at the root of both magic and art, appearing in what has been called the earliest known figurative sculpture (an Ice Age ivory carving of a man/lion found in Germany), and in the profusion of animal-human grafts in the poetry of Ovid forty millennia later. Their potency is clear. But Mendelson has also made a wealth of bottles, beakers, cups and bowls, variously long-necked and stout, netted and spiked, which while not grafts of animal forms are equally fanciful. And chimeras are not Mendelson's only form of hybridity. Her work also involves a complex interplay of ritual object, functional form and decoration. Teasing out what bestows value in art—questioning whether it be grace, utility or spiritual power—is one challenge her sculpture poses; another is how to embrace humor without violating the intent of sacred source objects.

Mendelson has been a resident at several glassmaking workshops, most recently Pilchuck in Washington State, where she produced a sphinx bearing an incense holder in pulled glass; like other glass works she has made, including winged, amulet-like forms in cast glass, it has a density at odds with the lucid fragility associated with glass sculpture. More traditionally glasslike, in fact, is the majority of Mendelson's work that is made from repurposed plastic, mostly beverage bottles, with which she has developed a remarkably flexible language of shape and surface. She begins with drawings (rather than photographs) of ancient objects, to prevent finickiness about their details, and assembles the sculptures' plastic elements with hot glue, *Magic Sculpt* (an epoxy that dries overnight) and acrylic paint, sanding between layers. Often, she exploits floral or star-shaped patterns in her plastic bottles' bottoms to achieve her work's complicated surfaces.



Shari Mendelson, "Animal with Cage Cup (white)", 2015, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, paper, found metal, resin, 9 x 5 x 8.5 inches

A longtime, committed recycler, Mendelson is happy that her work saves some plastic from winding up in a land-fill or, worse, an ocean. Her concern for the environment is shared with sculptors Ellen Driscoll, who has made wondrous little cities from recycled plastic, and Willie Cole, who has fashioned grand mandalas from water bottles. But Mendelson's work is distinctively addressed to economies of form as well as material: she demonstrates how little one needs to bring to life the sweeping arch of a neck, the lift of a foot, the grandeur of a pair of horns. At the same time, she encourages reflection on just how long household goods endure. In demonstrating a commonality between recycling bottles and retrieving the material culture of the ancient Mediterranean, she expresses a belief that salvage is a process invested with reverence, and that repurposing old things produces a compound in which form and meaning are enriched.

The antique references that appear in some of Catherine Haggarty's paintings include her use of fresco, a technique most closely associated with early Renaissance masters. And like Mendelson's, Haggarty's process involves conflating old and new, as by conjoining venerable painting methods and materials with airbrushing, inescapably linked to urban graffiti.

Rather than wielding it as an instrument of signatory mark-making, though, Haggarty favors the airbrush for its ability to dissipate color, creating a mist so fine it's scarcely visible. She often uses it to get started on a painting, in which case it forms a kind of paradoxically weightless ground, supporting more substantial applications of paint (including both oil and acrylic) and also collaged elements; the edges of occasional superimposed patches of canvas, or of areas of thinly knifed-on plaster, are themselves hard to see. Moreover paint is applied and scratched away with both conventional and unconventional tools, including chopsticks. In other words, the surfaces of Haggarty's paintings are complicated.

That is not to say they're congested. Built like architecture, to use a metaphor of the artist's choosing, they are generally constructed of nested fields. Architectural features such as pointed arches and pitched roofs allude to protection and shelter. Often the paintings have a narrow blank strip at the bottom or top, which Haggarty calls a "deletion"; it can be connected to her interest in old vinyl LPs that skip, creating unexpected jumps in the music. Haggarty also favors compositions that feature paintings-within-paintings, for instance by creating the illusion that the internal image is canted away from the physical surface. In other cases the initial,

airbrushed ground sometimes buoys the central image, floating it on a starry sky, or on dappled water. And sometimes there is the illusion of transparency, with the internal image illuminating or darkening abstracted pictographs that carry all the way across the canvas.

The tall, narrow-throated and broad-bellied vessel that can be seen in *Horizontal Slits* and again in *Sun God II* is one such pictograph. Others—there are roughly half a dozen in Haggarty's lexicon—include (in addition to the archways already noted) fistfuls of barely recognizable leaves, as in the brightly colored and sharply outlined *Leaf Interlopers II*. Recurring most often, and perhaps hardest to identify unaided, is a haunting figure derived from the slatted backs of common metal and wooden benches; it vaguely suggests an invented Chinese character. That is to say, like graffitiists, Haggarty has shaped a vocabulary that is somewhere between the opacity of letterforms and the transparency of pictorial representation.

In the eclecticism and fluency of her process, Haggarty is kin to Carrie Moyer; Haggarty's inventiveness also calls up the gemlike abstractions of the late Thomas Nozkowski. But what this exhibition helps bring out, by bringing painting into conversation with sculpture, is the striking object-ness of Haggarty's work. Playing with transparency and refracted light, as Mendelson does, and also with mediums of great density, she creates images that have the complexity of three-dimensional form. In a word, Haggarty creates hybrids—compounds that, like all newborn metaphors, forge new meaning from existing terms.

-Nancy Princenthal

Nancy Princenthal is a New York-based writer whose book *Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2015) received the 2016 PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography. She is also the author of *Hannah Wilke* (Prestel, 2010), and her essays have appeared in monographs on Doris Salcedo, Robert Mangold, Janet Biggs and Alfredo Jaar, among many others. A Contributing Editor (and former Senior Editor) of *Art in America*, she has also written for the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Princenthal has taught at Bard College, Princeton University, and Yale University, and is currently on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts. Her book *Unspeakable Acts: Women, Art, and Sexual Violence in the 1970s*, was published by Thames & Hudson in October 2019.



Catherine Haggarty, "Horizontal Sits", 2019, oil and airbrush on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



"Blue Syrian Vessel with Long Neck (small)", 2017, repurposed plastic, hot glue, resin, acrylic polymer, glass, paint
15 x 5.5 x 6 inches (left)

"Pink and Green Glitter Vessel", 2017, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, resin, mica, paint, glass frit, glitter,
19 x 9 x 9 inches (center)

"Syrian Bottle with Long Neck", 2015, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, mono filament, paint,
15 x 5.5 x 5.5 inches (right)

"Shiny Blue Vessel", 2014, repurposed plastic, hot glue, resin, 11 x 4 x 4 inches (opposite)





Top row: "Deer Askos", 2018, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, resin, mica, 8 x 7 x 3 inches (left); "Donut Animal Askos 2", 2018, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic, polymer, resin, 8.5 x 6.5 x 8.5 inches (right)
 Bottom row: "Mythical Figure with Earrings", 2018, repurposed plastic, hot glue, resin, acrylic polymer, sheet metal, gold, 13.5 x 4 x 7 inches (left); "Horse Askos", 2018, repurposed plastic, hot glue, resin, acrylic polymer, mica, paint, 10.5 x 8 x 3 inches (center); "The Offering", 2018, repurposed plastic, hot glue, resin, acrylic polymer, mica, paint, 9 x 4 x 6.5 inches (right)



"Walking Animal with Dense Net", 2018, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, metal, resin, paint, mica, 12 x 6 x 9 inches



"Animal with Net", 2017, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, resin, paint, mica, 28 x 15 x 15 inches (left)

"Round Vessel with Crown", 2016, repurposed plastic, hot glue, resin, acrylic polymer, mica, paint, 25 x 18 x 18 inches (right)





"Vessels with Spokes", 2018, repurposed plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, resin, metal, mica, paint, glitter, 39.5 x 12 x 12 inches (left)

"Four Vessels with Exoskeleton (Pink and Gold)", 2017, repurposed plastic, hot glue, paint, resin, metal, 37 x 10 x 9 inches (opposite)





"Bleu Ridge", 2019, oil and airbrush on canvas, 48 x 56 inches



"Color Cones & Water II", 2019, oil, paper, and airbrush on canvas, 48 x 56 inches



"Bernard", oil, airbrush, and plaster on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



"Benched There", 2019, oil and airbrush on canvas, 46 x 56 inches



"Memory Wins", 2018, oil and airbrush on panel, 46 x 56 inches (above)



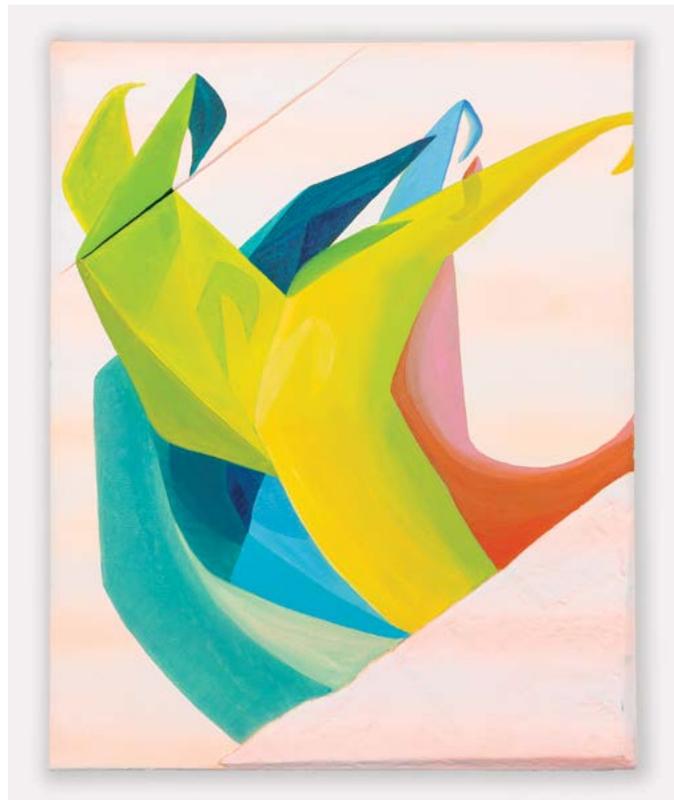
"To Float", 2019, oil, airbrush, and plaster on canvas, 20 x 16 inches, (above right)



"Orchestra For Flowers", 2019, oil and airbrush on canvas, 20 x 16 inches (right)

"No Shadows", 2019, oil, airbrush, and plaster on canvas, 20 x 16 inches, (opposite)



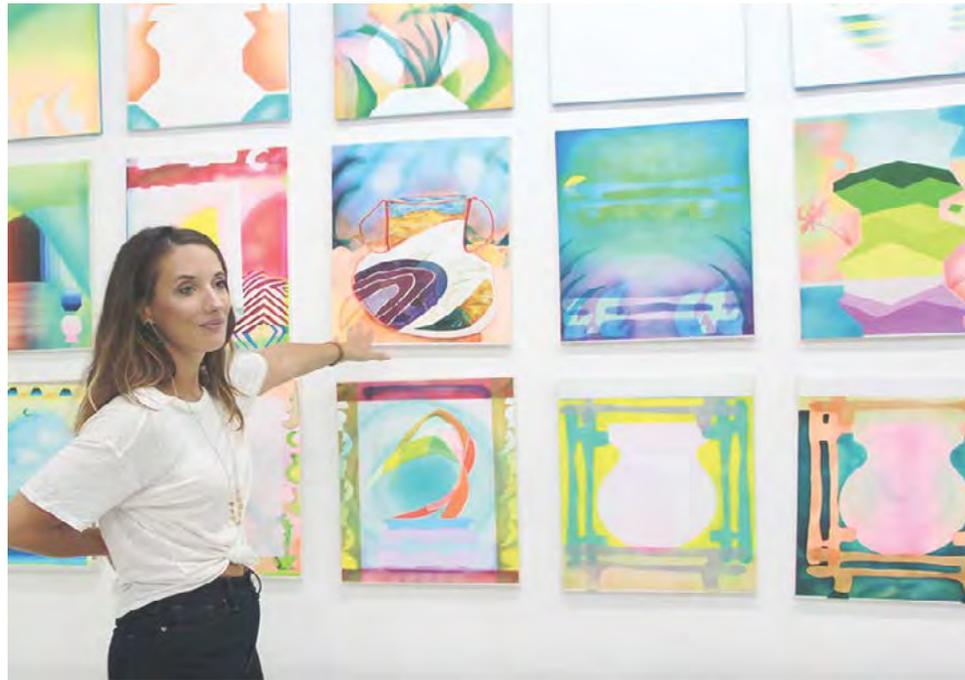


"Home for Leaves II", 2018, oil, airbrush, and plaster on canvas, 20 x 16 inches (above)

"Home for Leaves III", 2018, oil and airbrush on canvas, 36 x 42 inches (right)

"Home for Leaves", 2018, oil, airbrush, and plaster on canvas, 20 x 16 inches, (opposite)





Catherine Haggarty is an artist based in Brooklyn, New York. She earned her M.F.A. from Mason Gross, Rutgers University in 2011. Currently, Haggarty is an adjunct professor at The School of Visual Arts (SVA) in the Visual Critical Studies Department and also co-directs NYC Crit Club. Selected exhibitions include Hashimoto Contemporary, Paper Paris, Art on Paper Fair, Papier Montreal with Project Pangee, N2N, Able Baker Contemporary, Morgan Lehman, Markel Fine Arts, and The Provincial. From 2015 to 2019, Haggarty was a co-director of Ortega y Gasset Projects in Brooklyn, NY. Haggarty has also done additional independent curatorial projects with Crush Curatorial, Proto Gallery and One River School of Art and Design. In 2018 Haggarty was the Anderson Endowed Lecturer at Penn State University, and the juror for both Espositivo Residency in Madrid, Spain and Ground Floor Gallery in Nashville, TN.



Shari Mendelson is a sculptor who lives and works in Brooklyn and upstate New York. She has been the recipient of a John Simon Memorial Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (2017), four New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships (1987, 1997, 2011, 2017), and a Pollock Krasner Foundation Grant (1989). She has participated in residencies including Pilchuck (2019), Yaddo (2018, 1990), The MacDowell Colony (2018), the Bau Institute/ Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France (2014), UrbanGlass (2014), Corning Museum of Glass (2015), and The Toledo Museum of Art GAPP residency (2017). She has had solo exhibitions at the Hunterdon Art Museum, UrbanGlass, Pierogi, Black + Herron Space, Todd Merrill Studio, NYC, and John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY. She has participated in numerous two-person shows including a show at The John Molloy Gallery, NYC, and has been included in gallery and museum exhibitions including The Aldrich Museum, and The Brooklyn Museum. Her work is in the permanent collection of The RISD Museum, Providence, RI; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; The Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, Australia. Mendelson's work has been featured in publications including in The New York Times, Hyperallergic, Modern Magazine, Ceramics Now, Glass Quarterly, and NY Arts.

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Flecker Gallery would like to offer special thanks to Dr. Paul Beaudin, Wes Lundberg, Sandra Sprows, Edward Martinez, Charles Wittreich, Barbara Hurst, Maria Cherubino, Carolann Paszcek, Ena Meghan-Lefebber, and the SCC Association.

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Photography for Catherine Haggarty by Larson Harley.

Photography for Shari Mendelson by Alan Wiener.

ISBN:978-0-9979650-7-0



