

ALYSSA TAYLOR WENDT

COMPARTMENTS OF DESIRE



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

NOVEMBER 19, 2015 - JANUARY 14, 2016

AUSTIN, TEXAS

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Two pairs of black beeswax hands reach out to grope and finger you as you walk past them. The assertive gestures of *Saint Grab* are greeters—ushers provocatively placed on the wall—that universally transform each viewer into an object of desire as they enter the space. Warrior portraits surround you, staring you down. One has an impulse to fondle objects on a large rotunda and pull back a dark curtain in the corner booth. When you do give in to the impulse, you then find the artist herself gazing out at you from inside the vanity mirror, a dimension built of soft focus and mystery.

“What is the hardest battle you have fought? Or your biggest triumph? Or, perhaps, the most difficult thing you have overcome?”

Alyssa Taylor Wendt poses these questions to her models before and during their intimate portrait sessions. The resulting images resonate with formality, strength and power. Each one of the photographic subjects from the greater Austin creative community seems to have fought a battle—if not many. Whether they have triumphed or not, their experiences and vulnerability are played out in their stance, their stare, and their chosen attire. Wendt, who considers the dialectic sides of being an object of desire, ponders such subjects in her latest body of work, *Compartments of Desire*. Exploring this symbiosis between humans and objects, she created an arsenal of shamanistic accessories, or what I would call armor, for the models to wear in the images. The portraits highlight each model’s strength, sexuality and spirituality while the accessories, repurposed vintage sports equipment, empower each of them in turn. These *UrGear* sculptures seem to allow them access to deeper archetypes, loosened by the paths they have forged and challenges they have overcome in life.

This is not the first time Wendt has made her work wearable. In *Pharaoh Hoods*, she created latex garments that mimicked her own veined skin and photographed herself in them, referencing the shroud, burka, sphinx, saints, and marble statues as a way to dismiss any single read of the performances with the sculpture. These newest images of her select group of warriors are formally photographed against a black backdrop while protecting and/or coveting the objects inside the space, their gazes holding you in thrall and transporting you into your own journey of triumph and resilience.

The back wall of the gallery serves as a salon style armor room: shoulder pads adorned with Icelandic horsehair; a catcher’s mask turned into a life-size bat with teeth; and a fencing helmet covered in an elaborate 33 piece miniature drum set. Wendt’s process of making shows influences of Viking sagas, ritualistic totems, and couture fashion grown from our culture’s obsession with sports. With each piece named as tools for battle or primeval metamorphosis—*Death Rattle*, *Prismatic Shredder*, *Guttural Bib*—the *UrGear* sculptures are more than props for the portraits. Baudrillard discusses how every object has two functions—to be used and to be possessed. He says, “Let us grant that our everyday objects are in fact objects of

a passion—the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as investment in the ‘human’ passions.” Wendt’s transformed objects reek of passion—the passion that comes with both endurance and obsession—the passion that comes with sex and spirituality—the passion that comes with desire and possession. The gear itself seems almost possessed—by not only the primal materials but by the energy of an artist obsessed with both myth and the taxonomic elements of institutional display and collection. She even has them shown twice in the space, shadowing the objects themselves by their own utility and representations in the photographs.

At the center of the space, a monolithic trophy stand displays a wild assembly of totems, symbols and sculptures. Since before the notorious readymade by Marcel Duchamp, artists have imbued objects with meaning other than their original purpose. On this tiered stand, Wendt exhibits another collection of appointed trophies, continuing her appropriation of modern sports culture. Wendt’s trophies show the opposite side of the slick gold models given out at competitions. Hers ooze with a sense of the uncanny, hence the title of this piece, *The Spectral Arcane*. Wendt used the shared experiences of her



Saint Grab, 2015, (detail), beeswax, dye, aluminum rod, 9" x 7" x 4" each



Vanitas, 2015, (detail), mixed media installation: child's vanity table, blurry print of the artist, porcelain teeth, bandaged weasel forms, chain, whistle, cuckoo clock weight, vintage handkerchief, latex, lambswool, rug, stool with silicone and various notes of the artist's from planning the show, most failures and rejected ideas included, dimensions variable

models to name and label the objects with various bronze plaques lining the edges of the shelves. They read like satirical epithets for our modern suffering, with such phrases as *Transgressed But Still Depressed*, *#1 Survivor*, *Least Vanilla*, and *Sisyphus Forever*. These trophies hold the significance of those victories in this visual language, imbued with shared history and sexually charged. Key materials in Wendt's ongoing practice consistently include horsehair, teeth, latex, knives, salt, metal and wood. Like Joseph Beuys before her, she uses the organic to resurrect the inanimate, creating a living still life of assemblages and form. Here, a nest holds a vagina sculpted in wet clay, a skull is covered in rubber scraps and fronts a gold leaf grill, a giant salt egg moans with

a natural stone ball sac in its maw, the taxidermy snake form is coiled in bandages and a crystal is impaled with a tiny crutch, to illustrate but a few components of this marvel.

In this singular exhibition, Wendt marries the power of raw sensuality with a spiritual sense of ritual and loosely ordered taxonomy. With these explorations, Wendt appears in conversation with artists such as Linda Montano who dissolves the boundaries between art and life with ceremonial works that are often concerned with the personal and spiritual and Nayland Blake, whose work speaks to desire, obsessions and personal identity. On the floor, floating on an invisible platform, lies *Swept Under*, a silicone rug runner with hair trim and a lump underneath. Kneeling low, one can see this object is a rubber band ball, the focus of two years of media angst from around Wendt's *New York Times* subscription, wrapped with eleven secrets about herself. The artist plays with our intimacy levels throughout the show, as she asks us to be vulnerable while making us the voyeurs while she shares her own inner life of mystery and trials.

The confluence of this aspect occurs with *Vanitas*, the installation inside the curtained booth. Once again, we peak behind the translucent fabric. During the opening of the exhibition, a teenage guard stood outside, allowing one to get only a quick glimpse of what lay behind—a woman sitting at a child's vanity who shrieked when the curtain opened and her activities were disturbed. Acting as the artist, the topless performer leads us into the metaphor that Wendt poses between boundaries of privacy and the notion of exhibition as exposure. Viewing the installation afterwards, we see pieces of trophies lying scattered on the vanity and the walls papered with the artist's personal lists of tasks, rejected titles and ideas. A soft focus photograph of Wendt gazes back at the viewer and one is allowed a glimpse into the genuine artistic process. This is

not your disappointing Oz, Dorothy. Wendt is not hiding her secrets here, but instead making available the inner workings of her brain, presenting her process as an object in the exhibition.

Compartments of Desire reads like a theatrical pageant hall, lined with everyday warriors of life and framed in a world of sexuality, fetish, power and healing. The walls, with their Band-Aid meets fleshy hue, hold you in the grip of your own sense of skin and levels of personal comfort. This exhibition focuses on the power of arcane objects and the subsequent associations we bring to them. Wendt has formed and assembled these objects—they are *her* prizes. The armor, the trophies, and even the photographs are her artistic arsenal. She explores the animism of the readymade in tandem with her object making, commenting on the relationship between sporting frenzy, sex and gender, and primitive rituals. This rich collection of objects and images that emanates from quasi-erotic cultural signifiers continues to form her seemingly endless artistic cosmology and expansive conceptual world. They incorporate not only aspects of her personal cultural heritage, but those of her surrounding community of peers. This exhibition exposes this private metaphysical world of beauty, darkness, form and the liminal balance in between them all.

—Rachel Adams is the Associate Curator at the University at Buffalo Art Galleries.



Swept Under, 2015, (detail), silicone, Icelandic horsehair, acrylic veins, rubber band ball with 18 months of *New York Times* bands with 11 secrets about the artist on paper, wrapped inside the ball, 108" x 29" x 2"

ALYSSA TAYLOR WENDT

EDUCATION

- 2006–2008 International Center of Photography/Bard College
Master of Fine Arts, Advanced Photographic Arts
and Multimedia, Awarded Director Fellowship
- 1987–1991 New York University
Bachelor of Arts, Gallatin Division, with Magna Cum
Laude honors, Concentration in Photography, Sexuality,
Literature and Women's Studies

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 *Compartments of Desire*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX
- 2012 *Hirsute Drosscapes and Cenotaphs (Finem Respice)*,
Co-Lab Projects, Austin, TX
- 2011 *TRIFECTA*, Vox Populi Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2010 *((Transfer Station))*, Co-Lab Projects, Austin, TX
- 2009 *Meiosis*, Babel Visningsrom for Kunst Gallery,
Trondheim, Norway
- 2008 *the medium is the medium*, International Center of
Photography, New York, NY

SELECT PERFORMANCES

- 2013 *Work Song*, ESP TV live taping performance,
Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY
- 60-In-Sixty benefit performance, North Door,
Fusebox Festival, Austin, TX
- Whatever Lola*, performance for Katelena Hernandez,
Co-Lab Projects, Austin, TX
- 2012 *magnus returned*, live performance piece, Lowlives webcast,
Fusebox Festival, Austin, TX
- 2011 *US Vs. US*, Scope Art Fair, collaboration with
Lilah Freedland, New York, NY
- 2010 *Mortis Mai and Hermetica*, performances, NuMu Arts
Collective Space, Brooklyn NY
- I Am Walt Whitman*, benefit for Issue Project Room,
Brooklyn Bridge Park, Brooklyn, NY
- MeatJoy Reimagined*, NADA Art Fair Benefit,
collaboration with Brina Thurston, New York, NY
- Ecstatic*, Collaboration with Doom Trumpet and the
Magic Feelings, St. Cecilia's, Brooklyn, NY
- 2009 *The Alembic Duet*, Boffo Art Space, Brooklyn, NY
- The Man with the Weird Beard*, at Nayland Blake show
"Behavior," Location One, New York, NY
- 2008 *Envoy Enterprises*, performance series, curated by
Jimi Dams, New York, NY
- K.R.A.P.* collaborative performance with Brina Thurston,
Field of Dreams, Bruce High Quality Foundation,
Brooklyn, NY

SELECT GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2015 *POP AUSTIN*, international art fair, Austin, TX

- REVEL*, *ArtBash* gala, Austin Art Alliance, Austin, TX
- Red Dot Art Spree*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX
- XANADU*, Northern-Southern gallery, Austin, TX
- More Than One Way*, video screening, Southern Exposure,
San Francisco, CA
- AHØM*, The Museum of Human Achievement, Austin, TX
- I, Daughter of Kong*, artist and curator, Co-Lab Projects,
Austin, TX
- Advanced Young Artists Mentorship Show*, Pump Projects,
Austin, TX
- 2013 *I, Daughter of Kong: Skull Island*, Galerija Miroslav Kraljevic,
Zagreb, Croatia
- People's Gallery*, Austin City Hall, Austin, TX
- 2012 *The End*, Cantanker Final Catalog, Big Medium,
Austin, TX
- Art Nomads* commissioned sculpture installation,
Trondheim, Norway
- 2011 *Nuit Blanche Bring to Light*, festival commissioned
outdoor sculpture, New York, NY
- INDEX*, media festival, New York, NY
- Let Us Make Cake (FLASH:LIGHT)*, Interstate Projects,
Bushwick, NY
- Composite Factor*, Interstate Projects, Bushwick, NY
- 2009 *Cosmic Debris*, Podium Gallery, Oslo, Norway
- 2008 *Envoy Enterprises*, booth, PULSE! Art Fair, Miami, FL
- Issue Project Room Benefit Auction*, Phillips de Pury,
New York, NY
- New American Talent 23*, Arthouse, Austin, TX
- Flat Files Collection*, Pierogi Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

GRANTS AND RESIDENCIES

- 2014-15 ArtPACE finalist, San Antonio, TX
- City of Austin Cultural Council Grant Award Winner,
Austin, TX
- 2012 SVA Summer Sculpture Residency, New York, NY
- 2009 NES Residency, Skagastrond, Iceland
- 2009 Lademoen Kunstnerverkstede Residency, Trondheim, Norway

PANELS, LECTURES AND EVENTS

- 2015 Sneak Preview screenings of HAINT and artist talks:
Austin Film Society, Co-Lab Projects and an EAST
special event, Austin TX
- 2014 PNCA Visiting Artist Lecture, Workshop, MFA Studio
Critiques, Portland, OR
- 2013 People's Gallery Artist Lecture, City Hall, Austin, TX
- 2012 Visiting Artist Lecture, UT Austin, Transmedia Dept.
Austin, TX
- 2009 Guest Artist Panel Discussion, Vox Populi Gallery,
Philadelphia, PA



Compartments of Desire, The Spectral Arcane, 2015, (gallery view), trophy stand on casters, silicone, salt licks, bronze trophy plaques, taxidermy snake mount, clay, bronze, plexi-glass, ram's head bronze stand, colored blown glass, cypress knee, chain, 1930's rhinestones, generic Band-Aids, Icelandic horsehair, wooden oat, porcelain teeth, gold leaf, latex, paper mache, lambs wool, plastic skull base, felt, golden thread, stick balls, rose quartz, Styrofoam, tiny crutch, pewter, shell, Vergangenheitsbewältigung silk pageant banner, tourism idols, straw nest, acrylic, chain, Ace bandages, vintage kidney, wax fingertips, butcher glove, plastic baby lamb, turtle shell, mirrored plexi, minute tarot cards and booze bottle, oak, 60" x 60" x 60"

Cover: *UrGear Portrait 11: GC/EV model Feral Formulator (Verso), Contested Padder, Appointment, Shrug Tank and Wunderbander*, 2015, (detail), digital chromogenic print, 45" x 30"



UrGear, 2014-2015, (gallery view), used sports equipment, gold leaf, Icelandic horsehair, brass, latex, ball bearing chain, porcelain teeth, paper mache, coral, yarn, plaster, horn, bone, ash, mirror, lambs wool, rabbit fur, driftwood, Victoriana, silver thread, aluminum, quartz, felt, rejected taxidermy mounts, Ace bandages, wall: 20' x 8' x 2'; individual pieces variable

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 37th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,886 artists in 299 visual art exhibitions, 124 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 27 literary readings and 556 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, the New York Times, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 650 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
their work

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