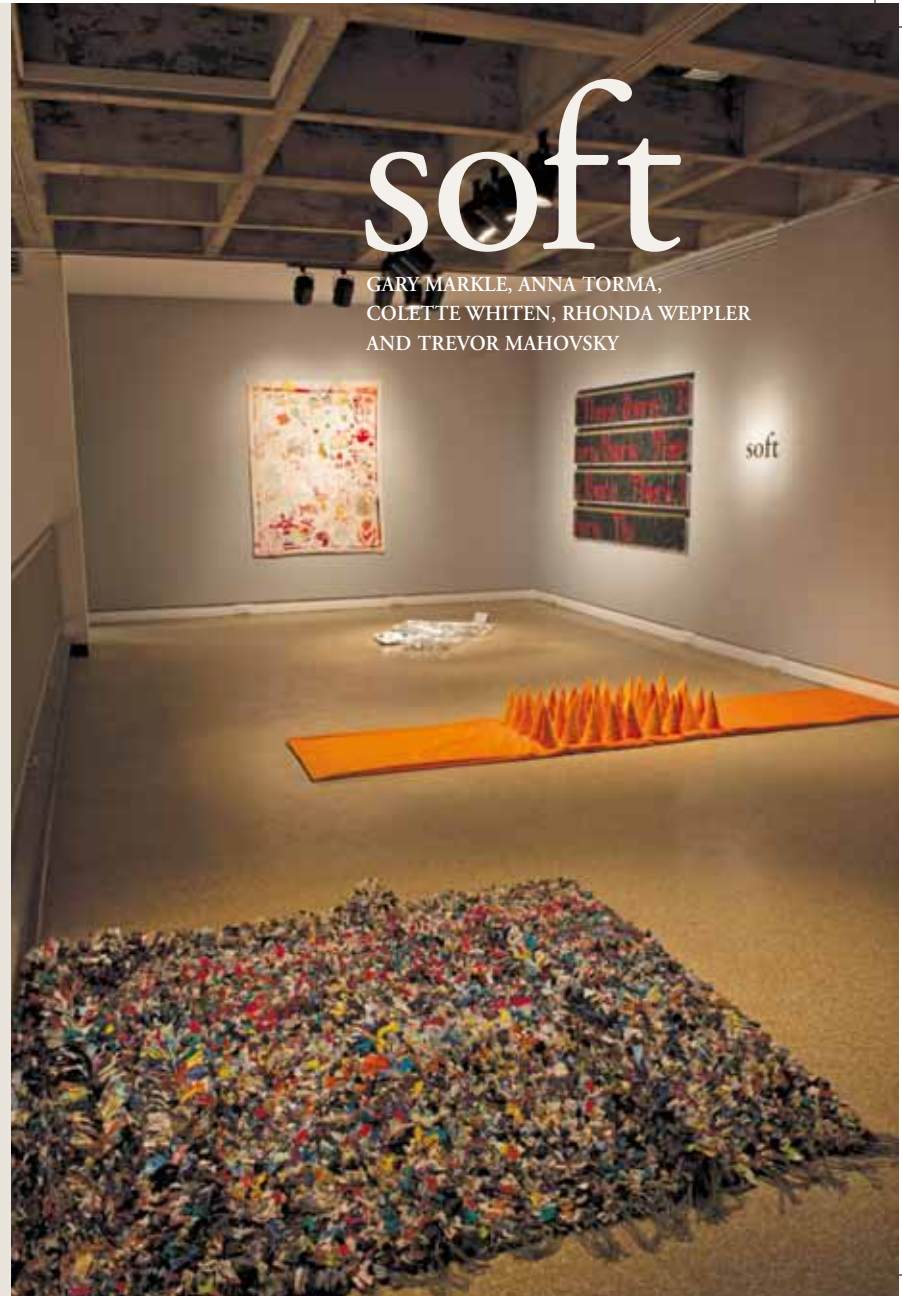


# soft

GARY MARKLE, ANNA TORMA,  
COLETTE WHITEN, RHONDA WEPPLER  
AND TREVOR MAHOVSKY

soft

msvu art gallery



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Texts by Katie Belcher  
and Ingrid Jenkner,  
Curators

MSVU Art Gallery  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Canada

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Soft*, held at MSVU Art Gallery, 12 May through 12 August 2012.

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Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3M 2J6

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Cover Illustration: *Soft* installation view, 2012 (photo: Steve Farmer)

Design: Docaitta/12

Printing: Bro-moc Print & Litho Ltd.

Distribution: ABC Art Books Canada

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Belcher, Katie

Soft : Gary Markle, Anna Torma, Colette Whiten, Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky / Ingrid Jenkner and Katie Belcher.

Essay by Katie Belcher.

Includes bibliographical references.

Catalogue of an exhibition held at MSVU Art Gallery, Halifax, N.S. from  
May 12 - Aug. 12, 2012.

ISBN 978-1-894518-64-2

1. Textile crafts--Canada--Exhibitions. 2. Mount Saint Vincent University. Art Gallery. I. Markle, Gary, 1963- II. Torma, Anna III. Whiten, Colette, 1945- IV. Weppler, Rhonda V. Mahovsky, Trevor VI. Jenkner, Ingrid, 1955- VII. Mount Saint Vincent University. Art Gallery. VIII. Title.

NK8813.A1B44 2012

746'.0971074716225

C2012-902279-9

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Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada

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## INTRODUCTION

*Soft* is the sixth in a series of exhibitions designed to prompt conversations between works from the MSVU Collection. The common ground for the current conversation is the tactile quality of softness. Of course, like any good conversation, this one ranges further than might be expected. There are conventionally “soft” art works in the exhibition, but also some surprises. The exhibition includes fabric collage with fine embroidery by Anna Torma, beadwork by Colette Whiten, “performable” textiles by Gary Markle and a continuously collapsing sculpture by Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky. Each in its own way, the works resist structural fixity—some through their soft material and others in their surrender to gravity.

The colours are vibrant, and the textures rich and varied. The works highlight each other aesthetically and conceptually. Soft pinks from Anna Torma’s *Red Flowers III* and bright oranges from Gary Markle’s *Conical Fields* are reflected in *Shopping Cart 11*. Echoing and augmenting the prevailing hues, Markle’s *Shag-Rag Rug* holds its own despite its unformed, domestic and worn appearance. Dangling above Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky’s tragically crumpled aluminum form are Colette Whiten’s trite words of comfort: *There there*.

The installation process physically demonstrated to us the multiple meanings of the word “soft.” We vigorously pushed the pliable but heavy rug against the railing to buckle it, and we also tenderly slid the fragile, feather-light foil cast off a board and onto the floor.

In the 1960s artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Eva Hesse and Yayoi Kusama introduced soft sculpture as an ephemeral alternative to metal, wood and stone. Oldenburg offered commentaries on mass culture and fast food through his exaggerated vinyl and collapsible canvas sculptures of everyday

objects and food. In her catalogue essay for the survey exhibition, *Soft sculpture* (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra), curator Lucina Ward writes that Oldenburg’s work “marries the Surrealists’ absurdist disregard for scale and functionality with a Pop art fixation on the crassness of consumerism.”<sup>i</sup> Drawing also from the example of 1930s Surrealists such as Meret Oppenheim, artists working in soft sculpture added to the humorous, sometimes macabre, and always surprising repertoire of nontraditional materials. They used cloth, rope, fur and leather, latex and vinyl, paper and plastic. The result was a new conception of sculpture that embraced impermanence, malleability and even “anti-form.” In their materials, mimicry, playfulness and acceptance of *deformation*, all of the artists represented in *Soft* acknowledge this history.

“In the plastic arts, a distinction is made between painting’s appeal to the eye and sculpture’s references to the body, and, by extension, to our senses. Materials evoke certain sensations.”<sup>ii</sup>

In the article “Exploration into formal aesthetics in design: (material) texture,” Dr. Hengfeng Zuo and Mark Jones attempt to define and classify the experience of texture and determine how its meanings are perceived. The text defines the “Emotional dimension” of texture as “the affective, hedonic, valuable feelings that are evoked by touching the material surface” and uses descriptive words such as “elegant” and “ugly”, but also less visually aesthetic descriptors such as “comfortable” and “uncomfortable”, “cheerful” and “dull.”<sup>iii</sup> Another category discussed in this design text is the “Associative dimension,” which describes the connections drawn by perceivers to their own life experiences. These two dimensions of textural sensing illuminate our interpretations of particular sensory experiences and environments.

Lucina Ward observes that felt, like many other soft materials, “retains the ‘memory’ of forms, be they the head in a hat or, in Man Ray’s *The enigma of Isidore Ducasse* 1920, something more mysterious.”<sup>iv</sup> In this photograph, the felt army blanket holds the shape of the sewing machine it covers, and is then made permanent by the camera—the mirror with a memory. Retaining form and detail, aluminum foil is packaging with a memory. In *Shopping Cart 11*, Weppeler and Mahovsky have preserved every detail of the original object, and also the creasing, wrinkling, and finger marks left by the process of taking an impression.

As well as retaining the shapes of forms they enclose, soft materials absorb particles of dirt and dust, liquids and smells. Gary Markle’s *Shag-Rag Rug* incorporates synthetic carpet yarn from a defunct Ontario mill and unwashed clothing donated by friends. Although the rug has since been cleaned, its initial presentation in Markle’s MFA exhibition would have introduced the “source” smells of those fabrics. The project retains the history of its materials.

The advent of soft sculpture in American art coincided with emerging Feminist art practices of the same period. “It took the Feminist art movement and re-evaluation of categories of fine art in the late 1960s and early 1970s for textile traditions, such as knitting and weaving, to be considered appropriate vehicles for sculpture.”<sup>v</sup> Needlework techniques were used to create non-rigid structures. Oldenburg’s *Soft Bathrub* (1966), made of canvas, sewn and suspended, resembles a body from which the bones have been removed. Poignantly, the sewing work on this piece and others was done by Oldenburg’s wife, Coosje van Bruggen.<sup>vi</sup> Given the Art Gallery’s special mandate to collect textile-based art, due to the medium’s traditional

association with women, it is not unexpected that such works share a connection with the domestic sphere. The connection extends beyond the domestic arts to visual art and craft, feminist and gendered practices.

Yet the most identifiably “domestic” piece in the exhibition, *Shag-Rag Rug*, was not produced by a woman. Despite its obvious performative and sculptural possibilities, Gary Markle’s rug does not deny its basic, household utility. Crafted in the same way as rag rugs, which are traditionally common in rural Atlantic Canada, the piece is most definitively a rug. It is intended to be interacted with and visitors are welcome to handle, lounge and walk on it. The *Rug*’s tactility is enhanced when it is worn over the shoulders and “performed.”

The connection to household space is augmented in this exhibition by the inclusion of another material associated with domesticity—aluminum foil. *Shopping Cart 11*, by the collaborative artists Rhonda Weppeler and Trevor Mahovsky, carries associations with the *homemaker*—and also with the *homeless*. Other soft sculptures by these artists represent the status objects of consumerism, and include cast aluminum cars and a collapsible cardboard boat. Regardless of size or subject, the artists’ foil sculptures remain eerily vulnerable, gradually softening to the point of complete collapse. For this reason, each exhibition of *Shopping Cart 11* may be its last.

In her finely worked quilts, Anna Torma preserves souvenirs of her family life. Her fantastical compositions fuse “a child’s naïf aesthetic with the knowledge of tradition, history, art and craft. There are references to illuminated manuscripts, medieval cosmologies, bestiaries (pictures and tales of phantasmatic animals), symbols from indigenous cultures and, most

obviously, children's drawings of monsters and soldiers of the night—those creatures untethered by the limitations of the real.”<sup>vii</sup> Although myth and fantasy play a significant role in her work as a whole, *Red Flowers III* also prominently features a newspaper photograph with a fragment of Magyar headline describing the advent of a pro-fascist regime in 1930s Hungary. Her inclusion of the expressions of others, namely the drawings and text of her husband and young sons, enriches her sophisticated compositions, acknowledging the interdependence of her creative life with domestic routines. About Torma's work in general, Kym Pruesse comments, “They are whimsical, intricate studies imbued with a disarming freshness and invitation to pleasure.”<sup>viii</sup>

Similarly childlike is Gary Markle's brilliant orange *Conical Fields*. Its velvet spikes or mountains evoke a child-sized landscape that is both witty and menacing. As in Yayoi Kusama's “penis upholstery”, Markle exploits the inevitable variety that distinguishes repeated soft forms. Even shapes that are cut and sewn according to identical patterns will behave slightly differently when made of a soft material and stuffed. The tips of Markle's cones lean in various directions and the soft velvet surface reflects light in unpredictable ways. The cones push and pull each other in their grid differently each time the piece is worn, draped across an object, or pulled taut across the floor.

From a distance, Colette Whiten's, *There there* appears more machine-made than hand-crafted. When facing the piece, however, one can't help but imagine brushing a hand across the dangling strands of beads. Just the impulse to perform that action places the bead “curtain” in a household context, an impression corroborated by the presence of hobby-craft fastening hardware. Although the beads that make up the wall hanging are made of

hard, smooth glass, the unfixed strands resist structural containment or even precise alignment of the letter forms. The red words formed by the beads remain unfocused, as in a pixelated LED sign, a pointillist painting or a Ben-Day dotted print.

*There there* achieves softness in two ways; by means of its flexible beaded fringe, and also by psychological implication. Commissioned for the touring exhibition *Survivors In Search of a Voice: The Art of Courage* (1995-1996), it addresses the helplessness of breast cancer patients whose fears are trivialized by medical staff. The phrase addresses women as if they were children to be comforted, as if their anxieties were disproportionate to the threats posed by the disease and its debilitating treatments. The phrase speaks more generally to the infantilization of women; perhaps also to the persistence of the Victorian concept of female “hysteria.” The words themselves express an attempt to soften a situation: *There there*, settle down: it isn't so hard after all.

Katie Belcher, Curator

## Notes

- i Ward, Lucina
- ii Ward
- iii Zuo, Dr. Hengfeng and Mark Jones
- iv Ward
- v Ward
- vi Lucy Lippard casually drops this gem into her interview with Joe Lewis “I like ideas: Lucy Lippard in conversation” in *Fibre Quarterly*. Coosji van Buggen collaborated with Oldenburg on numerous large-scale soft sculptures.
- vii Pruesse, Kym, pp. 25
- viii Pruesse, pp. 25

## GARY MARKLE

(b. 1963, Bella Bella, BC; lives in Dartmouth, NS)

### *Shag-Rag Rug* 1995

synthetic carpet, yarn and cloth strips in various fibres

140 x 229 cm

Gift of the artist, 2007

Mount Saint Vincent University Collection

### *Conical Fields* 1998-2000

sewn velvet with foam chip filling

71 x 23 x 356 cm

Gift of the artist, 2007

Mount Saint Vincent University Collection

*Shag-Rag Rug* 1995 (photo courtesy of the artist)





*Conical Fields* (detail) 1998-2000 (photo courtesy of the artist)

*Shag-Rag Rug* was completed as a part of Markle's MFA thesis work, incorporating synthetic carpet yarn from a defunct Ontario mill and clothing donated by fellow students. To produce the work, he built a loom from salvaged hockey sticks and other discarded materials. In emulation of Navajo weaving, the warp traverses the shorter dimension of the piece. The history of the materials used, including the smells of sometimes unwashed donations, helped to embed Markle's social connections in the finished piece. The Rug's tactility is enhanced when it is worn over the shoulders and "performed."

*Conical Fields* was partly inspired by the work of Naoko Furue, which Markle included in his curatorial project *Meta Textiles* (MSVU Art Gallery, 1996). The artists in this exhibition engaged the notion of "second skin" from disparate perspectives, though a spare, minimal sensibility. Markle was also inspired by *Contingent* (MSVU Art Gallery, 1995), which placed the work of two contemporary Canadians, Elspeth Pratt and Martha Townsend, in the context of post-minimal sculpture by Eva Hesse.

*Conical Fields'* vibrant colour, repeated cones and irresistible tactility offer an *hommage* to the 1960s works of Yayoi Kusama, especially her stuffed-penis upholstered furniture. Though more gridded in its placement, the childlike mountain range the cones evoke is similarly humorous and at the same time menacing.

Gary Markle holds a BFA in Fashion Design from the Parsons School of Design, New York (1988) and an MFA in Textiles from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1995). In 1996 he worked as Curatorial Assistant at MSVU Art Gallery. He now works as an Assistant Professor in the Textiles/Fashion Department at NSCAD where he has held various teaching contracts since 1997.

ANNA TORMA

(b. 1952 Tarnaros, Hungary; lives in Baie Verte, NB)

*Red Flowers III* 2006

hand embroidery, inkjet print on fabric

165 x 130 cm

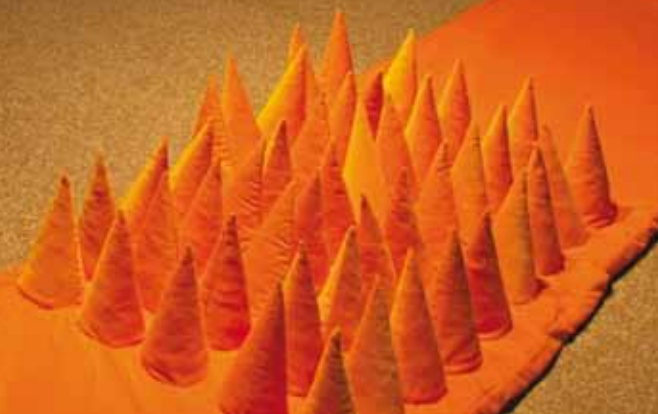
Purchased with financial support from the  
Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program, 2007  
Mount Saint Vincent University Collection



*Red Flowers III* (detail) 2006  
(photo: Steve Farmer)



soft





Anna Torma learned techniques of hand sewing and embroidery from her mother and grandmother as a child. She graduated with a degree in Textile Art and Design from the Hungarian University of Applied Arts in 1979, when censorship enforced by Communist government restricted aspects of artistic expression. Textiles were not then recognized as an artistic discipline, a circumstance which afforded practitioners a greater measure of freedom in political and creative expression.

Torma says, "I feel I am a storyteller, using my private diary pages with drawings, text and paintings from both my early experiences in Hungary and my recent life in Canada." Her works depict intimate details of her everyday life, emphasizing, in her own words, "the importance of small things—things and beings that are far from perfection."

*Red Flowers III* 2006 (photo: Steve Farmer)

Torma's collage-like needlework functions as a form of drawing. She is inspired by Visionary and Outsider art for their expressive directness and ability to communicate to a broad range of viewers. In works such as *Red Flowers III*, she alternates between figuration and abstraction, between the decorative and the literal.

In her catalogue essay for *Needleworks*, Anne Koval calls Torma's pieces playful with "staccato-like variance" saying, "...we enter a blooming garden, abundant with folk art, her husband's sculptural female forms and her children's art...The work is at once domestic and profound in its collective experience."

Anna Torma's work was shown in the 2007 MSVU exhibition *Needleworks*, and she was a 2005 finalist in the Saidye Bronfman Award for Excellence in the Fine Crafts. Torma has exhibited nationally and internationally.



*Red Flowers III* (detail) 2006 (photo: Steve Farmer)

COLETTE WHITEN

(b. 1945 Birmingham, England; lives in Toronto, ON)

*There there* 1994

glass bead fringe suspended from aluminum angle wall mounts

132 x 190 x 31 cm

Gift of the Amesbury/Chalmers Collection, 2005

Mount Saint Vincent University Collection



*There there* (detail) 1994 (photo: MSVU Art Gallery)

In the early 1970s Colette Whiten was known for a series of structures roughly built of brick, wood and metal. Though resembling a torture device, each apparatus was in fact designed to aid in the casting process by holding the model's body in place. The plaster casts and the apparatus were exhibited with photographic and video documentation of the casting process.

The documentation testifies to the models' discomfort. Swaddled in plaster-soaked cloths, suspended uncomfortably in the air and made to breathe through straws, the models had to trust that technology would not fail them.

More than twenty years later, the theme of the vulnerability of the human body and its reliance on technology echoes in *There there* (1994). *There there* was commissioned for the touring exhibition *Survivors In Search of a Voice: The Art of Courage* (1995-1996). Whiten wanted to address the helplessness of breast cancer patients whose fears were dismissed by their doctors: "There, there, there. It's going to be all right." Not unlike the models who collaborated in Whiten's sculpture casts, breast cancer patients can feel immobilized and forced to rely for survival on imperfectly understood technologies.

*There there* 1994 (photo: MSVU Art Gallery)



Underlying *There there* is the suggestion, implied by laborious handwork, that the impersonal reassurances of the machine cannot be trusted. As the artist explains, “by using tiny coloured beads accumulated to look like LED (light-emitting diode) display, I sought to introduce the notion that the technology available wasn’t adequate to deal with this disease. We expect the medical profession to know, but they don’t.”

Whiten began to bead as a way of scaling up from her needlepoint embroideries based on mass media photographs. She lives in Toronto, where she has taught at the Ontario College of Art since 1974.

From “Moral Fibre”, by I. Jenkner



*There there* (detail) 1994 (photo: MSVU Art Gallery)

## RHONDA WEPPLE

(b. Winnipeg; lives in Vancouver)

## TREVOR MAHOVSKY

(b. Calgary; lives in Nelson, BC)

### **Shopping Cart 11 2007**

aluminum foil

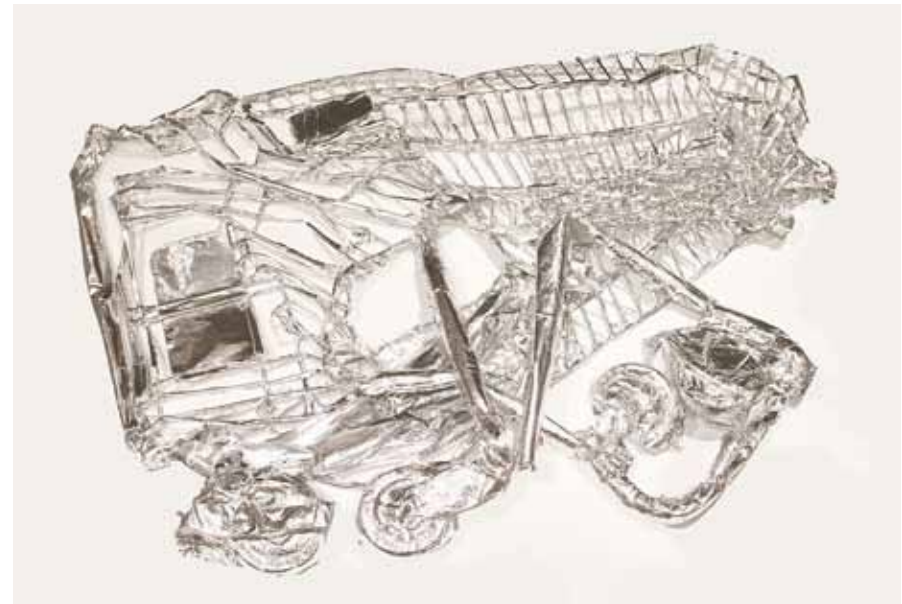
84 x 108 x 8 cm

Gift of the artists, 2007

Mount Saint Vincent University Collection

*Shopping Cart 11* was made on site at MSVU Art Gallery. The artists wrapped sheets of aluminum foil around the cart, embossed all of its details onto the foil and cut away the holes, then removed the foil from the cart and glued it together. The shape of the cast is determined in part by the object it represents, and in part by gravity and currents of air raised by spectators. Time, gravity and chance conspire in the structure's slow collapse. Because of foil's structural frailty, the crumpled posture of the shopping cart cast suggests roadkill from the outset. It may also remind viewers of hijacked, abandoned shopping carts that can be seen all over the city.

The artists observe that the now five-year-old shopping cart "is vulnerable and needs to be treated tenderly. At the same time it is...blank, and it is a joke about being useless."



*Shopping Cart 11* 1994 (photo: Steve Farmer, courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia)

## FURTHER READING

The basic principle of casting—as practiced by Wepler and Mahovsky—is similar to that of photography, in that the object represented leaves its direct impression, whether through light exposure or physical pressure, on the material at hand. The causal relationship between an object and its representation is called “indexical.” Indexicality is what constitutes the evidentiary value of an ID photo, a fingerprint or a footprint. Indeed, the thinness and sensitivity of foil are also similar to the physical qualities of photographic film. In both its photographic documentation and the sculpture itself, an emphasis on materiality and process confronts the iconic appeal of familiar shapes. The effect is uncanny.

Wepler and Mahovsky both have MFA degrees from the University of British Columbia. As former employees on the assembly line of a tile factory, they have adapted factory methods to their collaborative production process since 1994. Their disposable oeuvre includes SUVs, luxury and mid-range sedans, subcompacts, a half-ton truck and a Hummer H2.

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