

# sculpture

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CONGRATULATIONS **DEBORAH BUTTERFIELD**  
ON A LIFETIME OF ACHIEVEMENT



ERIG KICERA GALLERY ANGLIM/THIMBLE  
ZOLA STEINERMAN



Olivia Bernard, installation view with (foreground) *Untitled (Large Ovoid)*, 1996, wire, burlap, Hydrocal, and Cellu Tissue, 27 x 46 x 28 in. Photo: Macaylla Silver

## Olivia Bernard

November 10, 2022 by Elizabeth Michelman

### Greenfield, Massachusetts

Geissler Gallery at Stoneleigh-Burnham School

The work of Olivia Bernard, a longtime contributor to the New England and New York art scenes, commands the power to surprise and fascinate. The abstract, human-scale sculptures featured in “Visual Cycles • empty/full • absence/presence,” a two-person show with Karen Dolmanisth (on view through November 18, 2022), exude a compelling aura in the gloom of the shed-like Geissler Gallery. Each piece projects anxiety in the visible effort to maintain equilibrium in relation to gravity—rolling on the floor, balancing on a table, propped against the wall, or suspended from the rafters. A second body of work explores the spatial ambiguities of two-dimensional form with a decided sculptural twist.

Bernard has always been attracted to materials that transform from a fluid to a frozen state—first Hydrocal and Rhoplex; more recently, paper-pulp slurry and molten wax. She pours, casts, or layers these materials over an armature, combining hard and soft materials



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into an expressive and mysterious result. In her recent two-dimensional work, plate glass (an arrested liquid) becomes a substrate for dimensional materials interacting with the picture plane.

Working by hand with alchemical processes and simple tools, Bernard submits her materials to the bidding of her unconscious and the force of gravity. Immersed in constructing form, she lets instinctual energies take over and guide her in the moment. Something of this altered state is conveyed through the work.

“Visual Cycles” includes seven large, mixed-media and Hydrocal sculptures and six smaller hybrid works that highlight the optical and physical properties of glass sheets. Both bodies of work reveal Bernard’s growing preoccupation over the past two decades with the polarities of darkness/ lightness, gravity/air, and gravitas/transcendence. The most recent works are radiant with clarity, pain, and triumph.

Bernard repeats gestures of wrapping and twisting paper in earlier and more recent works to produce striking spiral-based forms. *Untitled (Large Ovoid)* (1996) is a paper-bound egg that might imprison a curled-up human. The ribs of *Spin* (2020–22), a wheeling vortex of soldered steel, are wound in paper strips dripping with stiffened Hydrocal. The spiral also appears in *Untethered* (2004), an atmospheric, nine-and-a-half-foot drawing studded with whirlwind shapes. It provided a take-off point for several room-size installations—swirling accumulations of airborne curvaceous forms. *Billow* (2005) more compactly mirrors similar forces in its suspended wave of curled plaster fragments.

From the transitional *Untitled (Pillow 3)* (1994–2015), a puffy plaster square framing a glass pane, Bernard’s interest in glass took her to the shadowy intersections of flat and dimensional form. Pursuing investigations with handmade paper, paper pulp, glass, and poured wax, she found new possibilities of luminosity and translucence. *Seeing Through*, from the 2014 “Glass” series, is small glass panel leaning against the wall on a close-fitting steel shelf. A spill of wax covers and cements a string and a sheet of hand-pressed abaca to the panel, leaving exposed many details from the front and back of the picture plane and beyond.

In the current series, “Abhasas,” Bernard lays doubled, unframed glass panes atop delicately crafted steel stands, barely overlapping the edges of the empty upper rectangle. Sandwiched between each pair of panes lies a collage of handmade paper, abaca, thread, and strips of Dura-Lar, held together by gravity. One of these pieces displays a cloudy, fragmented news photo of a bombed-out apartment building in Ukraine.

The pandemic years accelerated a process of inward turning and reflection on aging and loss. They also sent Bernard back to her first love, plaster. From this familiar source, ominous and unstable forms have emerged, including the wraith-like *Spin* and the all-black *Gnarl*, an abstracted limb that reaches out from the wall, as if tempting the viewer to grasp its spray of dark, desiccated pods. Pain may never be far from the surface.

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#### EDITOR'S CHOICE



Athena LaTocha, *The Remains of Winter*



Mary Ann Unger: *To Shape a Moon from Bone*

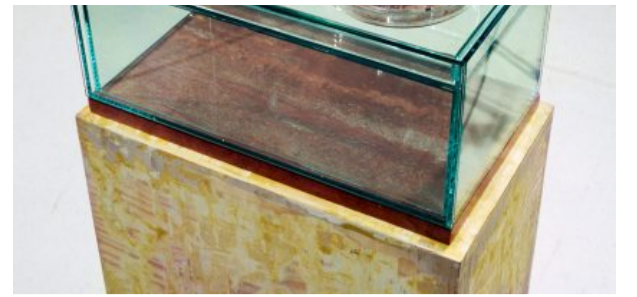


Nicole Eisenman: *Untitled (Show)*



Nari Ward: *I'll Take You There; A Proclamation*





Liz Lerner: Don't put it back like it was

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