

# SURFACE DESIGN



**THE POTENTIAL OF PAPER**

CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF FIBER AND FABRIC

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# PULP POTENTIAL IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

by April Claggett

**R**ebecca Hutchinson considers herself an environmental artist with a sustainability commitment. She shares with most environmental artists an ecological consciousness that mindfully engages with natural systems and natural materials, which are then introduced to creative transformations. While many artists with similar concerns cross over into activism or institutional critique (for example conceptual artist **Agnes Denes**), Hutchinson embraces the hybrid nature of her art. Like a barn swallow's nest—built in the midst of human activity with local mud, hay and feathers—Hutchinson's work embodies resourcefulness, integration, heterogeneity and growth.

Along with the newly-defined epoch of the Anthropocene—in which we are forced to acknowledge that human activity has profoundly altered the environment—scholars have premised an emergent aesthetic. Hutchinson fits into this category, for embedded in her pieces are traces of industrial fiber cast-offs and artifacts of domesticity including old linen tablecloths, maps and even shredded dollar bills. Rather than celebrating

nature in a purist fantasy or despairing over the damaged times in which we live, Hutchinson's constructed "growth systems" are each an experiment in proliferation and equilibrium.

For inspirational source material, Hutchinson draws upon both natural history and craft history, eclectically. In her collection of imagery are nature's nest weavers, orb spiders and paper wasps, and also the botanical designs found in vintage domestic crafts and Persian carpets. She includes rock outcroppings and cosmic phenomena alongside personal interactions with her natural surroundings. These are not literal translations. Rather Hutchinson transforms this information as she works, focusing on growth dynamics.

Her sculptural work takes on two principal forms: site-specific installations and floor and wall sculptures. She exhibited seven wall pieces at the **Duane Reed Gallery** in conjunction with **Innovations in Textiles STL 2019** and **Surface Design Association's** Biennial Conference. Titled *Navigating Borders*,

this body of work shows clearly her interest in determinate growth. An infrastructural willow grid acts as a substrate for the accretion of botanical forms. Each one has a different sense of equilibrium based on the dynamics and properties of grid and growth.

Sustainability, the buzzword of the Anthropocene, is a concept challenged to provide solutions to similar sets of factors: space, resources, demand, renewal. In a similar sense, her wall sculptures are each asking the sustainability question. *Hybrid Swirl* clearly feels like it has overreached its carrying capacity. *3 Slat Burst* has some precarious asymmetries alongside the possibility for growth. *Distending Pink*, a gorgeously healthy fungal-like array expresses limitations in terms of color diversity. Generally, we are drawn in by an unchallenging feeling of lightness and delicacy with easy flower imagery and beautiful color harmonies. Yet we soon realize we are dealing with unstable experiments where delicacy can be a strength and overabundance can be a weakness.

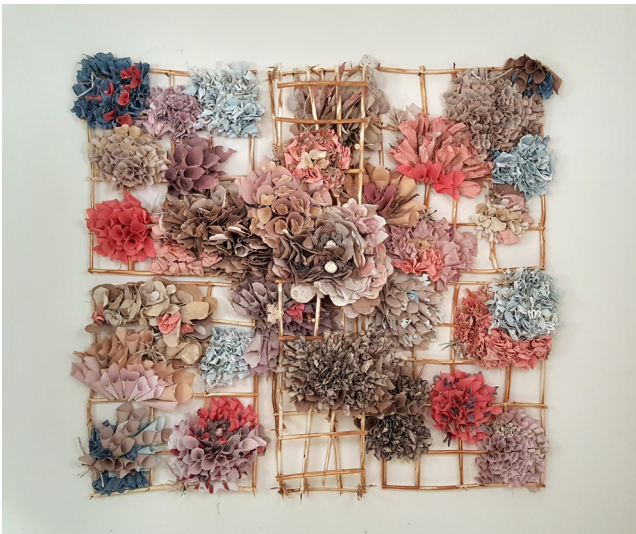
But this is not the only level in which Hutchinson engages with sustainability. When she declares a commitment to sustainability, Hutchinson is speaking of the materials, process and end product. Her primary materials—paper, clay and wood—are foraged from her natural surroundings, “within arm’s reach,” she likes to say. The blond willow branches that comprise the grid-like infrastructure are harvested from the riverside thickets near her Montana studio. Willow wood is light, straight

Left page: **Rebecca Hutchinson**, Left: *Affinity* 2008, 192" x 144" x 276". Holter Museum and Right: *Night Bloom* 2012, 114' x 216' x 180'. Racine Art Museum. Fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, fired and unfired slip trailing, slip-dipped fiber.

Bottom: **Rebecca Hutchinson** *Bold Red Four Square* 2015, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, slip trailing both fired and unfired, slip-dipped fiber, paperclay paper mache, 70" x 70" x 12". Photo by the artist.



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and pliable, material attributes utilized for centuries in basket making. These branches are joined with hand-crafted wooden pegs, also of willow, to form the “baskets” that will eventually hold the vegetation created by Hutchinson.

The transformational quality of Hutchinson’s sculptures and installations lay in the potential of humble paper pulp. Like the building blocks of nature—or cellulose itself—paper pulp in her art takes on many forms: pulled sheets, a spray and as an additive to clay. She acquires the fibers by harvesting from her garden or through “upcycling.” Like birds and animals, she forages plant materials, such as iris leaves and flax, from her surroundings. But reminiscent of the Anthropocene, she includes worn clothes and discarded table linens from the **Goodwill Industry**.

Used garments are washed and trimmed to get rid of buttons, zippers, and seams. They are cut into one-inch squares and put into a Hollander beater and pulped. From that pulp Hutchinson pulls handmade sheets of paper. She then fashions the sheets into individual botanical forms and other sculptural elements by the thousands and pins them to dry on a clothesline. These elements are then used to assemble large-scale installations or wall and floor pieces. Additionally, she sprays a mixture of this pulp, clay and white glue to the back of her wall sculptures to cement everything together.

Hutchinson adds paper pulp to clay to make it stronger and lighter. It becomes part of the clay body and acts as both structure and glue in her assemblages. She makes a clay slurry of 10-30% pulp in which to dip and thinly coat sculptural parts, such as a leafy shape or corolla-like cone. These parts can be made out of paper, fabric, organic material or found objects. Thus, something flaccid, when coated in paper clay, can become strong and rigid yet maintain its delicacy. Because of the intensive moisture wicking properties of the cellulose bundles,

Top: **Rebecca Hutchinson *Purple Overlap*** 2018, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, slip trailing both fired and unfired, slip-dipped fiber, paperclay paper mache, 90" x 60" x 12". Photo: Jeff Van Tine.

Middle: **Rebecca Hutchinson *Five Part Bloom*** 2017, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, slip trailing both fired and unfired, slip-dipped fiber, paperclay, paper mache, 68" x 68" x 12". Photo: Carly Costello.

Bottom: **Rebecca Hutchinson *3 Part Wedge*** 2018, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, slip trailing both fired and unfired, slip-dipped fiber, paperclay paper mache, 76" x 40" x 8". Photo: Jeff Van Tine.

Hutchinson can take a form, dip it in fresh slurry, and attach it to an apparatus just like using super glue. The fibers of the paper in paper clay form a sticky net on the wood that is much stronger than glue when dried. This added strength allows her to work quickly and intuitively, placing process and rhythm as integral to her product.

Unlike clay without pulp, paper clay is quite strong even in the vernacular adobe architecture of Africa and the Americas. This attribute has important cost and environmental advantages not lost on Hutchinson, whose personal habitats prioritize affinity with nature. She keeps one studio on a ranch in Montana and another in a quaint one-store village in rural New Hampshire. Her pieces are also lighter thanks to paper pulp which offers ease in shipping and of handling in the studio and the installation setting. When installations are complete and not sold or relocated, they are disassembled, taken back to the studio and upcycled into the next installation.

Repurposing of parts—like the concept of upcycling and paper clay itself—signifies the hybridity that is central to Hutchinson's ethos. Her work does not conform to a pure ideology of craft, ceramics or papermaking, but does manifest a craft aesthetic that she believes sculpture sometimes excludes. More than just the nature of her materials and methods, hybridity as a concept,

for Hutchinson, is an embrace of the creative possibilities that lay beyond categorization and genre.

Her most successful pieces collaborate delicately and deftly with foraged and found materials, attending to the possibilities of harmony and accent, presence and absence, suggestion and serendipity—rather than taking absolute control. As do the different artifacts found in a bird's nest, Hutchinson can tell stories with her foraging. Her site-specific installation series at the **Daum Museum of Contemporary Art** in Sedalia, Missouri, reflected the history of the town which built its economy around manufacturing blue jeans. *Tranquil Bloom Sedalia* is a constructed environment of intricate scaffolding grids which support random growth patterns of blue and green winding their way in and around the structure. For this piece she used denim remnants from the local factory as well as a million shredded dollars of

Left: **Rebecca Hutchinson** building up form on harvested willow frame with adobe paper clay mixture on handmade upcycled paper cones, Montana Studio, 2018. Photo: Jeff Van Tine.

Right: **Rebecca Hutchinson** *Purple Atlas Density* 2019, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, recycled paper, handmade paper, organic material, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, slip trailing both fired and unfired, slip-dipped fiber, paperclay paper mache, 29" x 79" x 7". Photo: Jeff Van Tine.





offline currency she acquired as an artist-in-residence at **Crane Paper Factory**. The inclusion of man made artifacts such as blue jeans and paper money tell the story of an Anthropocene in which our trail of debris gets recycled into new growth.

The willow grid represents both a support structure and a set of limitations that to Hutchinson encapsulate a fundamental aspect of survival: the need to grow despite constraints from the stressed environment. Her work blooms as she responds intuitively to space, form and color relationships as they develop. She works through limitations and obstacles by negotiating the dichotomies of strength and fragility, scarcity and abundance. This mediation is constant in both nature and in human relationships.

And, for Hutchinson, increasingly, it is political. In reference to an exhibition this summer pairing Hutchinson's wall sculptures and **Joan Snyder's** paintings at the **Provincetown Art Association Museum**, she stated, "The motif we are dealing with, *Double Bloom*, is charged on so many levels: charged on an ecological level, charged politically, charged with gender. To me the political gravity to bloom imagery is pure determination, of growth and vibrancy, despite all the

structural boundaries I've built." Given the host of challenges we live with, Hutchinson responds with material expressions of determination and optimism.

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Top: **Rebecca Hutchinson *Tranquil Bloom Sedalia*** 2019, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, handmade paper, organic material, pulped offline currency 1 million dollars, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, fired and unfired slip trailing, slip-dipped fiber, 480" x 240" x 300". Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, Missouri, US. Photo: Matt Rahner.

Right page: **Rebecca Hutchinson *Yellow Lattice*** 2019, fired and unfired porcelain paper recycled paper, clay, handmade paper, organic material, Adobe paperclay, woodwork with harvested willow, slip trailing both fired and unfired, slip-dipped fiber, paperclay paper mache, 32" x 74" x 8".

