

FALL 2014

ART VOICES



MARGERY AMDUR

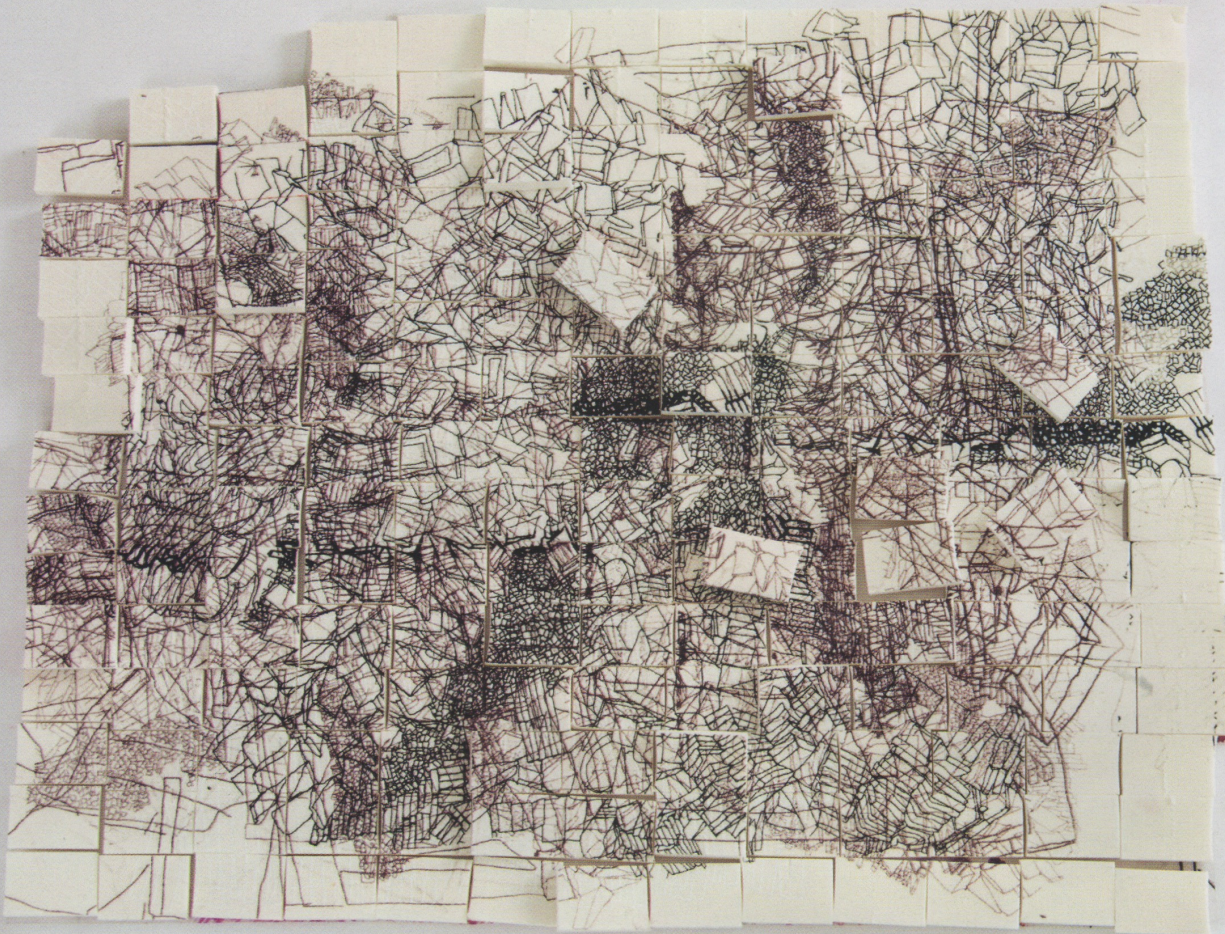




MARGERY AMDUR

BY NOAH BECKER

is a Philadelphia-based artist and educator, working in a variety of mediums. While her most recent work involves the use of cosmetic sponges, the work that she did between 2008-2012 was primarily collage-based. She painstakingly hand cut highly detailed forms and patterns out of frosted mylar to produce richly embellished large-scale, wall, and floor mounted work. In 2012, she was drawn to cosmetic (makeup) sponges.



Could the pliable, commercially manufactured multiples become the building blocks of her new work?

Amdur's Philadelphia studio has several floors, and a different aspect of her process takes up each level. As Amdur explained during my recent visit, she buys commercially produced cosmetic sponges in bulk. "They come in five standard shapes, which I then multiply by gluing parts together to make miniature formations. It takes thousands of these newly formed shapes to build a large six to sixteen foot canvas composition. I under-paint the sponges with gouache and ink, then layer pastel pigment on top, and develop each piece as if it were an abstract painting. It's the saturation of the pastel pigment that is not completely fixed to the sponges that makes them very sensuous, ephemeral, and almost sexy." I caught up with Amdur at the point when she was intuitively organizing new rectangular, silk-screened sponges on a tabletop and fig-

uring out how the new geometric forms could relate to her other bodies of work.

Amdur referenced New York legend Elizabeth Murray as someone influential and instructive in that in the seventies and eighties Murray was making "hybrid" paintings that projected into the audience's space. Amdur says she thinks of herself as a painter who has never been able to restrain her marks to a two dimensional surface. Today, artists such as Katarina Grosse, El Anutsui, and Mathew Ritchie are others with whom Amdur shares lineage. However, Amdur has found a process that transcends any direct comparative analysis with other artists. The cosmetic sponges arrive in boxes to her studio through snail mail. She removes the sponges and begins to conceptualize the piece. This approach is not measured against any kind of esoteric art historical criteria; the material is poured out and manipulated. Amdur's background and involvement is intellectual and studied. The New York tradition of abstraction

seems to be Amdur's guiding influence. Her work is extraterrestrial and transcendent of shadows in the mapping way she handles materials. We are aliens to Amdur's internal mapping process, and we find ourselves thrown into the center of her world. Her topography is visceral, and her color sense is a firestorm of noise and activity. Amdur stated that the sponges have a softness that she enjoys; yet softness is not something that the viewer may experience. This might be from the working process and from her personal experience while working on a piece and from the way things can wander conceptually. Of course, the emotional reaction and/or experience of the viewer cannot be fully gauged by any artist in this sense. In this way, I find that Amdur's ideas about her work diverge from the experience and associations that I find myself feeling when viewing her work.

Aside from material, a key element in Amdur's work is process. "Many times it is through the 'making' that concepts evolve," the artist said.

Through labor and manipulation, artists generally work toward a finished product, so perhaps Amdur is fighting with this urge to fully control the end result. Either way the laws of nature guide us to where we should be. Within her experimental language, there is an intent that goes beyond the intuitive and is just pure rawness being tackled by hand, and wrestled with in the soul. This is why you can walk into a room of Amdur's work and see how it appears highly original and consistent. It is a consistency that comes out of a conceptualized end result and a ritualistic approach. Presently, the shift in Amdur's work through drawing and various applications of line directly onto flat sponges is something that is changing the effort even further. Amdur's work is an exploration into the dialog of a new geometric form. The subtle change in geometry is the next phase in Amdur's process.

I had a chance to discuss this new aspect of Amdur's work in relation to her earlier explorations at her Philadelphia workspace.

Noah Becker: What do the sponge constructions represent to you?

Margery Amdur: They are maps of places unknown... personal landscapes.

NB: In what sense?

MA: Much of my work is how my internal landscape intersects with the external one. Also, there is an intersection between architecture and nature; when the pieces are flat, they feel architectural like topographical maps or a view from above. However, when they become voluptuous and bulge, they feel more organic as if from nature.

NB: And what is it about working with these foam pieces that appeals to you?

MA: This body of work is much more about physicality, feeling and touch. Its language is more abstract than narrative. Ultimately, when one walks by the largest works, there is silence. The abundance of foam acts as soundproofing. I enjoy the contrast of silence to the boldness and authority of the actual work. The process in making the work is intense. Although the formal

elements are extremely active, when you see the pieces installed, there's a distinct sense of quiet and calm. It's a great dialectic.

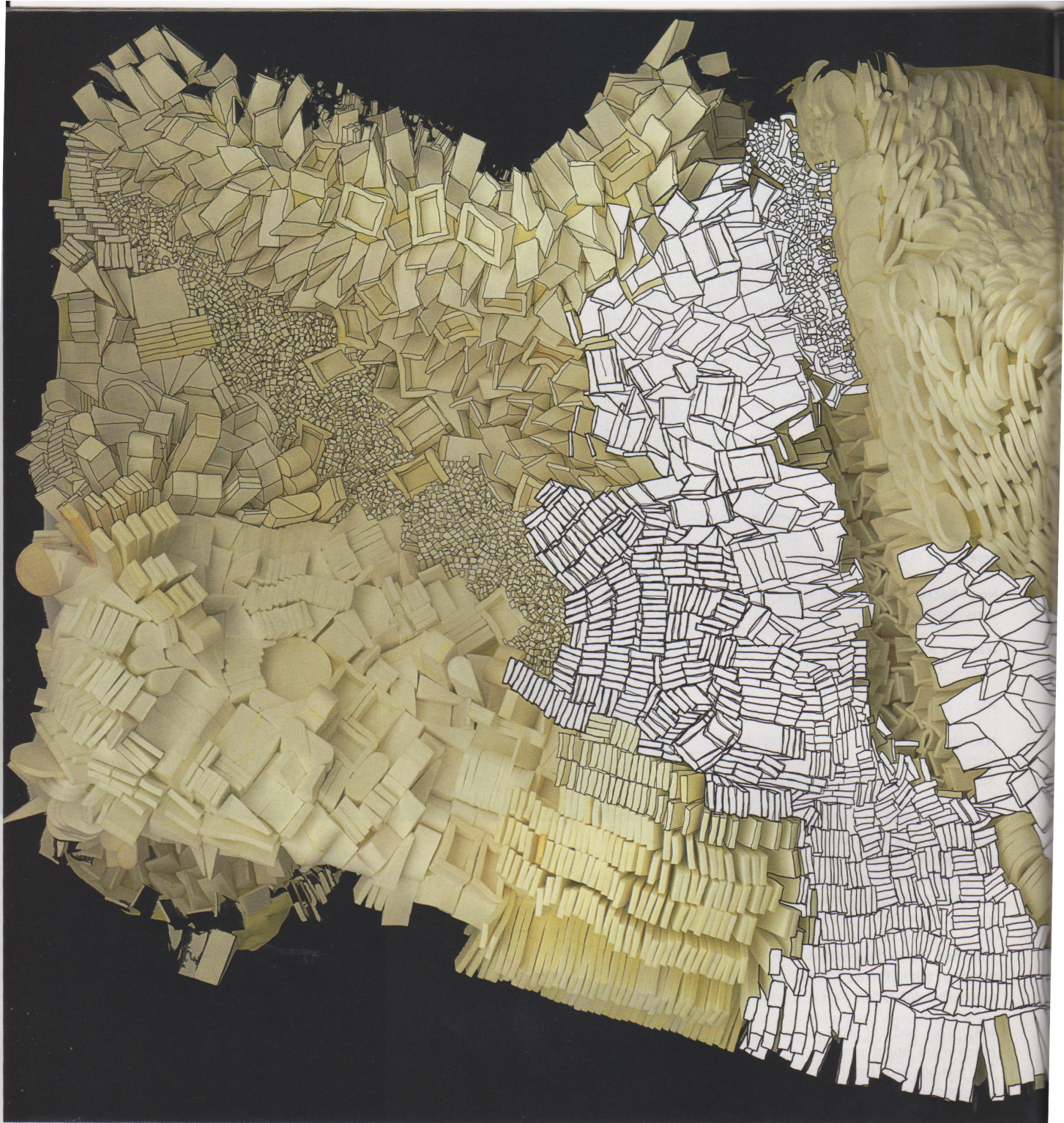
The newest of the 'new' work is much smaller in scale. A person can pick up individual pieces to investigate the print on all sides. This work comes out of my digital line drawings, which are initially traced on top of digital scans produced from the large flat canvas constructions before they are colored. These drawing studies provide me the opportunity to revisit and meditate on the topography.

NB: So this is a collective experience, an accumulation of these pieces, as opposed to just single sponge squares?

MA: For much of my career my work has been about making 'communities' of forms. In this instance, the individual parts are not static. As both a physical and conceptual process, I arrange, rearrange, and puzzle pieces together.

NB: The wedge shaped pieces are built out in topography, so it will be interesting to see how you handle this difference.





MA: I'm trying to figure out a way to connect the two approaches: the earlier series of makeup sponge constructions and the more recent forms that directly include drawing and silk-screen.

As I said, I'm working intuitively. This doesn't

mean that my decisions are readily made from instinct. Many times I do start from a hunch; however, it is through the manipulating, rehearsing, and meditating that the answer and resolve will arise. When this happens, sometimes sooner than other times, it will not be forced. In addition, I feel closely connected

to the work. I develop a kind of intimacy as I better understand my relationship with the material and it's ability to transcend itself. The smaller scale of this new work is heightening that experience.

NB: In what way do you see these as



being intimate?

MA: I was looking to make something that was soft. It was after I completed a monumental public art commission (six platforms, 4000 sq. ft. of flooring) in an underground subway station in Philadelphia. It was an intense, richly

rewarding, and invigorating two-year project, yet I needed to collect myself back into my personal studio practice.

NB: You mean soft to the touch?

MA: Yes, it was as if I wanted to make something to catch myself as I fell from a more public way

of working into a more personal one. I did not set out to make work out of cosmetic sponges; however, I was experimenting with soft pastel pigment applied with sponge applicators. And I liked the sponges! I Googled sponges, and what popped up first were cosmetic sponges. My work has always had gender as part of its meaning, and I had a hunch that the cosmetic sponges might offer something that I had been looking for, both in meaning and material.

NB: Well it's also an industrial product. As an industrial material, it has a modern quality. Makeup sponges are also a throw-away item, so it has a temporality about it. And even, what you are drawing on them is this kind of three-dimensional searching. Even when you are drawing in two dimensions on three-dimensional sponges, there's this other world of imagined geometric space within space happening.

MA: Mapping has been popular in the art world for some time. But I feel fortunate that my line and silk-screen drawings that feel like maps are made from the terrain of my sponge constructions. Most people will think the drawing comes first. In reality the constructions come first. They fuel the drawings and I like this reversal.

NB: It's still intuitive looking, so it's not really planned beyond the intuitive or figured out through computer imaging.

MA: Intuitive, Yes, that's correct. As is the case with the larger dimensional pieces that begin flat and are then sculpturally animated on location, the new sponge drawings are not permanently affixed even though the imagery is referencing the same line compositions over and over again. These are one of a kind constructions that are in a way performative.

NB: Material and time play important roles in your work.

MA: I'm an artist who seems to get hooked on material for periods of time...never standard art materials. I tend to choose low-tech material that ends up being very high-maintenance. The manner in which I build my work speaks to my intention of slowing down an overly complex and fast-paced world. My work is as much about marking time as anything else. It took me ten hours to sculpturally form and install the sixteen-foot wall piece and four days to install a one-person show of ten constructions. Again, my practice is ritualized and repetitive. 'Labor' should be my middle name! It's almost as if the connection and chemistry with material both fuels and inspires my artistic practice. I am the turtle not the hare. **IA**