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North American Beadsmiths

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# R•E•S•T•R•U•N•G

## Contemporary North American Beadsmiths

By Jessica Todd





“One reason that crafts, decorative arts and folk art are seen as outside the high art tradition is because non-artists don’t have the same kind of respect for things that we could make ourselves,”<sup>1</sup> wrote Marcia Tucker in the 1996 exhibition catalogue for *A Labor of Love* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. This sentiment likely elicits a cringe from you, *Metalsmith* reader, despite Tucker’s intent to celebrate the work.

The familiar “craft versus art” hierarchies are deeply rooted in classism, racism, and sexism, and the topic has been extensively explored in this and other craft publications for decades. Yet the art jewelry field perpetuates such snobbery over certain materials and processes. Perhaps the most targeted: beads. I have heard many academic and fine jewelers recount harrowing stories of being “accused” of “making beaded jewelry” when they first introduced their profession to a stranger (can you imagine?!). But take one look at the work featured in this article, and I assure, you will not be thinking, “I could have made that myself.” The nine contemporary North American artists featured here explore this oft-stigmatized material with curiosity, criticality, and grace. The sheer range of form and concept in their work speaks to the vastness of beadwork’s history and application.

Like a moth to a flame, I find myself dazzled by beadwork. The attraction is not simply its sparkle and color; it is the innate human impulse for the process that spans continents and millennia; the malleability of the material, its painstaking production, and its relationship to individual and collective identity. In *The History of Beads*, Lois Sherr Dubin writes, “[Beads] first appear with the advent of modern man, *Homo sapiens*, at least one hundred thousand years ago, and probably have been made and used by every culture in the world since then.”<sup>2</sup> Beads predate the earliest

known figurative art by about 75,000 years;<sup>3</sup> they are written somewhere in our collective DNA.

Over the millennia, as beads evolved from nature’s “ready-made” versions, such as predator-pierced shells, to increasingly complex technological feats of perforation and fabrication, material continually played a central role.<sup>4</sup> After all, at their essence, beads are but a solid object with a hole. Philadelphia-based self-taught jeweler Hilary Hertzler works in intimate conversation with materials. Hertzler spent over a decade working as an interior architect, developing a sensibility for the visual and structural qualities of materials. She notices the texture, line, and color of natural fibers, seeds, carved glass, and terracotta in her *Organic Necklace* series, “with rhythmic pops of smooth surface emerging from fuzzy textures and bright color interrupting neutral ones.” Hertzler creates with a “joyful work of the hand,”

Previous spread:

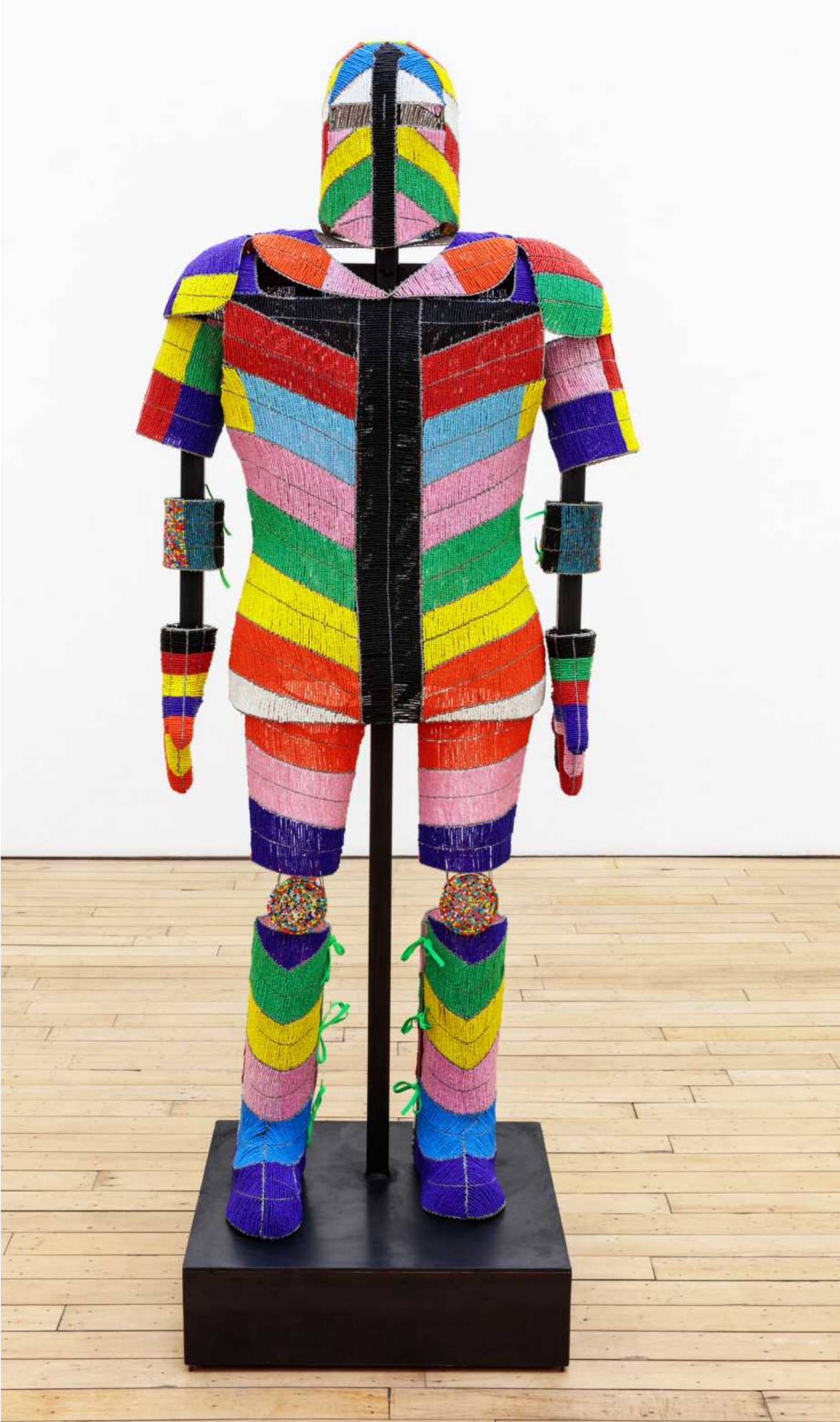
**Leonardo Benzant**

*Black Joy Takes Courage*, 2019  
(detail)  
Caucasian doll, fabric/  
clothes, acrylic, gel medium,  
monofilament, leather, glass  
seed beads, handmade ceramic  
bead, plastic pony hair beads,  
miscellaneous  
98 x 48 x 5 in.  
Photo courtesy of  
Claire Oliver Gallery

**Breana Ferrara**

*Long Pink Mouth*, 2019  
Polyester fabric and  
stuffing, glass beads,  
sterling silver, cultured  
freshwater pearls, thread  
10 x 4 x 3 in.  
Photo courtesy of the artist





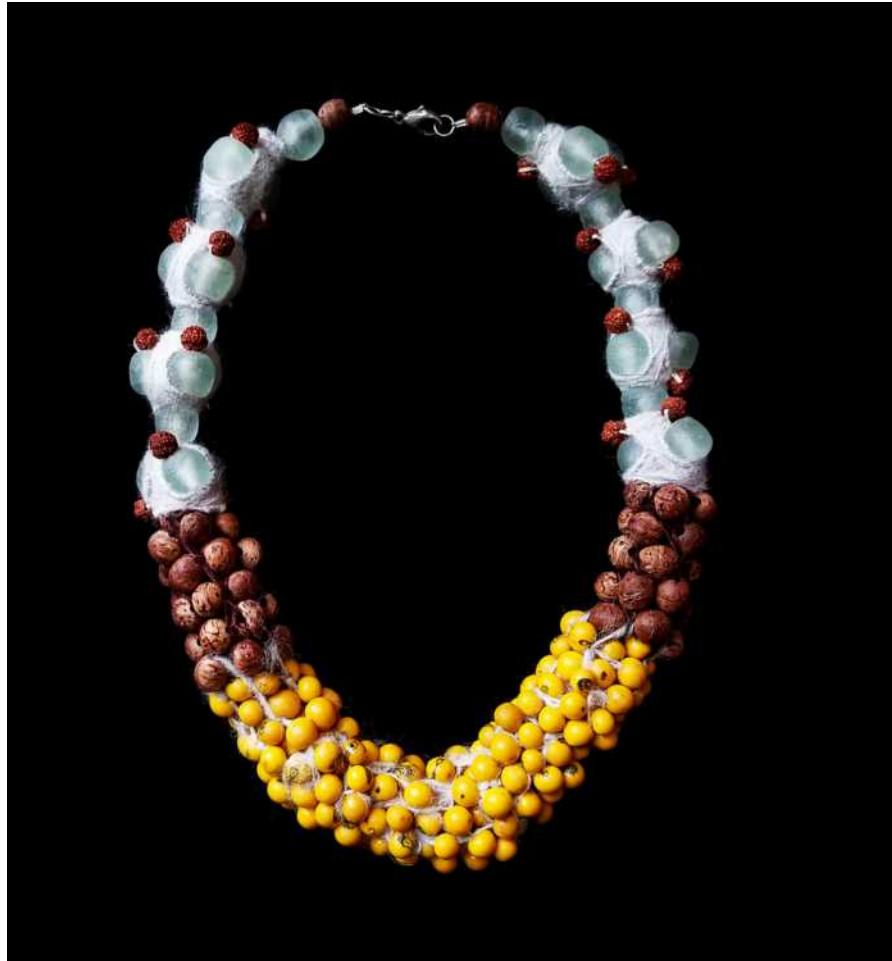
**Curtis Talwst Santiago**  
*African Knight II*, 2018  
Wire and beads,  
on steel armature  
82 x 24 x 24 in.  
Photo courtesy of  
Rachel Uffner Gallery

derived from the Pennsylvania Dutch traditions of her upbringing. Her necklaces and earrings illustrate the contrast of her rural childhood and urban adulthood, easily shifting from soft to rigid, natural to manmade, bumpy to linear. Her deep consideration of material pushes the viewer to notice the physical and tactile qualities of each component with fresh eyes, encouraging touch, connection, and joy.<sup>5</sup>

When studying the history of beadwork, materials tell us a story of origin, migration, colonization, and trade. Indigenous people were the first beadworkers in the region now known as North America, creating adornment and objects with beads made out of shells, pearls, bones, teeth, quills, stones, and fossils. With colonization came the introduction of European-made glass beads as well as other globally traded beads, which permanently altered historical techniques and forms. European glass beads were traded with an enormous profit margin—1,000 percent return on investment in 1632—to Africa and North America and played a significant role in the transatlantic slave trade, a topic we will return to shortly. Many North American Indigenous cultures began using glass beads, notably the Crow people of the Plains, who created exquisite beaded adornment for themselves and their horses.<sup>6</sup>

Artist Elias Jade Not Afraid grew up in Lodge Grass, Montana, in his great grandmother's house on the Crow Indian Reservation, where he recently returned to live. His great grandmother was a beadworker, and as a child, Not Afraid would take apart and recreate her beadwork using her old supplies. By age twelve, he had taught himself two-needle appliqué, an advanced beading technique used to create two-dimensional designs on a surface. He collects the same kind of beads his ancestors used—European glass beads from the 1800s to 1950s—for his work, combines them with antique metal findings, shells, and elk ivory, and fixes them to a base of smoked and brain-tanned deer hide. Not Afraid's wearable designs range from bold geometric patterns to stylized plant and animal motifs to edgy punk and pop culture references; he simultaneously carries on historical processes and disrupts tradition. His pieces start as simple outlines that he fills with color as he goes, working from his intuitive ability to create the perfect composition of hue, tone, and saturation.<sup>7</sup> Not Afraid's work zooms out from the material of each individual bead to tell a story of color and pattern, yet the materials he uses speak to a complex global history.

Although the proliferation and migration of beads around the globe stimulated exciting cross-cultural explorations, the underlying narrative is one of insidious cultural destruction and dehumanization. Lois Sherr Dubin writes, "Between 1500 and 1867, slavers shipped perhaps 15 million Africans to the Americas, routinely exchanging European-made glass beads for human cargo."<sup>8</sup> Demetri Broxton, an Oakland, California-based mixed media artist of Louisiana Creole and Filipinx heritage, tackles this



Top:  
**Hilary Hertzler**  
*Organic Necklace 2.0*, 2015  
 Recycled glass, rudraksha seed,  
 bodhi seed, acai seed, mohair  
 and silk yarn, sterling silver  
 6 x 10½ x 1½ in.  
 Photo courtesy of the artist

Above:  
**Hilary Hertzler**  
*Organic Necklace 3.0*, 2017  
 Clay, acai seed, mohair and  
 silk yarn, sterling silver  
 8½ x 8 x 1½ in.  
 Photo courtesy of the artist

*Beadwork's role in ritual is well documented throughout global histories, often granting talismanic powers to the wearer.*



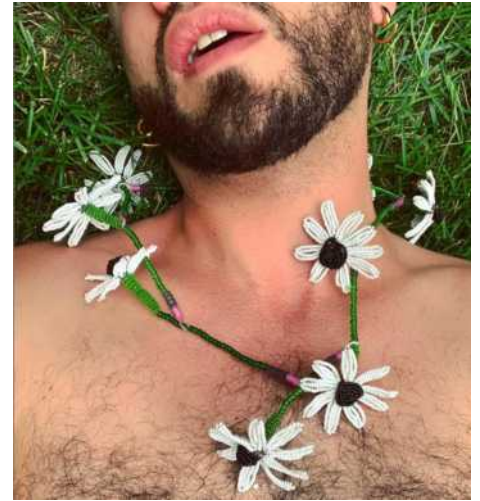
**Elias Jade Not Afraid**

*Crow style Kevlar cuffs, 2017*  
Smoked deer hide, antique glass cut seed beads, Kevlar ballistic fabric, vintage brass belt tack, 24k gold electroplated glass cut seed beads, Kevlar beading thread  
10 x 6 in.

Photo courtesy of the artist

**matt lambert**

*Something to mark life*  
*Something to mark innocence*  
*Something to mark tomorrow as yesterday's history*  
Glass beads, steel, copper, heat shrink  
15 x 11 x 2½ in.  
Photo courtesy of the artist



grievous history and its present-day iterations in his work with boxing gloves. Broxton prominently uses the cowrie shell, a beading material steeped in symbolism for many cultures throughout the continent of Africa.<sup>9</sup> Cowrie shells were a valuable commodity, used as currency by Portuguese slavers to purchase human beings for the slave trade. Broxton's sculptures converse with the cowrie shell shrines of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, called *Ilé Ori*, or House of the Head shrines, that sanctify "a person's spiritual essence; protected by a shield of cowrie shells."

Broxton's embellished boxing gloves reveal the modern-day legacies of slavery evident in the economy of Black bodies in sports and in hip-hop lyrics.<sup>10</sup> The gloves no longer function in the boxing ring, but they seem to offer their wearer even more protection. The cowrie shells are attached like spines with their pointed corners facing outward, often accompanied by other menacing, pointed objects; tenacious affirmations are beaded on the back of the gloves in a graffiti font. Broxton's sculptures are, at once, heroic declarations of self-determination, screaming frustration, solemn altars to loss, and revelry in the persistence of beauty through pain.

Artist matt lambert, formerly based in Detroit, Michigan, and now working in Stockholm, Sweden, critiques European colonization from another perspective. Lambert teases out the capricious nature of French beaded flowers, a pastime popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which reflects the wealth, leisure, and obliviousness of an aristocracy who profited from the brutal subjugation of the French colonies. Some of the flowers in the

Each of these nine beadsmiths, bearing a history as long as humankind, crafts a new page in our collective human story with an object so utterly simple: the bead.



**Teresa Sullivan**  
*Wanted on Six Planets*, 2008  
 Glass beads, thread  
 13 x 7 x 1 in.  
 Photo: Dan Kvitka

Top:  
**Elias Jade Not Afraid**  
*Crow rosette bag*, 2020  
 Vintage (1950) glass cut seed beads, smoked deer hide, Italian pony hair, antique brass findings, beaded leather strap, gold embossed Italian leather (lining)  
 10 x 615 in.  
 Photo: Aldric Nelson



work are restored and modified antiques, and others are replicas fabricated by Lambert. This process of collecting and recreating highlights the falsehood and romanticization of single-maker authorship embraced by Western culture. Further, the beaded flowers act as a commentary on the social construct of masculinity. In the same way the beads attempt to preserve the ephemeral form of the flower, our society attempts to fix masculinity to a brief moment in time that is youthful, virile, and athletic.<sup>11</sup> This definition is impossibly narrow. Yet, there is joy in Lambert's work as well. Tying together a necklace of real flowers is an act of experimental and ephemeral self-adornment. The wearer of Lambert's beaded version is allowed to preserve this moment of self-love and self-celebration indefinitely—for many, a countercultural act in itself.

Teresa Sullivan, a bead artist based in Olympia, Washington, began her adulthood immersed in the counterculture of the 1980s punk scene in Portland, Oregon, making Xerox collage art and playing in underground bands. While working in a tile factory, Sullivan began making ceramic beads and learned about the work of Joyce Scott, a name now synonymous with contemporary beadwork. Sullivan immediately connected with Scott's work, seeing in it a "love of underground comix, revolutionary discontent/social critique, healthy outlets for anger, questioning of norms of reality, and an inherent hermetic exactitude."<sup>12</sup> She went on to travel with Scott to South Africa in 2014, along with artist Sonya Clark, who also made influential beadwork in the early 2000s. The figurative narratives in Sullivan's work bear the influence of her mentor, as do many contemporary beadsmiths who Scott inspired to explore dimensional form in bold and unexpected ways. Sullivan's beaded jewelry and sculpture incorporate superheroes, pulp fiction, and found text, each piece a reflection of her intricate inner musings on culture, politics, and literature.

Also an expert at constructing narratives, artist Curtis Talwst Santiago creates historical fiction through his sculptures, performances, and paintings. Born in Alberta, Canada to Trinidadian parents, Santiago has spent his adult life moving around the globe; his travels are evident in the cross-cultural explorations of his work (he recently settled in Munich, Germany). He is well known for his miniature dioramas—tiny, contained theatrical stills that will surely appeal to jewelers and object-makers. But we came for the beads. Santiago developed an interest in beadwork during grade school field trips to museums in Alberta, where he was drawn to beadwork's global reach from First Nations cultures in Canada to the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania. Years later, on a trip to South Africa, he encountered a street artist named Jimmy beading animal figures for souvenirs outside of the airport and struck up a conversation. He soon found himself in Jimmy's home, learning how to bead and collaborating with Jimmy's family on his *African Knight* armor.<sup>13</sup>

Santiago examines the absence and presence of certain narratives in dominant culture, "draw[ing] upon theories of genetic memory and ancestral imagination to reveal, open, and show alternate histories and narratives."<sup>14</sup> The extensive multidisciplinary storytelling



of his *African Knight* series creates imagined artifacts that confront the Eurocentric trope of the knight in shining armor. A world traveler, Santiago mused, “I thought about all the armor I needed while traveling the world as a person of color.”<sup>15</sup> The steel frame of the *African Knight* suit, shrouded in plastic beads, offers little physical protection, but imbues Santiago with a connection to his ancestors and the enduring strength of their untold histories. In his video piece *Sir Dingolay*, he performs while wearing the suit in a courtyard surrounded by the detritus of urban gentrification. Here, he connects to his Caribbean roots—the elaborate and often uncomfortable costuming of Carnival, always accompanied by dance, celebration, and ritual. Off the body, the piece is displayed with the wear and tear of the performance, so it can be understood not as an aesthetic object but as an artifact inseparable from Santiago’s journey of making it and dancing in it.

Beadwork’s role in ritual is well documented throughout global histories, often granting talismanic powers to the wearer. Multidisciplinary artist and jeweler Catherine Blackburn explores ritual and power by applying a contemporary lens to traditional First Nations adornment. Blackburn was born in Patuanak, Saskatchewan, in Canada, is of Dene and European ancestry, and is a member of the English River First Nation; she is currently based in Terrace, British Columbia.<sup>16</sup> In the early nineteenth century, Indigenous people across North America were stripped of their artistic expression by Christian missionaries in the name of assimilation. Blackburn reclaims this history through beadwork as a “tool of resistance.”<sup>17</sup> Her work “takes stylistic inspiration from diverse First Nations across Turtle Island,”<sup>18</sup> acknowledging their differences and their shared history of colonialism. Using modern glass beads, plastic fusible craft beads, and synthetic materials, she



**Catherine Blackburn**  
*Ms. Chief of Change*, 2018  
 Plastic beads, glass beads, pearls,  
 nylon, wire, horsehair, plastic lace  
 36 x 60 in.  
 (photograph dimensions)  
 Photo: Tenille Campbell

creates twenty-first-century armor for Indigenous womxn, two-spirited,<sup>19</sup> and non-binary people. These bold pieces blend historical garment design and practices with pop street art aesthetics, evoking a futuristic glam warrior ready to battle harmful colonial legacies.<sup>20</sup> Blackburn employs photography to contextualize her work in natural, urban, and domestic settings, acknowledging the vast identities and experiences of their wearers.

Fitchburg, Massachusetts-based jeweler Breana Ferrara taps into the legacy of beadwork’s talismanic properties with her indulgent beaded adornments and objects. In celebration of excess and hedonism, she seeks to imbue the wearer with confidence, joy, and self-expression. The corpulent human forms of her early work have recently given way to anthropomorphic explorations. Referencing cryptozoology and the paranormal, Ferrara painstakingly embellishes familiar but strange animal hybrids that intrigue and delight. She grants permission to the wearer to “loudly express something from deep within themselves that they otherwise may be afraid to express.”<sup>21</sup> Each piece is born as a physical manifestation of a vulnerable or scary secret, coming to life to boldly face the light of day. In this way, the beadsmith becomes a kind of alchemist, transforming one of humanity’s most basic forms into spiritual medicine.

Artist Leonardo Benzant, based in Richmond Hill, New York, imagines himself an “Urban Shaman,” bridging the physical world and the hidden realms of our collective subconscious. His work begins with extensive studies and meditations on the transatlantic African diaspora. Benzant



**Demetri Broxton**  
*If I Ruled the World*, 2019  
 Everlast® boxing gloves, cedar, cowrie shells, Japanese seed beads, Czech seed beads, silver wire, mirrors, red coral, nylon thread, stainless steel chain and hardware, herbs, frankincense  
 48 x 28 x 8 in.  
 Image courtesy of the artist and Patricia Sweetow Gallery



**Catherine Blackburn**  
*The Waterhen Weaver*, 2018  
 Plastic beads, wood,  
 plastic lace, nylon, fleece  
 90 x 60 in.  
 (photograph dimensions)  
 Photo: Tenille Campbell

**Breana Ferrara**  
*Fertility Reptilian*, 2019  
 Polyester fabric and stuffing,  
 glass beads, sterling silver,  
 enamel on copper, mother of  
 pearl, shell, dyed cultured  
 freshwater pearls, thread  
 26 x 9 x 6 in.  
 Photo: Jillian Moore



revels in the rituals and vibrant culture of transatlantic African people who, despite having endured a barrage of colonization and displacement over centuries, have retained powerful connections to their ancestors and traditions that defy destruction of the African spirit. He draws inspiration from his ancestral history—including Yoruba spirituality and ceremonial objects and Congolese jewelry and ideographic writing.<sup>22</sup>

Benzant's beaded sculptures hold both intricacy and heft, and while their scale makes them unlikely to be worn, it is clear that they live in conversation with the body. The Western lens has a bad habit of pulling art from its context and isolating it as an aesthetic object. For the Yoruba and Kongo people, across Africa, and in much of the world, art and jewelry are so inseparable from culture, ritual, and life that they do not have a distinguishing lexicon.<sup>23</sup> Benzant's sculptures do not exist as inert objects in white boxes; they breathe in the bodies standing next to them dazzled by their rhythmic colors, and in the bodies that came before them rejoicing in their immortality.

*In the early nineteenth century,  
 Indigenous people across  
 North America were stripped  
 of their artistic expression  
 by Christian missionaries in  
 the name of assimilation.*



**Teresa Sullivan**  
*Advice*, 2017  
 Glass beads, thread, wire  
 12 x 18 x 8 in.  
 Photo: Dan Kvitka

Each of these nine beadsmiths, bearing a history as long as humankind, crafts a new page in our collective human story with an object so utterly simple: the bead. In the words of Teresa Sullivan, “No other material relies on that little bit of nothing (the hole) to define it—it’s the space, this absence of matter, that allows me to weave it to another thing.” Perhaps it is in the space between where we can find connection—utilizing the gaps of our differences to weave ourselves to our ancestors, our cultural legacies, our global histories, and back into each other.

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**Leonardo Benzant**  
*Black Joy Takes Courage*, 2019  
 Caucasian doll, fabric/clothes,  
 acrylic, gel medium, monofilament,  
 leather, glass seed beads, handmade  
 ceramic bead, plastic pony hair  
 beads, miscellaneous  
 98 x 48 x 5 in.  
 Photo courtesy of  
 Claire Oliver Gallery

1 *A Labor of Love*, ed. Marcia Tucker (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 11. / 2 Lois Sherr Dubin, *The History of Beads: From 100,000 B.C. to the Present* (New York, NY: Abrams, 2009), 16. / 3 Dubin, *The History of Beads*, 19. / 4 Dubin, *The History of Beads*, 16-17. / 5 Hilary Hertzler, email message to author, June 12, 2020. / 6 Dubin, *The History of Beads*, 106, 263-265. / 7 Elias Jade Not Afraid, email message to author, June 2, 2020. / 8. Dubin, *The History of Beads*, 132. / 9 Dubin, *The History of Beads*, 124. / 10 “Demetri Broxton,” Patricia Sweetow Gallery, 2020, <https://www.patriciasweetowgallery.com/artists/demetri-broxton/>. / 11 matt lambert, in discussion with the author, August 26, 2020. / 12 Teresa Sullivan, email message to author, May 7, 2020. / 13 Curtis Talwst Santiago, in discussion with the author, July 17, 2020. / 14 “Curtis Talwst Santiago: By Sea,” Rachel Uffner Gallery, 2018, [https://www.racheluffnergallery.com/exhibitions/detail/curtis-talwst-santiago\\_2/installation-stills/](https://www.racheluffnergallery.com/exhibitions/detail/curtis-talwst-santiago_2/installation-stills/). / 15 Osman Can Yerebakan, “Artist Curtis Talwst Santiago Introduces an Alter Ego to Help Navigate the Past,” *Observer*, February 22, 2020, <https://observer.com/2020/02/curtis-talwst-santiago-drawing-center-exhibition-can-i-alter-examines-history/>. / 16 “Terrace, British Columbia is situated on the unceded traditional territory and home to the Kitselas and Kitsumkalum people of the Tsimshian Nation.” Catherine Blackburn, email message to author, June 21, 2020. / 17 Turtle Island is a name for the Earth or for North America; used by some Indigenous and First Nations people. / 18 Two-Spirit is a modern, umbrella term used by some Indigenous people in North America to describe Indigenous people in their communities who fulfill a traditional third-gender (or other gender-variant), ceremonial, or social role in their cultures. / 19 “New Age Warriors,” Catherine Blackburn, 2019, <https://www.catherineblackburn.com/new-age-warriors/>. / 20 Breana Ferrara, “In Conversation with Breana Ferrara,” interview by Jessica Todd, *Art Jewelry Forum*, November 18, 2019, <https://artjewelryforum.org/in-conversation-with-breana-ferrara/>. / 21 “Leonardo Benzant,” Claire Oliver Gallery, 2019, <https://www.claireoliver.com/artists/leonardo-benzant/>. / 22 Ideographic writing is a writing system in which the characters signify whole words or significant parts of words rather than sounds or syllables. / 23 Leonardo Benzant, email message to author, August 2, 2020.