

sculpture

"Pae White: Material History"

By Kim Beil

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Installation view of "Beta Space: Pae White," San José Museum of Art, 2019-20. Photo: Courtesy San José Museum of Art

Pae White's primary material might well be the history of applied arts. In a new show at the San José Museum of Art ([on view](#) through January 19, 2020), she draws on at least 2,000 years of artistic practice, from goldwork to carpet weaving, bookbinding, printmaking, and painting. The materials on display are fantastically diverse: from cashmere to cotton, clay, and glass, to porcelain, plastic, acrylic, rubber, and polished stainless steel. It's not a surprise that White repeatedly expresses a desire for an aesthetic of the *ad infinitum*. What is surprising is that the Los Angeles-based artist worked out of a 600-square-foot studio for 20 years.

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Walking around her recently installed exhibition, White says that her unique approach to scale was born of necessity. After finishing her MFA at Art Center in Pasadena in 1991, she had a tiny studio and not much money, but she did have time and tenacity. She explains, "I didn't have a shop; I didn't have a team. I cut a lot of paper by hand. That was my way to get volume." When hung in grids, the hundreds of pieces created the appearance of something large scale, even if it could all "fit in a shoebox."

Her materials, too, have changed over the years. *Whistleblower* (2019), a hanging piece installed at San José, consists of more than 3,000 sheets of thin electroplated steel, cut into hexagons and tied at about foot-long intervals on string. White says, "I wanted something that would reflect *ad infinitum*, so you're not really sure what you're looking at." She takes hold of one of the shapes, turning it over to see the top side: "This one is green." Inadvertently she makes her point; it's not green. She keeps searching: "One of these is green, and it's reflecting onto those," she says, pointing at the cloud of silver surfaces suspended above us. As we walk under the installation, colors sweep through the mass of shapes, an effect that White calls a "blush." Spring green, jade, a little pink: the hexagons look like shimmering wave patterns reflected into trees overhanging water. The thin steel sheets are produced by a company that makes metal business cards. White says, "My old interests are still there, but now that I'm working with fabricators and computers and we're writing software, we can get something much more specific." Whether White cuts each piece by hand or collaborates with other artists and fabricators, labor and the sense of scale remain closely related in her work.



Whistleblower (detail), 2019. Ink, cable, and electroplated steel, 3189 discs, 295 strands, 84.5 x 189 x 74 in.
Photo: Courtesy the artist and 1301PE, Los Angeles

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She leads me to a series of freestanding cases, nearly 30 feet in length, which house *AGAMEMNOMICS* (2013). Hundreds of small, multicolored objects stand in regiments, organized in rows that repeat deep into the mirrored base of the vitrine. This is a selection of work made for White's intervention at the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna (MAK). She recalls, "I went down to the basement [at the MAK], and there were these insanely incredible pieces by Adolf Loos and Koloman Moser that I was supposed to consider doing an intervention with, but I kept looking at this box of toys in the darkness of a cabinet. Some were kind of broken. I realized they were never going to be seen because they didn't have any attribution. I felt immediately protective and melancholic about the toys and so I took them as my subject." As in the *Velveteen Rabbit*, White's attention to these objects brings them new life.



AGAMEMNOMICS (detail), 2013. Toy pieces: glass, wood, clay, porcelain, plastic, acrylic, rubber, ink, and paint; display case: steel, glass, acrylic glass, and wood, dimensions variable. In collaboration with Jemima Brown, London; David Carlson, Los Angeles; Cerámica Suro, Tlaquepaque, Mexico; Bernardo Chavez, Guadalajara, Mexico; Jeaka Chen, Guangzhou, China; Liz Craft, Venice, California; Aida and Saulius Dirse, Vilnius, Lithuania; EiABC protoLAB, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Erzgebirge, Berlin; Léo Kosm, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; David McDonald, Pasadena, California; Pentti Monkkonen, Venice, California; Rebecca Neiderlander, Eagle Rock, Los Angeles; Robert Tolone, Long Beach, California. Photo: Courtesy San José Museum of Art, Collection of Pae White

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Describing the project's early stages, she explains: "I narrowed down the box of toys to an easy matrix, sort of a chess set, then assigned each object its role in the chess configuration. Then I sent out an image of all of them with measurements to fabricators that I work with." This "fabricator ecosystem," as White dubs it, involves artists and craftspeople from all over the world, including small workshops and individuals in places as diverse as Mexico, Germany, Lithuania, and Ethiopia, as well as friends in Los Angeles. She asked each artist or group of artists to interpret the set of objects in their own way. "I was very loose in my requirements," she explains. "I was like, 'Well, maybe think about the colors a bit?'"

Generally, the scale is uniform; most of the pieces could fit in the palm of your hand. The shapes of the original toys echo through the series: an inverted oval broken like an egg is easily recognizable across all the makers' sets. The colors are muted, from a shadowy liquid chrome on the Lithuanian ceramics to a soft mauve on the wooden German pieces. One of White's former teachers at Art Center, a prototype artist for Mattel toys, reinterpreted the set with rich, opaque colors in cast plastic.

White had recently been in touch with a worker at a factory in China. They discussed the woman's frustration at the limited opportunities for creativity in her current work. White added the woman and her team to the project: "When I got these pieces back from China, they didn't understand (or didn't believe) that I should be getting only one set for the price, so they sent me 25 sets." The Chinese set nearly fills one of the cases, like a bar graph displaying worldwide industrial production. Otherwise, the project is guided by equality. All of the artists and workshops were paid the same amount for their work, and they are all named in its documentation and on wall labels. White says, "I just put the people together."

Not all of her work with fabricators is so flexible, however. In White's tapestries, which she has been producing since the early 2000s, her expectations are much more particular. The workshop in Belgium that weaves her large-scale tapestries receives a digital file from White's studio detailing every change of thread color, material, and weave construction. *foreverago* (2017), the 127-foot-long tapestry on view at San José, undulates through the space like a partially drawn curtain. White says of the Belgian digital loom, "I wanted this big industrial beast of a machine to produce something that looks like it was hand-embroidered." The techniques that she incorporates into her tapestries span centuries and continents. In one section, metal threads approximate goldwork, a technique that has been used for at least two centuries in the West, most recognizably on military uniforms. Elsewhere she alludes to the weaving of Persian carpets by introducing abrash, an abrupt but subtle color change in the middle of a pattern. Originally abrash revealed the place where the weavers ran out of wool in one color and had to dye a new batch in order to continue. "The randomness of it is so beautiful to me," White says, touching her introduced transition from a deep crimson cashmere to a brilliant neon orange.

Often White's descriptions of her work focus on tactility: the hardness of the Lurex gold thread or the softness of the cashmere. The chess pieces beg to be held. White's experience of her work, like that of many artists, involves touch, but once a piece enters the museum, it's separated from viewers by a glass vitrine or the admonitions of guards. I ask about this

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difference in the tactile experience, and she says: "I see people touching my work all the time. There was a video posted on Instagram of a viewer doing this at Basel"—she mimes someone lasciviously palming the work, which was shown at neugerriemschneider during Art Basel 2019. But, she continues, more seriously, "I don't know if it makes that much difference to touch it. Maybe it's better just to imagine that this feels cold," she says, pointing to a section of goldwork. "If you touch it, you're going to know that it's thread and the illusion would fall away. It's nice to maintain the ambiguity."



foreverago, 2017. Cotton, lurex, polyester, cashmere, silver, aluminum, and lead, 8.25 x 127 ft. Photo: Courtesy the artist and neugerriemschneider, Berlin

In anticipation of this disjunction between the visual and tactile experience of White's work, I had brought a bag of small objects to the museum. I wanted to see how she encounters things physically. How does she choose between one type of thing and another, especially since her materials have ranged from precious museum objects to the spider webs and cat whiskers that she collected in her early career? In the museum café, I empty the bag onto the table. A large quartz crystal, two magnets in the shape of Scottie dogs, a hand-painted tin mirror, a small plastic toy, and a pin tumble out. White leans forward and laughs. "This looks like someone's sand tray therapy, from Jungian psychotherapy. It's a tray that's typically painted sky blue on the

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inside, and it's filled with sand. The therapist probably has three or four walls of hundreds and hundreds of things—anything from this," she says, picking up the crystal and holding it up to the window, "to a rose petal, to a giant rat, to a candle. You put together your story based on these objects. I think it's so beautiful." She admits, "I could never do it because I'm always thinking about the viewer."

I have obviously limited the story that White can tell with these objects. In fact, I realize as she starts to pick things up that I've told my own story. I collected these things from drawers and shelves in my house. Why do I keep them all, secreted away? Some are nameless and untraceable, like White's box of toys from the MAK, but others are important to me. I thrill when she picks up a small black feather pin. "What is this?" she asks, testing its solidity between her thumb and forefinger, feeling its weight. "It has a degree of clarity that makes it feel like it's a 3D print, but it's wood? It feels like something that might've been..." she trails off. "It's beautiful. Is it Japanese?" Finally I reveal, sheepishly, that my grandmother made it. It's a replica of a bird feather, carved from basswood. Objects tell stories—cultural histories as well as deeply personal tales. These stories, and the centuries of creative engagement with the world that they evoke, seem to me to be at the core of White's work. She elevates the makers whose work is trapped in museum storage or on the shelves of the Dollar Store, reorienting our relationship to these sometimes beautiful, sometimes banal things. In her hands, they all become inspiration for new art. Each, in its own small way, is a monument to the history of human craft.

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