

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Dissecting and Detecting Stories in Found Objects and Remnants

Contemporary art's storytelling power has been the subject of numerous shows of late, from Gownanus to the Guggenheim, and *Story of a Story* at Brooklyn nonprofit Smack Mellon offers still more evidence of the novel forms narratives can take.



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Installation view of 'Story of a Story' at Smack Mellon (all photos by the author)

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nonprofit [Smack Mellon](#) offers still more evidence of the novel forms narratives can take. One unexpectedly popular tactic in the 13-artist show, which was curated by Shlomit Dror, is a kind of forensic approach that asks viewers to parse collections of found objects, watch methodical dissections, and solve puzzles. This formal tendency — let’s call it “the *CSI* sensibility” — accounts for several of this generally strong show’s most compelling works.

Foremost among them — if for no other reasons than its polychrome palette and central siting — is [Brett Day Windham](#)’s “Cypher (Sunset Park)” (2014), a color wheel of objects the artist found on walks around the titular Brooklyn neighborhood. From a distance, the spread of stuff has that satisfying sense of order and cohesion that makes people arrange their books by [the color of their spines](#). But the compulsion to get up close, pore over the objects — the bundles of pink and orange fabric, tangles of yellow rope, disembodied doll leg, belt buckle that says “VOX” in glittery gold letters, and so on — and draw connections between them is irresistible. Nearby works on paper document Windham’s routes around the neighborhood, her walking partners on each excursion, and her systematic schedule for covering the whole neighborhood. Removed from their domestic, industrial, or public park contexts, the objects become clues to their stories and settings of origin.

A similar spread of strange objects awaits in [Alisha Wessler](#)’s two table-top installations, though of a distinctly more mystical sort. One includes seedpods, the remains of birds, wasps’ nests, and a squirrel tail, while the other, “After the Soldiers and Shrikes” (2015), consists of a quasi-modernist geometric arrangement of honey locust thorns. (If Walter De Maria hadn’t died, but had merely been miniaturized in a [freak shrinking ray accident](#), he might have made something that looked like this.) Considering these artifacts feels like peering into some foreign culture’s Wunderkammer, or analyzing the evidence gathered at the site of a pagan ritual. The threat of violence lurking in the

beautiful honey locust thorns is not merely a product of their incredible sharpness and presentation reminiscent of arrowheads in a history museum; the thorns were used by Confederate soldiers during the Civil War to pin together their tattered uniforms, and the small carnivorous birds called shrikes are known to impale their prey on them. These stories might be impossible to discern without the helpful wall text provided, but the elegance and simplicity of “After the Soldiers and Shrikes” is deeply satisfying as its own formal end.



Installation view with Alisha Wessler, “After the Soldiers and Shrikes” (2015) in the foreground

Like Windham and Wheeler’s installations, Eduardo Gil’s featured project consists of collected objects imbued with traces of their previous owners and uses. The Venezuelan artist donated new pillows and toys to two orphanages in Caracas in exchange for their old pillows, which — much like another trope of investigative TV dramas, the psychic detective — he presented to several practitioners of Santería to “read.” The work, “Readings of Saliva, Sweat and Tears” (2013), consists of the seven pillows mounted on the gallery wall, with

speakers concealed beneath them, on which recordings of the psychics' interpretations of the lives of the pillows' former owners play. The readings, which are translated on nearby placards, range from incredibly detailed and specific ("A person by the name Yisnardi Andreina used this pillow. Yisnardi says she is 13 years old and is pregnant.") to generic ("This pillow was used by a man. A tall man with barely any hair and light brown skin."). Whereas Windham's piece lets us project stories onto found objects, Gil gives us others' version of things to consider, compare, and dissect.

Dissection, as it happens, may be *Story of a Story*'s most prevalent forensic procedure, with two videos involving some very precise scalpel-wielding. The "CSI sensibility" is especially strong in [Margaret Lee's](#) video "Teddy's Surgery" (2013), which is really more of an autopsy and consists of point-of-view footage of the artist methodically slicing apart a small teddy bear and extracting its innards. Lee balances the inherent dark humor of the footage by performing the autopsy at a very measured pace while narrating her movements, giving the act an affecting, sentimental charge. Meanwhile, [Hadassa Goldvicht's](#) two-channel video "[My Mother's Wrinkles As They Bloom](#)" (2007) involves a more autobiographic sort of surgery. The piece shows the artist cutting the wrinkles out of a superimposed photo of her mother on one screen, while on the other she applies the excised wrinkles directly to the camera's lens so that Goldvicht seems to literally inherit or wear her mother's wrinkles. The video offers up familiar stories — about generational memory, the bond between mother and child, and growing up to irrevocably resemble your parents — in a very subdued and enigmatic form.

To list all the worthwhile works in *Story of a Story* and how they may or may not display elements of the "CSI sensibility" would be tedious — [Karina Aguilera Skvirsky's](#) engrossing "Blogs de la ruta del sol (Blogs from la ruta del sol), Pichon (Piegeon)" (2012) certainly does, [Stass Shpanin's](#) three large paintings



Eduardo Gil, "Readings of Saliva, Sweat and Tears" (2013)



Detail of Jisun Beak, "The King has Donkey's Ear" (2013)



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Samantha Fein, "Spinning Story Wheel" (2013)

