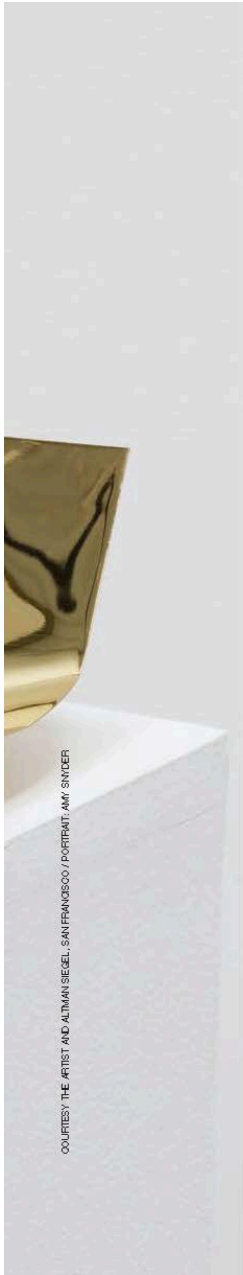


sculpture

Villa Adams, Amanda Dalla, “Making Strange: A Conversation with Zarouhie Abdalian,”
Sculpture Magazine, November/December 2019, p.32-43

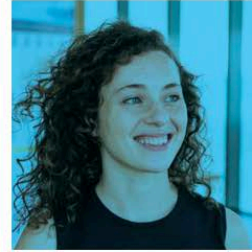


Hold,
2018.
Bullet stone and
gold plate,
2.5 x 4.75 x 4.75 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO / PORTRAIT: AMY SNIDER

q/a



Making Strange: A Conversation with Zarouhie Abdalian

by Amanda Dalla Villa Adams

New Orleans native Zarouhie Abdalian, who recently returned to her hometown after stints in Philadelphia and Oakland, is a multidisciplinary artist whose work often interrogates site-specificity. Using sound, performance, and sculpture, she draws attention to the overlooked by framing a space and restoring forgotten aspects of its layered history—for instance, projecting spoken words about industry into New York's Meatpacking District to question labor relations or replacing sections of siding and fencing at the New Orleans African American Museum with mirrored glass to invite consideration of the site's troubled past. In 2012, Abdalian, who earned her MFA from the California College of the Arts, was awarded a SECA award from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Since then, her installations have appeared in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, as well as at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and the New Orleans Contemporary Art Center.

Amanda Dalla Villa Adams: *Could you discuss your shift from painting and printmaking, which you studied as an undergrad at Tulane University, to site-specific installations incorporating sound?*

Zarouhie Abdalian: Even when I was working in two dimensions, I was interested in where the work would be encountered. How does the location of an artwork affect a viewer's experience of it? For example, in 2004, I was presenting portraiture projects in unusual places such as parking lots and a homeless men's shelter. These shows were early experiments in making work informed by its situation and addressed to various publics.

In 2007–08, I had a residency at the Episcopal Cathedral in Philadelphia. In exchange for studio space, the Cathedral requested that I donate a work for permanent installation in the worship space. *Parallax* (2008) is a light installation that formally echoes a skylight feature in the existing space; in the artwork

■ zarouhie abdalian



however, an image of the Cathedral's West Philadelphia neighborhood is projected into the space, inviting congregants to consider their location within the surrounding neighborhood. I finished that project right before leaving for graduate school at the California College of Arts. At CCA, a decidedly interdisciplinary program encouraged me to think broadly about the context and materials of my work. The experimental art and music scene in the San Francisco Bay Area offered both historical precedent and contemporary context for a broader range of art-making.

ADVA: What was your path toward sound art?

ZA: My partner and collaborator of 13 years, Joseph Rosenzweig, is an artist, musician, and composer. When we moved to the Bay Area, he attended the MFA program in music at Mills College. There was a lot of back and forth between us as we worked through projects and our graduate programs. Many of the materials that I started using, particularly after school, were materials that Joseph knew a lot about and used in his work. It made sense to introduce sound into my installations. In conceiving site-based pieces, I'm often interested in the materials that are already at a site or that might plausibly be found there. Sound is one such commonplace "material." Joseph and I work through my projects together and also produce formal collaborations, including *Transport Empty* and *threnody for the millions killed by silicosis* (both 2017).

ADVA: In *Functions* (2015), performed at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, you consider the work of Luc Ferrari and Pauline Oliveros. How do you think of your work in relation to these historical sound art figures?

ZA: For *Functions*, which is the only work I've made for performance, my historical research was specific to composers and artists who'd made prose scores or instruction pieces. That piece is indebted to Oliveros, Christian Wolff, Allison Knowles, and Yoko Ono. In general, though, I've focused my study mostly on artists working with sound and site—like Max Neuhaus and Maryanne Amacher. In the end, I'd say my work comes from decidedly sculptural traditions, whereas the artists I've just mentioned generally come from musical traditions.

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FROM OPPOSITE:
Zarouhie Abdalan and
Joseph Rosenzweig,
*thready for the millions
killed by silicosis*,
2017,
4.1 audio, 45 min.,
dimensions variable.

Joint fix,
2017,
Mirrored hand tools,
7 x 7 x 10.5 in.



■ zarouhie abdalian

“

If artists want to understand themselves as art workers... **They should choose to work in solidarity with other members of the working class to win equity not just for other art workers, but for all workers.**

”



THIS PAGE:
bunt ü,
2017.
Steel tool head,
4.375 x 1.625
x 1.625 in.

OPPOSITE:
*The fall without
the fruit*,
2012.
Spring scales,
dimensions variable.

ADVA: How do you think about the relationship between visitor and work in your public pieces, including *Occasional Music*, installed in Oakland, California, in 2013, or *Chanson du ricochet*, installed in New Orleans in 2014, at the Whitney Biennial in 2017, and currently at MASS MoCA?

ZA: I learned a lot from working on *Occasional Music*. There were multiple audiences for the piece: there were the people who were already in the downtown area where it was installed, some of whom—whether interpreting it as art or not—noticed and became familiar with the bells that went off at a different time each day, articulating randomized rhythms; there were those who didn't notice the work at all; and there was a group of very noticeable noticers—the art-going public, who would show up just before the bells started and look attentively around the public square. It was important that the work hailed a range of auditors, some engaged in activities other than evaluating artwork and some there for that express purpose. I think it was useful that there was nothing delimiting the space of the work. There was no particular object to look at—in fact, there wasn't even an ideal listening position. Partially because of this, the status of the work's "participants" was ambiguous.

Each installation of *Chanson du ricochet* has been unique, but its first iteration similarly sought to address a range of auditors. Though the work was installed at the New Orleans African American Museum, much of it happened on the side of the campus that faced the sidewalk and street. With both of these pieces, as well as others, I'm aiming to call the viewer's attention to the histories materialized in objects and sites. To effect this, I often find myself working in ways that are subtle or that might be overlooked. This is intentional, because I don't want the works to be too far outside the viewer's everyday experience. The effect I'm after is one of defamiliarization, a making-strange that changes how a site registers in the everyday experiences of the viewer, beyond and away from the site and at the moment of contact with the artwork itself.

ADVA: Boundaries denote different things in your work. You have the boundary of the museum; then, the boundary of your sightline; and finally, the boundary of the sound. How do you think about these multiple boundaries?

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ZA: Boundaries, borders, thresholds, and other features that designate the transition between spaces are interesting to me because they are the parts of material sites where one type of space might butt up against another, where one public might encounter another. The boundaries of art spaces are the places where one might address a broader public. For this reason, I've made a number of pieces for windows, including *Flutter* (2011) and *Interregnum* (2016), and works that deal with more subtle boundaries in public space, such as *Occasional Music*. The meaning of materials also changes along the boundaries that distinguish "art" spaces from their outsides.

ADVA: Part of your practice, namely the sound installations, is very ephemeral; but another part, the sculpture, is materially based. You've used silk, plated security bars, tools, cockleburs, lamb bones, and piano keys. Can you discuss that difference?

ZA: I'm interested in thinking through the specificity of the types of spaces in which I work: outdoor public space, the gallery, the museum, and the art fair. From the time I left graduate school in 2010 until 2015, the bulk of my practice was site-specific. When I started making work for museums, I wanted to treat them as specific places as well. I was thinking about the language of the museum, using vitrine elements to make certain aspects of sculptures inaccessible, as in *As a demonstration* and *Each envelope as before* (both 2013). When it came to producing work for a gallery setting, I initially sought to address that space as a site of public exchange (the objects are there temporarily and then move on to other spaces and collections). This situation has parallels with gift-giving or making offerings—though the "gifts" that I designed were slightly duplicitous, as in the case of *Possy* (2014), which is a bouquet of cockleburs. Recently, however, my intentions around making objects have changed. Over the last couple years, I've been using objects to explore ideas initiated by site-based works. Many of the most recent sculptures came out of *Chanson du ricochet*.

ADVA: Do you make the sculptures?

ZA: I do, though there are certainly parts that I work on with fabricators—for instance, after I sanded and polished the tools in the "Joint" series (2016–17),

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■ Zarouhie Abdalian

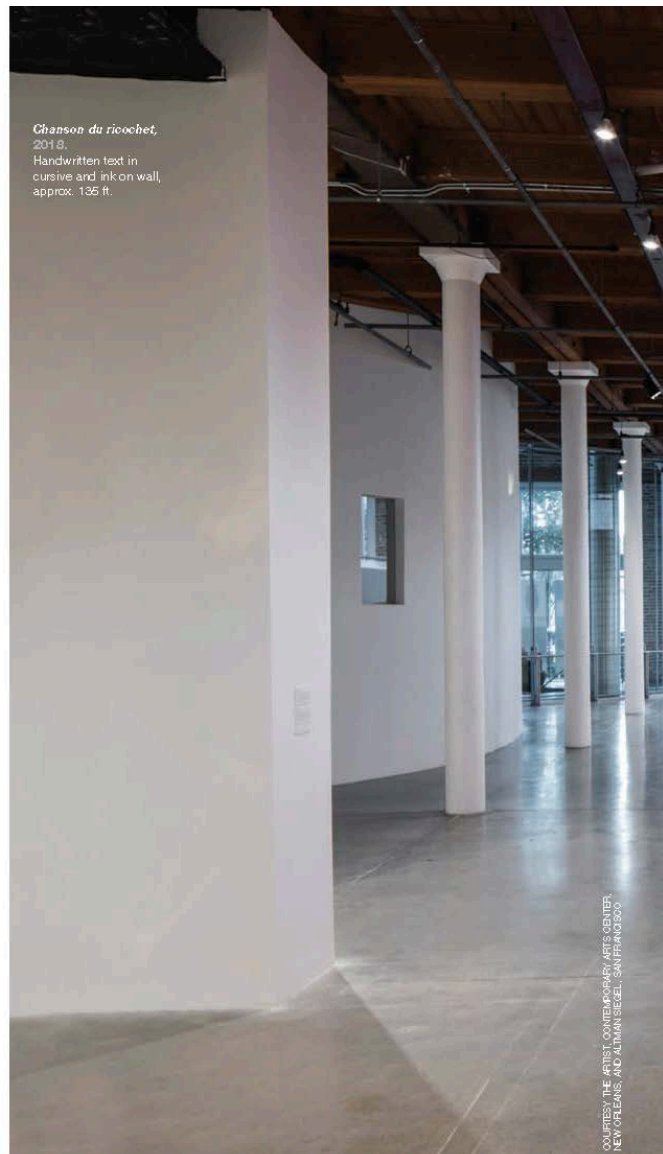
they were nickel plated by a professional. I also work with other professionals, including programmers and welders, and, of course, I work with Joseph on realizing all manner of things. Several recent projects have been at a scale I could not achieve alone. For instance, to make *Banner* (2018), a group of six people, including myself, embroidered a large canvas over a two-week period.

ADVA: Labor, specifically the exploitation of labor, shows up repeatedly in your practice, in *Having Been Held Under the Sway* (2011), *Transport Empty* (2017), and *threnody for the millions killed by silicosis* (2017), to name just a few.

ZA: Under capitalism, most labor is exploited labor. Most people don't work for their own benefit. You're working for a wage, and a capitalist boss is making a profit. Silicosis is an occupational disease that affects stone knappers, lens makers, miners, and others inhaling small particulate matter. As the title indicates, *threnody* is offered as a kind of wailing song, but at the same time, it depicts blunt power and force—the sounds depict the percussive act of knapping as it reverberates through diverse spaces such as a mine, a cathedral, a factory floor, and a dungeon. Through the sound installation, these disparate locations are connected. *Transport Empty* also depicts various spaces. It is made from field recordings at a number of worksites, including a machine shop, a commercial kitchen, a grocery store, and a construction site. It is exactly one hour long, divided into scenes from these worksites and silences that last exactly as long as the scene that follows. The piece mirrors in a condensed form the typical division of workers' waking hours between "free" time and the time during which their labor is at the disposal of a boss.

ADVA: There's a certain level of irony with your interest in labor. As an artist, though you manipulate materials, you also engage in intellectual labor. It reminds me of the moment in the 1960s with the Art Workers Coalition (AWC).

ZA: I understand what you're getting at, but I don't think I'd characterize it as ironic. After all, it is the capitalist mode of production that seeks to divorce



Chanson du ricochet,
2018.
Handwritten text in
cursive and ink on wall,
approx. 135 ft.

COURTESY OF ARTIST ZAROUHIE ABDALIAN / LEFT CENTER,
NEW ORLEANS; AND ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO

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■ zarouhie abdalian



THIS PAGE:
As a demonstration,
2013.
Acrylic vacuum
chamber, electric bell,
and steel.
22 x 25 x 22 in.

OPPOSITE:
to history (iii),
2017.
Colored pencil
on cotton,
60 x 20 x 6 in.

THIS PAGE: COURTESY THE ARTIST, DAMAZEL BERNIELEY, AND ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO /
OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALTMAN SIEGEL, SAN FRANCISCO

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"brain work" from manual work. The advent of capitalism has seen a major increase in the division of labor into limited operations performed by specialists (a division that is meant to increase profits for a few owners). There isn't an inherent contradiction, antagonism, or separation between thinking about materials and processes and manipulating materials. Even under capitalism, artists can work through the complete production process—conception, material testing, making the work. We work in ways that are not specialized; we are not "detail" workers. As a species, we are suffering because of overspecialization—because of the labor process being divided in ways that produce profit—and this siloing, division, and specialization results in nearsighted, profit-driven social arrangements that are not for the benefit of humanity. This is wrong, and I don't think that I should understand what I do and who I am according to this anti-social system.

But, I understand your question to be one about class. One of the problems with the AWC seems to have been that, even while they sought to define themselves as "art workers," as a group, they lacked working-class solidarity. Many artists work in direct service of the bourgeoisie. The stereotypical image of the artist is not usually a worker—many artists are involved in petty production—they are petit bourgeois and own the means of their production. (I include myself in this category.) But even if you are petit bourgeois, even if you have some financial security, the position is a tenuous one—one is always at risk of being driven back down into the working class. (Of course, I'm ignoring the many artists with family money, inheritances, or trust funds.) This unique class character is one of the things that has made artists potentially useful in a revolutionary sense—it also makes them untrustworthy and dangerous.

In the end, the artists who sustain themselves from art production alone are a privileged few. Most artists are also workers: the way they get by is to sell their labor power to somebody who has means and is buying their labor power, which is to say, exploiting their labor. If artists want to understand themselves as art workers, rather than being distracted by individualistic aspirations of success and security and "making it," they should choose to work in solidarity with other



■ zarouhie abdalian



THIS PAGE:
Part,
2014,
Lamb bone and
stainless steel,
21.625 x 7.125
x 4.25 in.

OPPOSITE:
*Each envelope
as before*,
2013,
Acrylic vitrine,
solenoids,
electronics, and steel,
47.75 x 70 x 38 in.

members of the working class to win equity not just for art workers, but for all workers. In 1969, someone wrote an anonymous letter to the AWC proposing just this kind of class solidarity, suggesting that the AWC understand the slogan "all power to the workers" to mean "all power to *all* workers." I think there is revolutionary possibility when art workers join with hospitality workers join with petrochemical workers join with cab drivers, understanding that class interests align.

ADVA: *You were born in New Orleans and left in 2005, shortly after Hurricane Katrina. Why did you return in 2016?*

ZA: When I left, I was always thinking about when I was going to come back. Though Oakland was definitely a home away from home, we felt like we couldn't keep living in the Bay Area. Many artists were being made homeless or leaving because of the housing crisis. Artistically it felt very stifling to be there at that time partly because the community was so stressed and fractured. It didn't feel like we could be useful or afford a future there. It was finally time to move home and figure out what living and working in New Orleans might mean for us.

ADVA: *Critics say that your work is indebted to history, specifically the history of New Orleans. What kind of connection do you see between your work and the city?*

ZA: When I was growing up here, I met an artist named John T. Scott. Mr. Scott would talk about what he called a jazz philosophy of art-making: you make work that is grounded in the present but with a deep sense of its past and a vision for the future. Time isn't linear; what he described and understood was the spherical nature of time. The way I see it, if I diagram it out, is that the present is a tiny dot inside a bigger sphere that is the past. The past is around and is contained in the present, but there is this thing that radiates out, and that's the forward-looking element, the future element. Mr. Scott challenged us as students to try to make art that would function according to this philosophy and understanding of time. How do you make a piece that functions that way? This is something I continue to think about with my work. ■

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HEROINE

Blythe, Finn. "Interviews," HEROINE, Issue 11 (Fall 2019), p.150-153

150

Andrea Andersson,
Chief Curator
of Visual Arts at
New Orleans'
Contemporary Arts
Center, selects four
vital artists working
in the city

INTERVIEWS
Finn Blythe



Joint (ii), 2016, Zarouhie Abdalian

Zarouhie Abdalian

Returning to New Orleans in 2016 following periods in Philadelphia and Oakland, Zarouhie Abdalian admits she had to "re-learn" the city she was born in, such was its transformation in the eleven years she'd been gone. Still visibly scarred by Katrina, the once-ubiquitous jazz clubs, local bars and historic venues showed clear signs of gentrification and the loss of those who'd been unable to return to their homes.

For all that's changed, the same inequalities persist, and her socially conscious practice, grounded in the history of labour, modes of production and working-class legacies, intensified as a result. Her site-specific, multidisciplinary approach, which includes sculpture, found object, performance and sound installation (often in collaboration with her partner, artist and composer, Joseph Rosenzweig), is a pervasive study in material culture, uncovering the dexterity and social histories embodied within.

With her sculptural works in particular, Abdalian explores the boundary between given and made objects, often disguising one as the other. Through her interest in lithic tools, Abdalian isolates the moment humans distinguished themselves from nature – what she perceives as the genesis of human exploitation – and it's this extractive force, which continues to impact Louisiana, that galvanises her practice.

Finn Blythe: Given your experience of living in Philadelphia and Oakland, what is it about New Orleans that you were excited about returning to? What makes it a stimulating city to work in as an artist?

Zarouhie Abdalian: Growing up here, history weighs down the present for better or worse. California is the opposite of that. The mythology of that place is this newness, even though it's not that new, but anything's possible there, you can be whoever you want to be. New Orleans is again, the opposite of that. The past of this place is intrinsically woven in with the present and even when I was living elsewhere, that has very much influenced how I approach place in general. Since returning, I've noticed how people are not only thinking about the past but really trying to imagine a different, more liberated future. Post-Katrina, many of the city's inequalities were exacerbated and exposed, so many things have been privatised and wealth is in the hands of the very few. In many respects we're still living in the same plantation society, run by the same families. Because people are so grounded in history, and so many people have been oppressed for so long, there are a lot of grass-root movements toward a more liberated and freer future which has been incredibly inspiring since moving back.

Finn: So how would you characterise that shift among the city's artistic community?

Zarouhie: Since Katrina there are way more artist-run spaces, that's been the best and biggest shift I've seen. Before, we had the major museums in town and the small commercial galleries, there were still places where people experimented, but not in the formal programming way that's happening now. There are a number of artist-run spaces in a neighbourhood called St. Claude Arts District, which has led to more diverse programming and types of events. Antenna gallery really stands out for that because they run a lot of different platforms that are critical of the arts funding in New Orleans. A lot of the money comes from

The Helis Foundation which receives its funding from gas and oil drilling in Louisiana, so Antenna have been critical of that and we'll see what comes out of it. I think we should be demanding reparations.

Finn: Since returning, do you notice yourself being drawn back to the same things that fired you up before you left or have you shifted your focus entirely?

Zarouhie: When I moved back I had to re-learn the city in a way. I mean, like 100,000 people haven't been able to move back and so that was a shift. A lot of the places I was meeting artist and musician friends before the storm don't exist anymore, they all died with Katrina or closed soon after. Before Katrina I was really inspired by the jazz and funk scene, the brass bands and New Orleans r'n'b but the new residents to the city have made these spaces and public performances almost impossible in certain neighbourhoods. There's been a lot of criminalisation of musicians and a lot of the smaller clubs and bars can't afford to pay off the city so have disappeared. My view of the city has changed. I think when I left I wanted to hold on to what New Orleans was but what's been interesting, for me, about being back is people imagining what it can be, what it needs to be if we're going to survive.

Finn: What do you see as those essential things that make the city what it is and therefore need protecting?

Zarouhie: The people who make New Orleans what it is. What everybody loves about New Orleans exists because of the contribution of working class African Americans and it's now increasingly impossible for them to live here. The city just celebrated 300 years, which everyone's bragging about, but it's so perverse, how do you celebrate that? It's like celebrating genocide and slavery – what we should really be celebrating is the end of that 300 years and the beginning of the next 300, where the working and oppressed majority will have power in the city.

Finn: Your work is so socially-centered and draws attention to a social class that has historically been made invisible, not just in New Orleans but globally. There's an empowering quality to sculptures like your *Joint* series for example, where you've taken these everyday tools out of their context and transformed them into reflective, sculptural compositions that are precariously balanced against one another.

Zarouhie: The mirrored object comes up a lot in my work – I wanted the tools to reflect one another and also to depend on one another. Those sculptures are kind of queer hammer and sickles in a way. The hammer and sickle represent industry and agriculture, but the *Joint* sculptures include tools for reproductive labour and domestic work. I wanted the mirror to also reflect the viewer in the space and therefore make them appear as part of the piece.

Finn: You and your partner Joseph Rosenzweig also produced a sound piece in which you recorded work places where labourers were paid an hourly rate. What were you exploring there?

Zarouhie: That was *Transport Empty*. Most of the locations were around New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, a machine shop or a butcher, a cabinetmaker, a dry cleaners. That work is exactly an hour long and was really thinking about this historical idea of eight hours of work, eight hours of what you will and then eight hours of sleep. The direction of the work is influenced by a piece I made in 2014 called *Chanson du ricochet*, which was made for the African American Museum that opened at the time.

Finn: And this was part of Prospect? [A citywide contemporary art triennial in New Orleans]

Zarouhie: Yes. At that point in my

practice I'd been doing a lot of site-specific works one after another, which I felt wasn't sustainable. I was playing with these ideas and digging into these histories or materials that I wanted to keep working with after the piece was finished. The focus of *Chanson du ricochet* was very much the history that is embodied by the materials of a space and making evident the artefacts or work that's been done to produce something we take for granted in the everyday environment. It was accompanied by a reading of a list of tools and then using reflective surfaces to highlight aspects of the built environment. The lithic tools I showed at LAXART [part of her exhibition *Work*, in 2017] represented a departure in our human history from nature, where we began instrumentalising through violent means. I was interested in the minimal difference that is necessary for something to read as a sculpture and became inspired by these texts that set out how you can differentiate a knapped stone tool from a rock. Often you're looking for things that are barely visible.

Finn: Tiny abrasions or scratch marks?

Zarouhie: Even less than that, like the way the wear has developed over time or the presence of polish. So that minimal difference that dictates how an object is understood or classified informed the way I've been thinking about making sculpture, in a roundabout way.

Finn: It's what I liked about the work you showed at LAXART. Your sculptures play with the given and made. So you have the *from chalk mine* hollow pieces, which are natural objects with the appearance of being man-made, next to the Brunt sculptures – man-made objects but given the context in which they are placed they take on organic forms.

Zarouhie: The Brunt tools came from a pawnshop really near the chalk mine. One of the salient features of these objects is that they're all forged tools, that is, they're handmade. I think of these objects as bearing much more aura than the mass-produced commodities typically designated as readymades. These forged tools are more particular, more concrete than the archetypal readymade. Their surfaces reflect the history of their use, and I wanted to foreground these marks of their time and place.

Finn: Earlier you said you still felt like New Orleans resembled a plantation society in a sense, with the same families in power. I feel like I know what you mean but I wondered what you see as a means of resistance?

Zarouhie: It's a really important question. I think it depends on who you are but what I see as important is contributing to efforts that are on-going and happening now, all across the world. If that looks like being in the streets or publishing a worker's newspaper, or any number of direct actions, it has to happen soon.

ArtReview

Vogel, Wendy, "Zarouhie Abdalian: Production," *ArtReview*, January 2019

Zarouhie Abdalian *Production*

Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans 3 November – 10 February

In *Production*, New Orleans-native Zarouhie Abdalian links the abstract concept of work to the often-overlooked materials of labour – ballast stones, motors, construction tools, the ambient sounds of the workday. Using a spare, poetic aesthetic, Abdalian monumentalises these objects and calls attention to the hidden histories of sidelined and mistreated labouring bodies. These histories, of course, are especially poignant in the local context of the port city of New Orleans and the greater Mississippi. The conceptual artist has long favoured a site-specific method, and most of the works on view are made or adapted for the exhibition. But as she brings her work home, Abdalian lends it an intimate touch.

A dramatic swathe of red cotton, dominating a long wall, draws viewers into CAC's ground-floor converted-industrial space. The museum occupies two levels of a former warehouse for the shuttered pharmacy chain Katz & Besthoff, with a newly opened creative coworking space on top. From afar, the creased *Banner* (2018) resembles one of Tauba Auerbach's large *Fold* paintings of the early 2010s. Closer up, one can see words stitched in crimson across its rumpled surface: LET LIVING LABOR LIVE, LET DEAD LABOR DIE. A distillation of Karl Marx's ghoulish quote about exploitation – 'Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' – the motto brings a punk twist to a piece that could other-

wise rehearse well-worn arguments about women's work. Painted up to the edges of *Banner*, in a neat line across the length of the expansive galleries, is a personalised example of the artist's handcraft. In loopy cursive without discernible breaks, Abdalian has hand-lettered the names of tools without apparent regard for specialisation or function. One excerpt reads: 'whipsawaxe-mortiserouterbobbinailsethacksawpush-broomswitchbladeironcottongin'. The project, titled *Chanson du ricochet*, originated during Prospect.3 in 2014, when the names of tools were read out loud at the New Orleans African American Museum in the Tremé neighbourhood. The artist has explained that the tools referenced labour on the site 'that was historically forced or coerced or overlooked in some way'. Here, the artist has reconfigured this script around her own durational labour.

If these works bear the traces of Abdalian's own hands at work, other pieces deploy recording or casting to pay homage to other workers' efforts. *Transport Empty* (2017), a sound piece made in collaboration with Joseph Rosenzweig, brings together field recordings from many labour sites – including the gallery itself – each followed by a silence of the same duration. The piercing waves of sound make the gallery feel claustrophobic; as the noise ebbs, the space starts to feel larger again. *The stone shall cry out* (2018) is an upright, lifesize resin cast of a New Orleans street paved with ballast stones. These large rocks balanced the weight on outgoing

ships, later tossed overboard to allow room for the ships to return with cargo. Abdalian underscores the latent association with the slave trade by her choice of location. The piece was cast from a stretch of Montegut Street near nineteenth-century rice mills and cotton presses, where raw materials, historically harvested by slaves, were processed into saleable goods. *Hull* (2018) seductively mimics the look of a ballast stone hitting the water, as the rock rests atop a sheet of dented gold-plated metal. Working furthest from New Orleans, Abdalian has cast small fragments, with Hydrocal, from a Tripoli chalk mine in Iuka, Mississippi, in *from chalk mine hollow (i-xii)* (2017). Now abandoned, the mine was worked by labourers who died of a lung condition called silicosis. The casts, each enclosed within a 13 × 15 cm frame, register the marks of their pickaxes, as well as evocative traces of red and blue from the graffiti that now covers the cave.

Within the exhibition, Abdalian has also curated a film programme with six documentaries by artists including Allan Sekula, Kevin Jerome Everson and Flora M'bugu-Schelling. She writes that these films 'endeavour to ascribe meaning to work'. Rather than a didactic supplement to her exhibition, however, the programme may be considered a material extension of it. In her insistence on activating the materials of labour, and letting them be read as such, the artist also makes work of meaning and meaning of work. *Wendy Vogel*



Hull, 2018, ballast stone, gold plate, 61 × 61 × 61 cm.

Photo: Alex Marks. Courtesy Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans

ARTFORUM

Tatum, Charlie, "Zarouhie Abdalian," *Artforum*, November 14, 2018



Zarouhie Abdalian, *Chanson du ricochet*, 2018, ink on wall, 135'.

NEW ORLEANS

Zarouhie Abdalian

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, NEW ORLEANS
900 Camp Street
November 3 - February 10

A seemingly infinite band of delicate cursive text wraps around the walls of two rooms: "sandpaper, casting flask, devil's claw, steam shovel, razor blade, boom, dipstick,

WeedWacker." This textual collection of tools is the backbone of Zarouhie Abdalian's solo exhibition, which reconsiders the conditions under which we collectively name work. The combination of mundane and obscure implements highlights ignored, undervalued, and blue-collar forms of labor. A complement to this visualization is *Transport Empty*, 2017, a compilation of noisy recordings of a commercial kitchen, a construction zone, an auto repair shop, and other worksites.

Always present in Abdalian's practice is a concern for the ways in which systems of production intersect with the art industry, for art itself is complicit in the obfuscation of labor. Many of the artworks on view examine the concept of the readymade, which divorces everyday objects from both their original functions and their intended users. *Clutch*, 2018, juxtaposes these contexts of production via ceramic sculptures Abdalian created by pressing handfuls of clay onto the motor of a car. The hard shapes of bolts and shafts are visible on one side; traces of the artist's fingerprints remain on the reverse. *Joint (ix)*, 2017, represents another consideration of these ideas: Abdalian polished and plated with nickel a wrench, a compass, and a pair of scissors and then leaned the shiny devices against one another to construct a precarious pyramid. One is left with the sense that the structure could collapse at any moment.

— Charlie Tatum

SHARE

ARTILLERY

Morris, Barbara, "Zarouhie Abdalian: Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco," *Artillery* (January 2, 2018)



Zarouhie Abdalian, *To History*, (2017), courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

ZAROUHIE ABDALIAN

Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco

by Barbara Morris ·

January 2, 2018 · in



Known for her minimal interventions in public spaces, creating subtle shifts in environments, either visually or with sound, New Orleans-based Zarouhie Abdalian has garnered significant acclaim. With four components considering the concept of work, "To History" elicits an overall impression of remembrance and remorse.

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Entering the first gallery, one is immediately drawn by the distant sound of banging and tapping that echoes throughout the largely vacant space. Dotted around the expansive gallery, small wall-mounted Hydrocal casts titled *from chalk mine hollow* were pulled from molds made of the walls of the Mississippi Chalk Hollow mine, closed since 1912. (The abandoned mine itself is now a minor tourist attraction.) Each cast bears rough marks denoting where chalk was hacked out from the earth. *From chalk mine hollow (iv)* (all works 2017) houses a vertical trough with a smooth curved edge spanning the length of the slab. The rest is rough and irregular, with peaks, craters and pits, and the faintest traces of pastel pigment.

Six pedestals form regular rows dividing the gallery, each around chest height. Each bears a single metal object, a tool, or head of a tool, *brunt (i-vi)*, encased in a thick coat of rust. The “sharp” edges, each poised on the top of the pedestal, actually appear blunt, having been eroded by time and use. Perhaps they symbolize the human workers who also bore the brunt of their labor; as one considers these objects as stones and monuments, a somber air arises.



Zarouhie Abdalian, *from chalk mine hollow (iv)*, 2017, courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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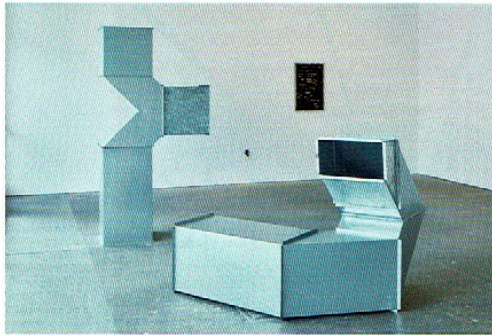
The second gallery features an installation of five hanging cotton panels, *to history (i-v)*, and *brunt (vii)* on a pedestal. Created by a frottage process, with delicate red pencil rubbings made from a six ton wrecking ball, the panels are lyrical, swaying slightly in a small breeze.

The source of the sounds is ultimately revealed in a third gallery, a quartet of speakers mounted high on the wall and a large black subwoofer on the floor, playing *threnody for the millions killed by silicosis*, a collaborative work with Joseph Rosenzweig. At full volume it's deafening, with the base reverberating at an alarming, seemingly cardiac arrest-inducing level. Silicosis is, one may note, a disease endemic to miners who inhale particulate matter. Sounds are of knapping, the process of making stone tools by striking with rocks, digitally mixed to reproduce the effect of echoing within different specific acoustic environments, such as a mine or a dungeon.

The history of mining, like that of civilization itself, is scarred with many acts of abuse and domination. Miners have become an emblem of a certain kind of noble suffering. Still, the feeling of work, in particular of the hardships endured by human beings engaged in such a treacherous activity as mining, seems oddly missing from the equation here, which is all pristine objects and elegant presentation. Yet, as a memorial to lives lost in the name of commerce, there is a quiet dignity to the mute objects—disturbingly juxtaposed with the clamoring soundtrack.

Art in America

Brown, Brandon, "Reviews: Mechanisms," *Art in America*, February 1, 2018



View of the exhibition "Mechanisms," 2017-18, showing (foreground) Chadotte Posenenske's *Series D (Square Tubes)*, 1967, and (background from left) Cameron Rowland's *Constituent*, 2014, and Lutz Bacher's *Mesa*, 2002, at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts.

not just as a quality to perceive but as a lens that can literally and figurately transform our perceptions of an environment. Translucent works on view included a blue plexiglass box by Donald Judd, a candy-colored plastic awning by Diana Thater installed in the backyard, and a hot pink acrylic bubble by Michael Asher that cast a glow on the walls of the institution (which, it bears mentioning, were painted white).

One of the sharpest inclusions was *Forbidden Colors* (1988) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres—four acrylic panels that correspond to the white, green, red, and black fields of the Palestinian flag. The wall text in this case was a letter from Gonzalez-Torres, in which he explained that from 1967 to 1993, the display of these colors in any combination in Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories was punishable by violence and imprisonment. Displaying particular colors in Los Angeles, a city divided along racial lines, has sometimes carried its own risks. The show served to remind viewers that when colors take on an ideological cast, they can have dire consequences.

—Travis Diehl

SAN FRANCISCO

"MECHANISMS" CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts ON VIEW THROUGH FEB. 24

In the Bay Area, the relationship between art and technology is a common topic for exhibitions. Such shows often focus on artists' use of new computer programs and hardware. But rather than simply celebrate innovation qua innovation, "Mechanisms" offers broad, diverse interpretations of what machines are and how humans use and are used by them, asking whether it is possible for artists to utilize machines, or make new ones, and still question and challenge their hegemony.

Anthony Huberman, the exhibition's curator, conceived "Mechanisms" in relation to historical shows that took technology as their theme. In his catalogue essay, Huberman cites the Museum of Modern Art's 1968-69 "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age" as a crucial influence. That show, according to its press release, addressed a "crisis within technology itself, at a time when machines that imitate man's muscles are being supplanted by electronic and chemical devices that imitate the processes of the brain and nervous system." It featured historical items like Leonardo's sketches for "flying machines" alongside contemporary collaborations between artists and engineers. "Mechanisms" echoes this approach by juxtaposing historical works (such as Jay DeFeo's 1987 series of photocopied images of tissue boxes and Charlotte Posenenske's 1967 air-duct-like sheet-steel tubes) with new pieces that recognize, if not a crisis, an aporia regarding the incorporation of technology into everyday life.

Some of the works on view interpret the past through found objects. Pope.L's sculpture *Lever* (2016) consists of the bowl of a porcelain water fountain—that apparatus for hydration and, in the Jim Crow era, forceful segregation—smeared with black acrylic and oil crayon and stuck with chewing gum. On the floor below it spreads Dahn Vo's *Twenty-Two Traps* (2012), a menacing collection of old, rusted animal traps purchased at a public auction in Montana.

Other works play with the notion of "usefulness" as an immanent property of the machine. Zarouhie Abdalian's "Joints" (2016-17) are mirrored replicas of hand tools. Evoking luxury items, the "Joints" remind us that the gallery is a place where things that might have no immediate practical uses can obtain inflated value as artworks. In two 2017 works consisting of multiple reliefs, Patricia L. Boyd imprinted congealed cooking fat with components of used office items (a turntable and an Aeron chair), turning waste products into artworks. Huberman describes the tendency to make artwork that reassigns objects' purposes as applying "elaborate protocols that misalign outputs from their inputs." Cameron Rowland's *Constituent* (2014) is a literally misaligned "output": a destroyed electrical outlet.

The path through the Wattis's galleries culminates with an epic video installation by Harun Farocki, *Deep Play* (2007) features twelve channels showing different perspectives on a single sporting event: the final match of the 2006 World Cup between France and Italy. With audio and visual components ranging from real-time animated simulations of on-field events to behind-the-scenes commentary fed to on-screen reporters, *Deep Play* offers a hyperbolic representation of what most of the event's billion-plus viewers experienced as a simple two-dimensional portrayal. The inputs of such spectacles are more elaborate than we can imagine from our seats in front of the television, and, in confronting us with them, *Deep Play* impedes our view of the actual match. Here, as with much of the art in "Mechanisms," the vaunted attributes of innovation in technology (speed, efficiency, user-friendliness) are called into question—even when they work.

—Brandon Brown

ArtReview

Griffin, Jonathan, "Review: Zarouhie Abdalian Work," *Art Review* (October 2017)

Zarouhie Abdalian *Work*

Jonathan Griffin on the politics of the human use of tools

By **Jonathan Griffin**



Zarouhie Abdalian, work from 'from Chalk Mine Hollow' series, 2017

LAXART, Los Angeles, 30 July – 2 September

Where lies the distinction between the words 'touch' and 'hit'? If you're thinking that the difference is a question of impact, doesn't it depend on the materials involved? Touching a butterfly's wing with your finger is more damaging than hitting an elephant's hide with your hand, for example. Are tactility and physical harm just two ends of a sliding sensorial scale?

It's an unsavoury thought, and I'm not entirely sure where it leads us, but it's one that occurred to me in Zarouhie Abdalian's exhibition, thanks to her juxtaposition of steel tool-heads against delicate Hydrocal casts taken from the surface of a chalk mine. The former – seven tarnished brown metal objects balanced on crisp white plinths – are titled *brunt* (i–vii), while the latter, from *Chalk Mine Hollow* (i–xii), consists of a series of small rectangular slabs mounted flush to the walls (all works 2017.) The tenderness of these fine impressions of the chalk contrasted with the evidence of chisel blows that once hacked away at it. The exhibition is so outwardly airy and genteel that it was a while before my thoughts became embroiled in parsing scales of imagined violence. This is an effect that Abdalian cultivates throughout her work.

Abdalian, who typically kindles reflections on broad socioeconomic, political and environmental issues through deft, smallscale sculptural interventions and soundworks, moves fluidly between the polarities of the micro and the macro. On a digital screen in a side room, black-and-white photographs show the craggy, lapidarian edge of a chisel, vastly magnified. Arranged in an adjacent space are steel and aluminium tools (pipes, beams, levers, bolts, etc) that have been bent out of shape and all usefulness by whatever colossal forces of nature they were once attempting to master.

Perhaps because of the recent visibility of mining as a political and environmental issue in the US news, perhaps because of Chalk Mine Hollow's location in Mississippi and perhaps just because of the fraught times we're living in, it seems appropriate to read these objects and images as signifiers of the brutal injustices of labour. A sound recording of stones knapping other stones made by Abdalian and Joseph Rosenzweig, titled *threnody for the millions killed by silicosis* (referring to the disease caused by inhalation of silica that led the Mississippi mine to be closed in 1912), appears to bear out this dynamic of victimhood.

In other circumstances, however, *Work* might primarily be read as an elegy on humankind's assault on the natural world. The miners, perhaps, are actually the aggressors. More subtle is a third reading – one that I imagine Abdalian intends – that synthesises both of the above. When *Homo sapiens* first took rocks and reimagined them as tools, an unstoppable process was set in motion through which the Earth was reconstituted as a raw material for its own exploitation at the hands of humans. Millennia on, the process had continued until humankind cannibalistically was using members of its own species as expendable, readymade tools.

WORK MIGHT BE READ AS AN ELEGY ON HUMANKIND'S ASSAULT ON THE NATURAL WORLD

Abdalian's exhibition is most compelling when it complicates power dynamics rather than allegorises them. Everywhere, nature is pushing back: rock imprints itself on the steel edge of the chisel; gravity contorts metal implements into softly withered, amputated nubs; mined chalk sickens and kills those who attack it. Both the darkly rusted hammerheads and the wrinkled, blotched surfaces of the Hydrocal slabs are evocative of skin – in this context, plainly (perhaps even simplistically) racialised. Abdalian refrains from sermonising, however, and we never find out what she really thinks about those beleaguered coal miners in Trumpland. On the contrary, labour is romanticised and – for better or for worse – abstracted. *Work* is as much about the Duchampian readymade ('works which are not works of "art"') as it is the backbreaking job of toiling underground. The gallery becomes a comfortable and calming haven from which to reflect on disquieting ideas both big and small, near and very far away. Jonathan Griffin

From the *October 2017 issue* of *ArtReview*

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Zarouhi Abdalian, Work, installation view. Image: courtesy the artist and LAXART, Los Angeles



Zarouhi Abdalian, work from 'brunt' series, 2017

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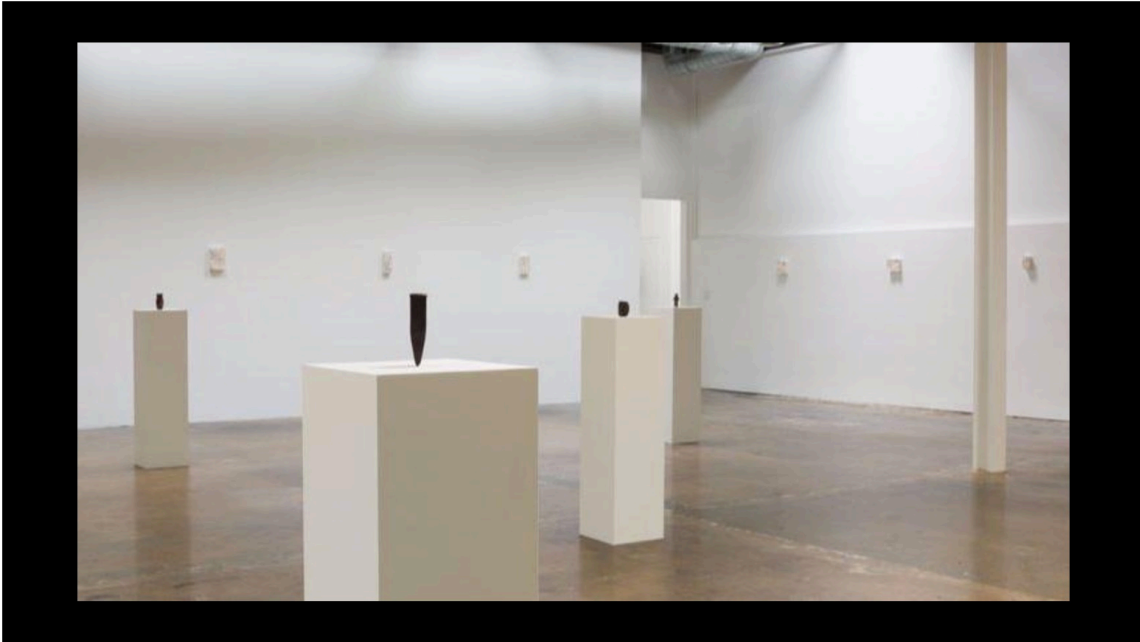
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Los Angeles Times

Mizota, Sharon, "Review: Where the chisel hits the marble: Zarouhie Abdalian seeks the moment nature becomes art,"
The Los Angeles Times, August 25, 2017

Review Where the chisel hits the marble: Zarouhie Abdalian seeks the moment nature becomes art



LAXART's installation of the Zarouhie Abdalian exhibition "Work," on view through Sept. 2. (Ruben Diaz / LAXART)

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AUGUST 25, 2017, 4:30 PM

Zarouhie Abdalian's beautifully spare exhibition at LAXART takes a close look at the point where the chisel hits the marble. The New Orleans artist is fascinated by the moment when natural materials become something else — tools or art — the two basic categories of human-made objects.

Her work raises questions about our relationship to nature and the nature of making.

The walls in the main gallery are lined with small, white, abstract reliefs. The rectangles were excised from an abandoned chalk mine in Mississippi and exhibit the craggy surfaces, pockmarks and scoring of the mining process. They are also quite beautiful: a soft white, tinted with various pastel hues. One could be forgiven for assuming they come from natural rock formations.



Zarouhie Abdalian, "from Chalk Mine Hollow (VI)," 2017. (Ruben Diaz / LAXART)

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Arrayed across the center of the room are pedestals, each bearing a different steel tool head. The heads are the brownish color of heavy industry and are positioned with their chisel edges or hammer heads pointed down, as if frozen in the moment of striking. They are mini-dramatizations of that initial point of contact between a raw material and the person who sees something else in it.

Periodic loud pinging sounds echo from the back room. The audio piece is a recording of knapping, or the process of striking rocks together to make early Stone Age tools. The space reverberates with aural evidence of the advent of tools, the point at which nature became instrumentalized.



Zarouhie Abdalian, "Brunt (II)," 2017. (Ruben Diaz / LAXART)

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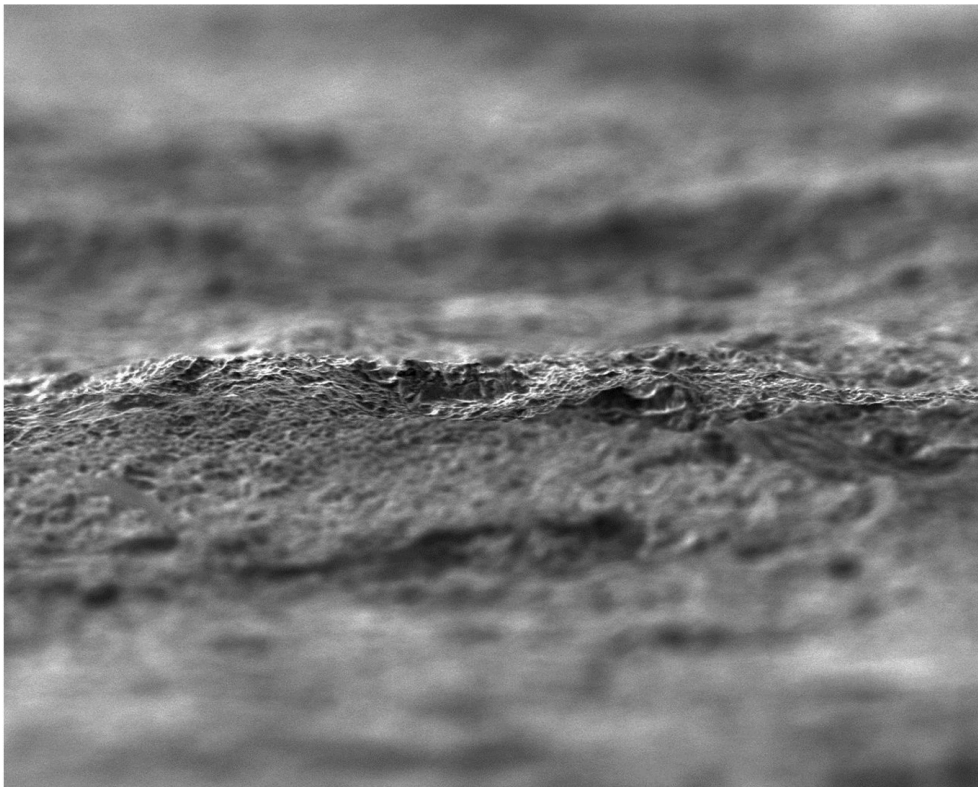
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Still another room contains parts of industrial machinery that have experienced catastrophic failures. These broken bits are testaments to unmaking, the flip side of innovation. They attest to the point at which human ambition outstrips a material's inherent properties.

Finally, in another small space, is a single monitor displaying a series of microscope images of the edges of chisels. Oddly enough, these zoomed-in views look a lot like natural rock formations. The edge of the chisel is a pivot point at which something wavers between its natural state and what we want it to be. For better or worse, Abdalian suggests, tools (and art) are just desire set down in concrete form.



Zarouhie Abdalian, still from "Working Edges," 2017. (LAXART)

Zarouhie Abdalian: "Work"

Where: LAXART, 7000 Santa Monica Blvd.,

When: Closed Sunday and Monday. Through Sept. 2.

Info: (323) 871-4140, www.laxart.org

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ARTFORUM

Fisher, Cora, “Critics’ Picks: Zarouhie Abdalian,” *Artforum* (November 2017)

Zarouhie Abdalian

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25th Street

November 3–December 16

Zarouhie Abdalian’s exhibition “To History” pays tribute to the early industrial laborer, the proletarian figure whom Émile Zola’s novel *Germinal* (1885) described en masse as an “avenging army” that would soon “overturn the earth.” Abdalian’s offerings here—husks of toilsome manual work—bring a material surrogacy for the miner and the migrant.

A fleet of nicked steel hand tools, all titled *brunt* (all works 2017), stands positioned on white pedestals. Abdalian’s Hydrocal relief casts, “from chalk mine hollow,” offer a delicate counterpoint, with chisel marks, an occasional dramatic gouge, and speckles of color lifted from a defunct mine, now covered in graffiti, in Tishomingo County, Mississippi. For the immersive sound piece *threnody for the millions killed by silicosis*, made with Joseph Rosenzweig, the artist learned the technique of knapping, a controlled manual chipping of stone for the purpose of making tools. The clank of lithic instruments resounds across acoustic simulations of a dungeon, cathedral, mine, and factory. Finally, there is “to history,” a series of five burgundy-on-white drawings on cotton, which are rubbings taken from a massive wrecking ball. Scars of impact become sanguine frottage.

Abdalian’s investigation into the haptic and sonic character of industrial labor produces an archaeological aesthetic. It seems more precise, however, to think of her tracings as quasidocumentary interventions that draw attention to extractive practices taking place all over the world, parallel to the rise of automation. In this sense, the show’s dedicatory title speaks in equal measure to the present.



View of “Zarouhie Abdalian: To History,” 2017.

Art in America

Pocock, Antonia "First Look: Zarouhie Abdalian," *Art in America*, May 2016, p. 33

Zarouhie Abdalian

by Antonia Pocock

OAKLAND-BASED ARTIST Zarouhie Abdalian (b. 1982) creates sculptures and sound installations that reveal the physical and historical conditions of a particular site. Since earning her MFA in 2010 from Oakland's California College of the Arts, Abdalian has received commissions for site-specific works at international biennials and at such institutions as the Berkeley Art Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. For "The Space Between" at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, artists were invited to work with areas beyond the galleries, such as stairwells and courtyards—a prompt that aligns with Abdalian's predilection for interstitial spaces. She created a sound piece in a garage near a construction site. The piece incorporates a voice intoning different terms for "labor."

Abdalian's first solo exhibition in New York, at Clifton Benevento, presents a constellation of subtly altered found objects that echo the features of the gallery and of each other. *Openings* (all works 2016), a mortise lock affixed to the wall just past the gallery entrance, draws attention to the noises particular to this space. Wired to an electronic device, the lock clicks periodically, punctuating the clanging of the gallery's radiators and the creaking of its floors. The iron scrollwork of *Close of winter*—a security gate the artist disassembled into four vertical fragments—resembles the ornate ironwork found in the building. *One into Two* comprises two plaster busts representing the Roman god Janus. Typically a double-headed figure, Janus is here shorn apart and repositioned to face himself as in a mirror—one of many instances of doubling in the installation. Hanging

in one of the gallery's windows is a transparent screen printed with a photograph of the rooftops outside. This view includes a tarp-covered roof that is echoed by a taut tarp hanging inside at a diagonal from the gallery ceiling. In turn, the tarp's form mirrors the oblique face carved into the surface of a lava rock in the corner.

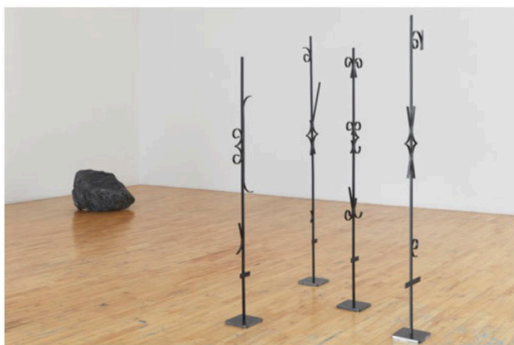
Abdalian's selection of materials and forms highlights the distinctive mix of industrial and classical elements in the surrounding architecture. The SoHo gallery is located in a former store building constructed in the 1880s. After a period in the 1960s and 70s, when such buildings served as studios for artists, the structure has returned to its original purpose as a locus of commercial activity—in this case, the sale of artworks.

Janus, the god of doorways and passages, establishes the central theme of the installation. All of the pieces represent transitional spaces: a lock from a door, a gate, a window. A tarpaulin implies construction, and a lava rock a change of state. In this way, the work internalizes the function of the gallery as a site where art objects are always passing through.

Abdalian's works have consistently explored liminal zones, from her simulation of broken glass on the windows of her graduate school building to reflect the dilapidated surrounding neighborhood, to her timed light installation in an abandoned storefront for the 2013 Shanghai Biennial. Born and raised in New Orleans, a city in which the effects of time on materials is pronounced, Abdalian is particularly attentive to the ways in which historical processes are embedded in physical transformations of spaces. ○

CURRENTLY ON VIEW: Zarouhie Abdalian's solo exhibition "A Betrayal," at Clifton Benevento, New York, through May 14.

ANTONIA POCOCK is a PhD candidate at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.



View of Zarouhie Abdalian's exhibition "A Betrayal," 2016, showing (left) *From what is called Mono County*, 2016, lava rock, and (right) *Close of winter*, 2016, painted steel. Courtesy Clifton Benevento, New York. Photo Elisabeth Bernstein.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Pagens, Peter, "Wise-guy-isms, Fence Posts and the Number Six," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2016

Zarouhie Abdalian: A Betrayal

[Clifton Benevento](#)

515 Broadway, (212) 431-6325

Through May 14

Ordinarily, Zarouhie Abdalian (b. 1982) creates installations of a somewhat abject nature, polite versions of the more politically aggressive site-specific intrusions of Hans Haacke or Jerri Allyn. In 2014 at the New Orleans African-American Museum of Art (Ms. Abdalian went to college at Tulane), the artist coupled a man's recorded voice reciting the names of tools used by slaves, with a brick path going around the rear of the institution, and some strategically placed mirrors, to build what the Museum termed "a study in moderation" and a "temperate intervention."

In the right context, which is to say someplace bigger, grittier and less cozy than a standard white-cube art gallery, such installations can work poetic wonders. Confined to a contemporary art emporium, however, an artist such as Ms. Abdalian is often forced either to fill up the chamber so much that it feels like granny's attic, or to attenuate the offering so that the viewer gets a pretty good idea of what the artist is usually up to, aesthetically and philosophically, elsewhere. Here, Ms. Abdalian has chosen the latter.

The gallery contains (counterclockwise from the entrance, as museum labels are wont to say) a wall-mounted mortise lock, two small plaster busts of a Classical man's head facing each other, a printed translucent screen mounted on a window, a lava rock on the floor, and four

black steel sculptures that look like poles from a decorative fence. The rest of the gallery is conspicuously bare, which is, one assumes, a bit of the point. How it all mounts up to "A Betrayal" is difficult to say. Although one simply has to take Ms. Abdalian's word for it, her track record makes her fairly trustworthy.



'One into two' (2016) by Zarouhie Abdalian
Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein/Zarouhie Abdalian/Clifton Benevento, New York