

FRIEZE.COM



In Profile: Jessica Jackson Hutchins

A pivot to glass by the sculptor shows an attempt to see hope through political disillusionment

By: Laura van Straaten
December 1, 2017

Jessica Jackson Hutchins has long explored the tensions between domesticity, femininity, labor and craft through her free-standing and wall-mounted sculptures, fashioned from common materials such as clay, papier-mâché, concrete, well-worn furniture and commercial textiles in various states of decay. But her latest solo exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, *The People's Cries*, marks a pivot for the artist. In addition to several multimedia floor sculptures, Hutchins traverses higher-strung emotional and political terrain – including the election of Donald Trump – in a new medium for the artist: multicolored fused glass panels whose prettiness she wields like a weapon.

The panels have been packed tightly along 12-meter rectangular skylights; each is a discrete work with its own title (all from 2017), though they fit together like one continuous frieze, or a cartoon strip that lacks a clear narrative. 'I found myself working in this beautiful new medium at the time when the political climate in the United States was beginning to change drastically,' Hutchins writes in the press release. 'The sensory extravagance (the gorgeousness!) of colored light was as overwhelming as the political upheavals and injustices.' She goes on to describe the light and color of the glass as creating 'a kind of hallowed space' that might 'be the salve of hopefulness that we need right now.'

Making use of a medium associated with medieval church windows, Hutchins's glass panels are a sacrament of a different sort. Their surfaces bear painted phrases from punk songs and political placards carried by protesters around the world: 'General Strike', 'Power Up', 'Mercy for the Innocent', 'Oh Bondage Up Yours'. Elsewhere, she's canonized recognizable figures like the activist Angela Davis, whose image appears in the mix. Hutchins has also kitted out the gallery's front window, so her work is visible from the street.

Despite the anger, fear and frustration apparent in these words and images, Hutchins has found redemption – and even delight – in working with a new material, which she manipulates playfully in a palette far more vibrant than the muted mauves, yellows and earthy tones of her earlier sculptures.

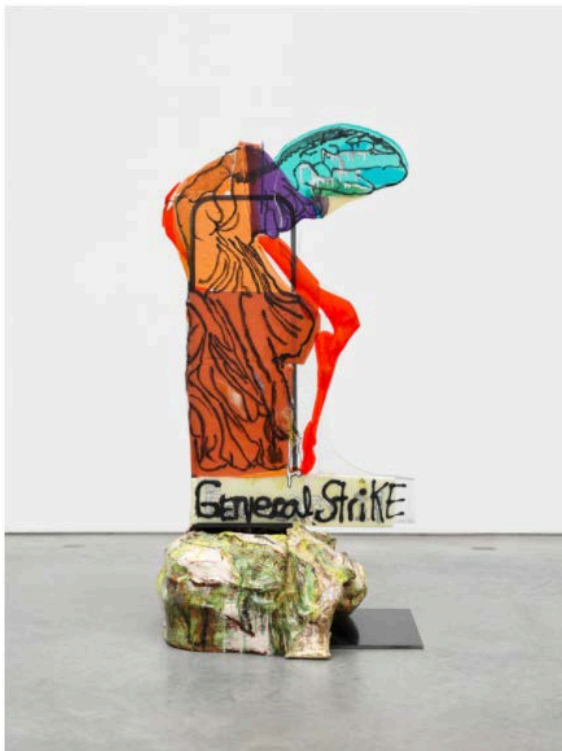
'The colored glass is kind of whiz bang insanity,' she told me with a laugh when we spent a day together in Portland, Oregon – the city where she lives and works – in August. We drove to the Bullseye Glass Studio, where she has been in residence for several months, to see the glass panels in progress for her Marianne Boesky show. Weaving through traffic in her dusty minivan, we gabbed about growing up in Chicago, where she and I were three years apart at the same small private primary school, just blocks from Lake Michigan. Though I have followed her career, we had not been in touch for decades. We talked too about our tough teenage years, by which time we had each lost our mothers and begun to dabble in bad behavior. We both credited school, especially literature and the arts, for giving us something to hold onto. 'I always felt like art was salvific,' she said.



While scouting locations for the 2016 Portland Biennial, Hutchins found herself in an abandoned Christian Science Reading Room in Pendleton, Oregon. She noticed that several of the stained glass panels on the ceiling's oculus were missing. She said she was seized with a desire to fill the gaps with her own glass works, despite never having worked with the material: 'Within five minutes I had called a glass fabricator I had heard of in Portland and was on my way there.'

At Bullseye, Hutchins demonstrated how she used a scoring tool to hand-slice sheets of pre-pigmented glass and then composed them into collages, drawing with paint and adding in other materials for detail and texture. A kiln melts her compositions together, leaving in slight overlaps in color and a crude messiness that she favors. (The fresh panels immediately evoke Shrinky Dinks, the 1970s craft of our youth that encouraged kids to melt plastic into shapes in an oven.) In addition to the skylight panels, Hutchins has designed metal stanchions so that several of the panels can be incorporated into the floor sculptures or installed at eye level on vertical walls and illuminated from the back, which makes imperfections in the glass more visible; in some sections, the uneven surface of the glass reveals where Hutchins has permitted small air bubbles to form and freeze. 'With glass especially you run the risk of it being design-y,' she explains, 'So these imperfect bits help get it to be complicated, emotional and about human frailty and urgency instead.'

An imperative not to be 'perfect' or 'precious', as Hutchins puts it, is something she's carried over to glass from her work in ceramics. She completed an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but she decided to learn ceramics by taking 'adult-ed' courses at the Oregon College of Art and Craft. While Hutchins is included in *Vitamin C: Clay and Ceramic in Contemporary Art*, a survey of the top 100 artists worldwide working in ceramics published last month by Phaidon, she remains almost defiantly uninterested in acquiring – or at least showcasing – her own skills. 'That came from a decision I made to avoid a kind of slickness that becomes co-opted so easily,' she explained. 'I want to resist design and commodification, even of the artist's hand, in favor of privileging a crude eccentricity, allowing for a sense of entropy and punk instead of a rarified perfection.'



The day we visited Bullseye, we also dropped by Hutchins's brand-new main studio, in Southeast Portland. Half-finished floor sculptures destined for her shows at Boesky and a January show at The Pit in Los Angeles were strewn about the hulking street-level structure. Incorporating a mishmash of materials more in keeping with her signature style, such as fabric and clay, many of their ceramic forms often evoke the often lumpy heft of human figures without being overtly figurative. 'I like to use fabric for softness and for 'culture' – color and texture – and to interrupt the hard with the soft,' she explained.

At one point, Hutchins sat down in her studio on an upholstered chair whose cushion now forms the foam plinth for her most figurative ceramic work in the Boesky show, *Cushion* (2017) – a pair of ceramic figures fused in an embrace. 'Creative process is still in many ways my content,' she mused, leaning back into its peachy plushness. 'It is the meta content.'