

Drawing Form

Jill Bonovitz



BY SCOTT ROTHSTEIN

Opposite: *Untitled*, 2013. Wire and string, 22 x 18 x 11 in. This page: *Untitled*, 2015/16. Wire, berry, and clay, 1.5 x 2 in.

Jill Bonovitz, an artist with an intensely personal aesthetic sensibility, is known for her idiosyncratic ceramic sculptures. The matte opacity and restrained color of her glaze gives each object a visual weight and substance, despite its small scale. In addition to these clay pieces, for the past 15 years, Bonovitz has been using thin metal wire to make a series of intimate and nuanced works. Bending and twisting elements, she creates line drawings and invests them with form. In contrast to her ceramics, these works appear to elude gravity. The lines suggest movement as wires intersect and randomly catch the light.

These lyrical and rhythmic sculptures appear structurally precarious. They are fabricated in a manner that seems more haphazard than skilled. Yet Bonovitz is an exceptionally informed artist, who always creates work with the most focused intent. With her wire pieces, she offers forms both delicate and subtle that occupy a domain of fragility, exposure, and vulnerability.

Bonovitz began using wire in a curious and roundabout way. Rather than the result of a deliberate pursuit or artistic exploration, her discovery of the material was accidental—she noticed that fruit was rotting in a bowl and crafted a wire basket, thinking this container might stop the decay. The experiment was unsuccessful since the fruit still deteriorated, and she abandoned the idea. But there was something about the basket that resonated with Bonovitz; she was just not clear why. So, she chose not to discard it, and without any specific thought in mind, secured it to a wall in

her studio. Over time, the object suggested possibilities, and Bonovitz began to experiment with wire.

The first works resembled baskets made to be placed on a pedestal or shelf, constructions suggesting the possibility of containment. Though it is tempting to see these pieces as objects that could hold other things, the connection to function, in fact, is conceptual. These sculptures imply shapes without actually defining them.

Later pieces were built to mount on the wall or hang from the ceiling. The impression of drawing in space is clear in these

efforts. It is as if Bonovitz had found a magic pen capable of rendering in three dimensions. These works convey the same energy as rapid, spontaneously made drawings. Although in the strictest sense it may be accurate to refer to them as sculptures, they are more aligned with installation, offering an experience rather than presenting a defined object. Bonovitz's wire pieces, whether on a wall or suspended in space, are more about the moment and less about permanence or structure.

Recently, she has been making diminutive sculptures that are her simplest to date. Working with a small base, she attaches one or two wires, and then, with only a few manipulations, she completes the piece. These objects might seem like models for much larger constructions, but they are hyper-intimate, finished sculptures that reveal Bonovitz at her purest—using only what is essential to create art.

This sensibility, the notion of things reduced and attentively nuanced in detail, comes from her long-time attraction to a particular aspect of Japanese art. In Japan, the concept of *mingei*, a sense of beauty that can be found in the commonplace, was first expressed in the early 20th century. Although originally applied to folk

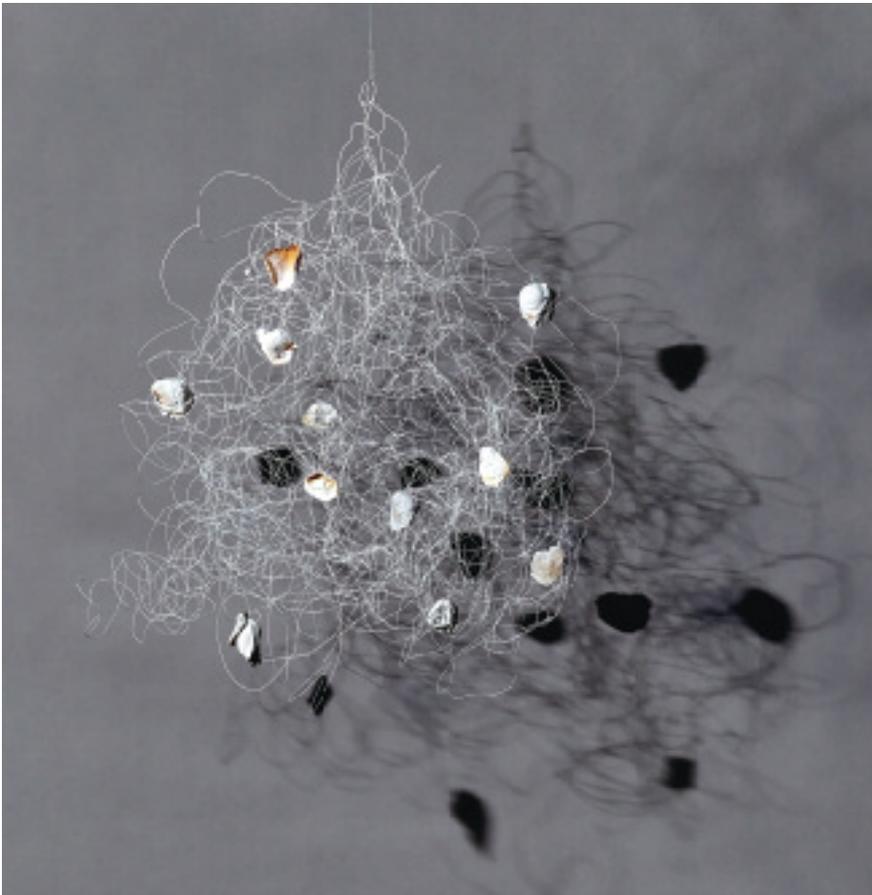


Above: *Untitled*, 2016. Wire and paint, 6 x 16 x 20 in. Below: *Untitled*, 2015–16. Wire, paint, clay, and plant material, dimensions variable.





Above: (left) *Untitled*, 2015–16, wire, paint, petal, and clay, 2.5 x 3.5 in.; and (right) *Untitled*, 2015–16, wire, paint, petal, and clay, 2 x 2 in. Right: *Untitled*, 2013. Wire and tape, 24 x 18 x 16 in. Below: *Untitled*, 2015. Wire, paint, and rose petals, 28 x 24 x 15 in.



art, this aesthetic orientation subsequently infiltrated the world of painting and sculpture. *Mingei* is the conceptual underpinning that grounds Bonovitz's approach.

For 30 years, she has occupied the same studio, a third-floor loft in South Philadelphia. The space functions as a sanctuary and a place to work, but it is also an environment in which everything reinforces a frame of reference. Collected objects

coexist with sculptures both realized and in process, in a range of mediums. A consistent, limited color palette runs through the space, defining a personal narrative and creating a place to concentrate without distractions. Bonovitz needs such a space more than most because of her multifaceted involvement in the art world.

In addition to exhibiting her work in museums and galleries, she serves on the

boards of several arts organizations. And, together with her husband, she has assembled a significant collection of American outsider painting and sculpture, which has been exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Their collection is a promised gift to the museum.) Bonovitz has also given an important group of embroidered textiles from India to the same institution.

As a museum board member and adviser, Bonovitz is tasked to consider many types of art. Most are fundamentally different from her own work. To stay grounded, focused, and true to her vision, time in the studio is critical for her. In a sense, her studio is an installation in itself. It is a space filled with details in a range of materials. Each object, whether made by Bonovitz or carefully collected, appears responsive to the next. Things are added and taken away, giving the impression of exploration and work in progress. Here, Bonovitz, without pretense, reveals how the compelling can be found in the ordinary. She speaks softly through her thoughtful work, offering an experience, but never demanding an encounter.

Scott Rothstein is an artist and writer based in New Mexico.