
FRESH PERSPECTIVES *on the Permanent Collection from* DARTMOUTH'S STUDENTS

A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

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Designed by Christina Nadeau
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CHECKLIST

Erica Baum, American, born 1961
Ribbon, 2010, archival pigment print
Purchased through the Olivia H. Parker and John O. Parker '58 Acquisition Fund, the Robert J. Strassenburgh II 1942 Fund and the William S. Rubin Fund

Alice Hutchins, American, 1916–2009
Untitled, 1968, cylinder magnet, bearings, tubes
Gift of the artist; GM.988.10.2

Louise Lawler, American, born 1947
This Takes the Cake, 1991, mixed media, artist-designed paper on commercially prepared matchsticks
Gift of Trevor Fairbrother and John T. Kirk; 2010.88.18.3

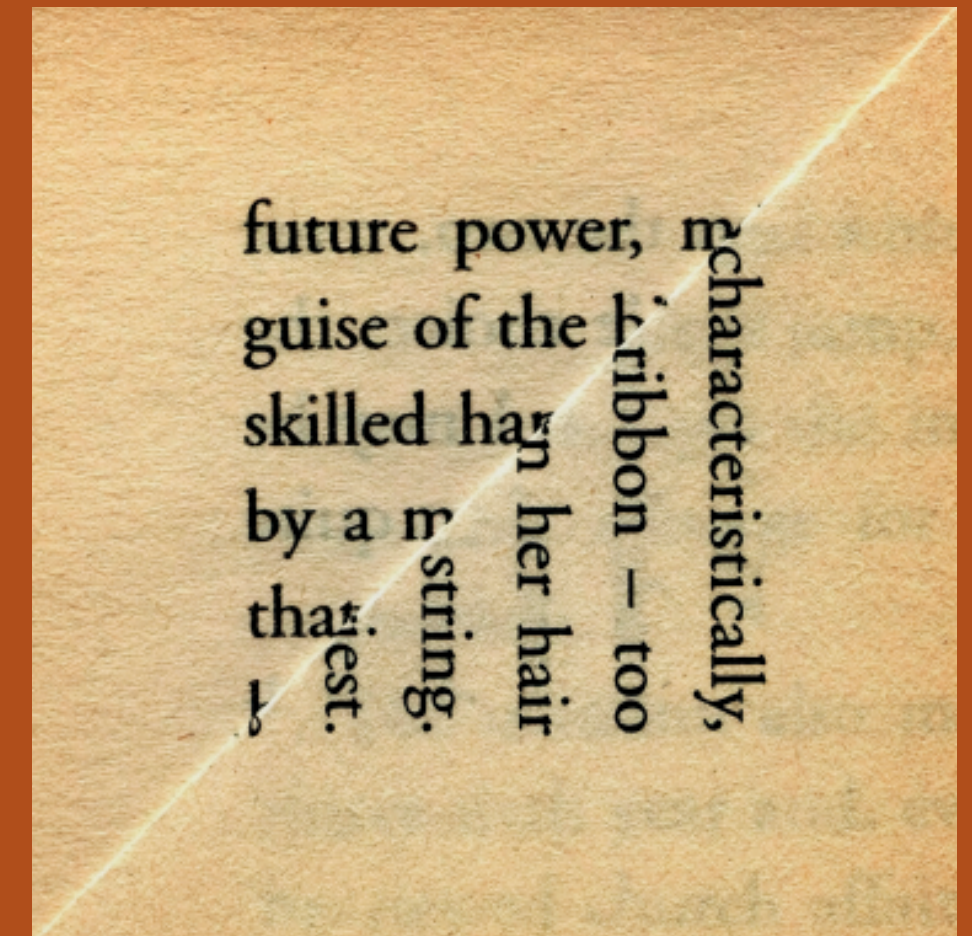
Catherine Opie, American, born 1961
Dyke Deck, 1997, playing cards with screenprint photographs with a clear case
Gift of Trevor Fairbrother and John T. Kirk; 2010.88.24

Takako Saito, Japanese, born 1929
Heart Box, 1965, paper box covered with drawings filled with smaller paper boxes with drawings
Gift of Alison Knowles; GM.978.212

Mieko (Chieko) Shiomi, Japanese, born 1938
Disappearing Music for Face, 1965, thirty-nine-page stapled flipbook with sequential images of Yoko Ono's mouth losing a smile by Peter Moore from the Fluxfilm of the same name
Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; GM.987.44.2

Richard Tuttle, American, born 1941
Section I, Extension M, 2007, mixed media
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2011.66

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Erica Baum, *Ribbon*, 2010, archival pigment print. Purchased through the Olivia H. Parker and John O. Parker '58 Acquisition Fund, the Robert J. Strassenburgh II 1942 Fund, and the William S. Rubin Fund

REJECTING THE DIMINUTIVE

Small-Scale Art, the Viewer, and the Art World



Louise Lawler, *This Takes the Cake*, 1991, mixed media, artist-designed paper on commercially prepared matchsticks. Gift of Trevor Fairbrother and John T. Kirk; 2010.88.18.3.

By contrast, very small artworks were typically looked down upon as timid and unadventurous, domesticated by a size shared with doll-house miniatures, souvenirs, and precious collectibles. Ultimately, most modernists tended to view tininess as a forfeiture of artistic authority.

—Ralph Rugoff, *At the Threshold of the Visible: Minuscule and Small-Scale Art, 1964–1996*

Small-scale contemporary art has often been ignored or trivialized by scholars and critics. This exhibition looks at seven works that reveal different strategies for rejecting conventional artistic standards. Some of these artists appropriate “insignificant” materials—either everyday or ephemeral in nature—while others employ a hybridized practice to break down traditional institutional boundaries between “high” and “low” art.

Despite their size, the intellectual process behind small works can be quite complex. Erica Baum’s *Ribbon*, one of the scanned and enlarged photographs of dog-eared pages in the *Dog Ear* series, is inspired by her son’s method of bookmarking and her fascination with “ephemeral printed language.” *Ribbon* transforms acts of reading, seeing, and understanding of text (Goldsmith, vii), suggesting multiple ways of encountering it anew. The fold in the middle of the image does not disrupt the continuity of the text but rather adds new visual, linguistic, and auditory effects, as the printed characters meet to create different symbols on the page. The intricacy of this small work demands our close scrutiny, which in turn negates the difference

in scale between the viewing body and the work of art. The humorous, playful quality of *Ribbon* is, in fact, only possible in the context of its small scale.

The issue of scale is particularly apparent in sculptural works. In “Blowup—The Problem of Scale in Sculpture” (1968), art historian and critic Barbara Rose attributes the twentieth-century American obsession with monumental and masculine sculpture to the demands of institutions such as banks, churches, museums, and schools to enhance their prestige and standing in the most literal way possible. A sculptor’s choice to work small constitutes a rejection of this principle, as well as the market for large art that follows from it. Alice Hutchins’s magnet art is not only small but also interactive, as the audience is invited to rearrange the pieces. However, neither Hutchins nor her work’s participants have full control over the work—their intentions are always subject to the force of the magnet, thereby producing a “serendipitous event” (Hutchins, 12). Hutchins’s magnet, an everyday material rarely used in art, actually repels the authority generally attributed to artists regarding their work.

Like Baum and Hutchins, Catherine Opie and Louise Lawler also appropriate everyday material to oppose the preconceptions associated with high art. Opie’s *Dyke Deck* draws attention to a demographic whose representation is often neglected in art, presenting a playful, confident, diverse group of lesbian women to question stereotypes using a commercial language. The work’s impact is enhanced by the hand-held quality of the playing card, which leads one to treat each woman represented there as an individual. Yet Opie concedes that it remains a challenge to reach people. She notes, “A lot of times in queer culture no one looks at this amazing work that’s been done in the art community” (Ferguson, 258). Lawler’s *This Takes the Cake* is a different kind of institutional critique. Her matchbooks are distributed to the general public and frequently “placed, replaced, displaced” rather than exhibited in some permanent fashion in an art gallery or museum (Fraser, 2). The placement of the matchbooks, Andrea Fraser observes, “disrupts institutional boundaries that determine and separate the discrete identities of artist and art work from an apparatus that supposedly merely supplements them” (Fraser, 3).

Sometimes, small art works have an ephemeral quality, as exemplified in works by Baum, Lawler, Richard Tuttle, and Takako Saito. Tuttle’s *Section I, Extension M* and Lawler’s *This Takes the Cake* both use common, disposable commercial material. Made of cheap cardboard paper, *Section I, Extension M* rejects “conventional aesthetic values such as purity of execution, permanence and concreteness in the art object” (Dallas Museum of Fine Art). Yet this sculptural work is not straightforward, by any means. Partly painted and placed against

the wall, it acts like a painting too, and this merging of art forms “expands and explodes the definitions of sculptures, painting, and drawing” (Grynsztein, 29). Tuttle’s work resists any association with timidity, instead realizing a “physical proportion that is ‘just right’ insofar as it correlates precisely to the work’s intentions” (Grynsztein, 45). Rose observed that many artists “replace content with scale” in large art (Rose, 161). Small works such as Tuttle’s, though, demonstrate that embracing smallness need not be a compromise in this regard but rather a thoughtful act to convey specific content and effect.

Likewise, the fragility of Takako Saito’s *Heart Box* has a definite purpose. Dedicated to Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles and their daughters, this paper box is filled with images of the family and “drawings of objects and scenes from the world” (Baas, 70). The personal relationship Saito had with this family is captured in the intimacy of this hand-held work.

Associated with the Fluxus movement, Hutchins, Saito, and Mieko Shiomi’s works specifically challenged rigid aesthetic conventions by working with an intermedial orientation. Apart from being interactive and performative, Saito’s *Heart Box* references games. Shiomi’s *Disappearing Music for Face*, in turn, references music. Presented as a flipbook—which supplies a free “movie” of sorts—*Disappearing Music for Face* captures Yoko Ono smiling and then gradually shifting back to a neutral facial expression. This change in expression simulates a decrease in volume. Through “visualiz[ing] a diminuendo of music by human action,” *Disappearing Music for Face* attributes sound to the visual, a quality that is indiscernible to most viewers (Yoshimoto, 154).

The artists in this exhibition prove that it is not the scale of the work but rather our preconceptions about scale in art that are limited. Small-scale art works speak to those who are willing to pay close attention to them. Once viewers abandon their preconceptions, they open the door to hidden, humorous, playful, and complex elements in these works. As Gaston Bachelard suggests, “One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small” (Rugoff, 15).

Winnie Yoe ’14,
Homma Family Intern



Takako Saito, *Heart Box*, 1965, paper box covered with drawings filled with smaller paper boxes with drawings. Gift of Alison Knowles; GM.978.212.