



LISA HOKE

VISUAL ARTIST

Interview by Harryet Candee

Photographs Courtesy of the Artist

Lisa is known for colorful, immersive installations and abstract sculptures characterized by labor-intensive working processes and inventive use of repurposed consumer detritus as raw materials. Her work has often challenged notions of mastery, permanence and fixed meaning, embracing qualities such as contingency and transience.

Harryet Candee: *The freedom to create and document life, seems to be something you have taken full advantage of is the feeling I am getting when viewing your installations and sculptures. The space it takes up, the materials, and colors are overflowing, yet very organized at the same time. It feels limitless to the space. I understand you work within the parameters while giving respect to the space allowed. You must feel unleashed yet restrained to certain principles of your own making. I wonder, how much of your personality is truly revealed within each piece you produce? And, if so, where do we look to find it? Or are we not supposed to know you at all, I wonder, for example, in your installation, Come on Down, that was at The Oklahoma Museum of Art in 2013.*

Lisa Hoke: Well, that is a big question that is best answered with a little background as to who I am and what may have shaped my life and ideas. My childhood was nomadic. My father was a Navy Pilot, and my family was enlisted into a life

of constant change, a different state every 12 to 18 months. We moved from airbase to airbase, Texas prairies to eastern seaboard. Our compact family of four were always moving, packing, and unpacking. I adapted, I was the adapter with each new place, seven elementary schools, four high schools.

My work has always reflected my life in a very direct way and is drawn from my experience of living and working in a loft in New York City. Early in my art making life, I realized I could use what I know and how I live as source material.

For many decades now, my work has operated in the area between discrete object and installation. My materials have always been the overlooked ephemera of our daily lives. The earliest sculptures, in the 1980's, consisted of wire and cast-iron fruit and vegetables, addressing issues of gravity, tension, and balance. Thereafter, seeking means of combining light, color, and scale, I used a myriad of multiples, such as: napkins, zippers,

buttons, thread, clothes, shower curtains, drinking straws, cups, rubber bands and paper. Since 2004, my focus has been on large-scale mural installations, intentionally highlighting the indigenous color and nature of all manner of disposable materials.

It was during 2008 to 2014 that I first began to use disposable and recycled colored cardboard packaging. I realized that every week I was throwing out bags of packaging. I was initially intrigued by its inherent possibilities as a color building block and its sad abundance. An amazing amount of material I had just from my household. The colors are boldly and richly printed and irresistible in their color saturation and sophistication via global marketing. I have commented that the contents, sadly, usually cost far less than what has been spent on the packaging.

I cut up the elements into chromatic piles, like a Bower Bird. I was able to break down and re-purpose the modules of these exhibitions into new



Lisa Hoke *Come On Down*

2013 150 x 16 x 2 Feet Cardboard Packing, Glue and Hardware Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma

forms, the history of the materials becoming part of the history of each work. My studio then was a way to build smaller components that could be additive in an Installation. As the site-specific modules become part of the ongoing creation, the small and iterative processes inform the larger arc of my work. And this is how a work like *Come on Down* comes into being, it is the result of everything that came before it and will become raw material afterwards.

I built site-specific installations in those years using this small module methodology that I could expand onsite, in institutions such as the Brattleboro Museum, VT; The New Britain Museum, CT; Mass MoCA, MA; the Montclair Museum of Art, NJ; the D'Amour Museum of Art, Springfield, MA; the McNay Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX; the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC, the Oklahoma City Museum of Art, OK; the Sarasota Museum of Art, FL, and the Brooks Museum, Memphis, TN.

Pieces of a puzzle! You dress the walls like a costume designer dresses an actor. Have you had a previous career, or past interest that has led you to use your ingenuity to create these empowering

works of art? All from recycled packaging?

LH: Not always recycled packaging but I have always been engaged with using the wall as support for my sculptures as well as the relief murals. The immediacy of attaching work directly to the wall is more architectural than anything else and has made it possible for me to build small modules, attach and add to build them into very large projects. I have loved the spontaneous nature of building on the wall, no drawings, no rehearsal, failure a big possibility. The 2004 installation, *The Gravity of Color*, featured 10,000 plastic and paper cups screwed and glued to the wall at Elizabeth Harris Gallery. This was my first foray into a mural format. My next was a switch in materials but even bigger scale. Working with modules of construction paper in a profusion of color, I created *Light My Fire*, in 2006 for Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, TX and then a version in the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, CT, that time using a wall of glass as support. The recycled packaging and disposable materials followed this work and has been an avenue I've been exploring for many years, recently adding felt and wire to my wall constructions.

You must have a wonderful studio! Every piece of art is first created in the mind, then off to a functioning workspace. Tell us about yours.

LH: I have lived, worked, and raised a family in the same loft in Manhattan for 42 years. It is a wonderful studio and it has made my art life possible. I think staying put in one spot and the stability of a studio has allowed me the freedom to move from idea to idea. Recently, I also have a studio upstate in Red Hook, NY and I love being able to go back and forth. It's such a pleasure to work in a beautiful location full of trees, it is inspiring and peaceful.

What gets the wheels turning in your head to keep producing new pieces of art?

LH: I'm not sure I have any strategy; I always try to move each piece forward so that it is a challenge. I begin pieces in my studio, most often by experimenting with parts, not fully realizing a work until much later.

When I'm invited to build a work, then there are a whole new set of parameters that require me to consider the new space, how tall is it, how wide, how much can be built in the studio or on site, will
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Lisa Hoke *Light My fire*
2006 16 x 40 x ½ Feet Paper and Glue Rice Gallery, Rice University, Houston, TX



Lisa Hoke *Dolce Croma*
2018 55 x 14 x 2 Feet Nuvola Lavazza, Turin, Italy Packaging, metal, glue, foil, hardware

I have assistants or a lift or scaffolding, how much time to build? These questions usually shape the work in ways I can never predict.

The Gravity of Color, New Britain at the New Britain Museum of Art in 2008 gave me my first experience with being the contractor within a museum, unique for me. I obtained insurance and workman's comp for my crew, I contracted three stories of scaffolding, installed and de-installed for the project and learned how to create contracts. *The Gravity of Color, New Britain* would remain on site for six years and for the first time gave me a large work to revisit. It was a model I would use with many future projects. Many works are hybrids of each other, they changed, parts are destroyed, cut up or reformatted into something else. I think of everything as raw material so many pieces only exist now in photographs.

When I return to my studio from doing an installation, everything has changed, I have a different set of experiences, not unlike my early days of constant moving. New information has been gleaned and I move forward with what I have discovered. This creates a flow of new ideas. I didn't realize how much the outside experiences melded

with my studio life until Covid caused it all to stop. My studio life was very hermetic for those 2 years. Happily, I'm back to a balance of building on site and working in the studio.

Tell us about your most recent work?

LH: A wonderful highlight was my 2018 commission to build a permanent relief mural at Nuvola Lavazza Headquarters in Torino, Italy, culminating in a 55-foot wide artwork, *Dolce Croma*. It was incredible to arrive in Torino, Italy with scissors and a few ideas. For two months, with help from two assistants, we cut up packaging, that dated to the company's origins. I then slowly layered piece by piece directly on the wall, gluing and stapling the patterns and color. For the first time building on site without a deadline, it was like going to the studio every day but with great coffee! Following Covid, in the spring of 2021, I built an installation, *Bird by Bird* in Hudson, NY at the Pamela Salisbury Gallery. I was given the ground floor of the Carriage House and it was so fantastic to pull work from my studios, my storage and elsewhere, cut things up and create 8 free standing sculptures. I titled the work for a book

by Anne Lamott about the process of moving one step at a time. That is for me the crux of what I do. I move one tiny piece at a time to be able to create work that then can expand and expand.

Can you tell us about the varieties of materials you use, and how you find, collect, and use them?

LH: Much of what I'm inspired by comes right through the front door. As I mentioned earlier, my first body of work with cast iron came from a desire to cast vegetables, rocks, coconuts, and all lowly items I found locally or bought at the food stands in Chinatown. These iron works were the basis of weighted work that I made and showed in the 1980's. Soon after, I began to add domestic items to the sculptures and that opened a door to building with large batches of items, mostly, from single items originally found in my home.

In the 90's, I might look at a bag of clothing in the closet and realize I could use that in a work, or noticing a button caused me to get thousands of them and cast them with wax in jars. Just the normal sewing of garments inspired me to walk down Broadway and buy hundreds of pounds of Industrial spools of thread that I unfurled and



Lisa Hoke *Gravity of Color*
New Britain 2008 35 x 30 x 3 feet Plastic/Paper Cups, glue/hardware New Britain Museum of American Art, CT



Lisa Hoke *Bird by Bird*
2022 Dimensions Variable (approx. 9 x 37 x 3 feet) Cardboard packaging, wood, glue, felt, wire, hardware, sand Pamela Salisbury Gallery, Hudson, NY

sprayed with glue to make clouds of color. A rug on my floor made its way to the wall and became part of a work. I pulled a drawer out of a bureau and filled it with household flotsam, that became a wall sculpture in a show. I was emboldened to look at everything. Car windshields and iron pipes hung as a large chain to make a 20-foot necklace, *Lucky Charms*. Some items were one offs but I revisit objects often. An early piece with homemade sandbags inspired me use tripod saddlebags filled with sand as weights in my recent standing sculptures. I let my eye follow a path till it veers to the next shiny object.

What is the connection between your large-scale art and your small-scale work?

LH: I must work extremely small or extremely big. One is a relief from the other and is in the world so differently. They are the same but vastly different. One ceases to exist and the other lives on.

What is the life expectancy of one of your sculptures that is made of cardboard and paper, and how does it endure for galleries who expect to sell

your work?

LH: It is very long lasting and very stubborn in its determination to endure. Galleries can sell anything they want to sell.

What do you enjoy the most about showing your large-scale installations? What reactions do you often get that surprise you?

LH: I enjoy everything about it, the sweat, the worry, the fear, the excitement, the sheer joy, and thrill of completely something that I couldn't see until the end.

What has been amazing with all my projects are the people, some who help me by inviting me to build a work that doesn't exist, even in drawings, or support my ideas, or build with me, or collect objects for me, or write about it or just visit the work. I had no idea I was embarking on making work that required other people to help me complete it. I am always surprised and humbled by how much my installations have come to fruition because of others.

Of all the techniques and materials you have used in your work, which of those have been most chal-

lenging, and why?

LH: There are materials and techniques that I have used that I move away from. One example is arc welding. I set up a welding section in my studio, but it is a process that requires extreme and careful concentration, also wearing a lot of protective clothing. This was not me; I couldn't always be 100% present and there is no room for mistakes. This is a very skilled occupation, so I leave it to others better suited. I must be able to make mistakes. I also used to melt wax in a double boiler in my studio, vast amounts. I made works using 5 foot in diameter cake pans that I had fabricated out of ductwork. I poured endless vats of hot wax into these. I loved the results and cherished those works, but it was too dangerous to do in my studio in my loft. So, I moved to other materials, kind of naturally changing, looking for the next body of work. These are techniques and materials I won't revisit, somehow climbing 3 stories of scaffolding seems safer!

Where did you study?

LH: I got my degree in English Literature at the
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Lisa Hoke *Equilibrium*
1989 Dimensions Variable
Cast iron, steel, wire Germans Van Eck Gallery, NYC



Lisa Hoke *Manifold Destiny*
1990 9 x 5 x 2 Feet Pipe, mufflers, plastic webbing, wire
Thread Waxing Space, NYC

University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1974. I then wanted a re-do and went back to college at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA where I got a BFA in Studio Art in 1978, nothing prepared me for how exciting a discovery art has been. After a year of graduate studies in Sculpture at Florida State University in Tallahassee, I moved to New York City in 1980. That is where my education began. And most importantly I discovered the comradery of artists, building our studios, the great sharing of ideas, looking and talking about art. This has been the fabric of my life in New York.

How do you explain to people who ask you, how and why you created the piece, "Equilibrium"? Is it just not easier, you think, to be a realist painter? Demystifying art is an art unto itself. Thoughts?

LH: Firstly, there would be nothing easy about being a realist painter for me. If I could, maybe I would. I can't paint, never could, never would. Life is simple sometimes. You do what you are drawn to. I make what moves me to take a closer look and what I find compelling. Color knocks me out!! No idea why. I don't set out to make choices about my medium. I'm attracted to something and want to know more about it, what can this object do? What makes it have meaning to me? Where is that meaning?

Equilibrium, was exciting because it was such a logical piece. I had a pile of discarded metal parts in my studio that was blocking my way. So, I

wrapped wire around the pile and hoisted it up into my ceiling. Then, I wondered what it weighed so I ran a wire from it, across the ceiling and down the wall and added cast iron weights till the weight was equal. Then, I built it at Germans van Eck Gallery in Soho.

What direction are you presently taking with your art, now in the aftermath of Covid?

LH: During the Covid time in my studio I felt like I had to stop being the artist I was and be somehow different. I'm not sure why I came to that. I felt like I need to have better skills, maybe survival skills, but I bought a jig saw and cut wood, and tried to teach myself how to build work. It seemed important to not engage in the ephemerality that has always driven me, as though, I had been irresponsible. Now, I can do both and I feel like myself again, but I have better skills!!!!

Have you contemplated the overall scheme, and thought of how to allow your early works of art to resurface and maybe join in with new ideas for future projects? Is it a difficult or easy process, you think to rework art that has been put aside?

LH: Re working, re purposing and re discovering is the way I work, and although some works have a permanent status in Institutions and homes, I consider that any of my pieces that I have in my possession are raw material for anything I want to make. My past and present mingle.

What time period in art for you is most exciting

and why? The start of Modern art?

LH: Everything. I can honestly say that I am so inspired daily by artists, writers, architects, builders, designers, furniture makers, journalists, in an ever-changing theatre of visuals.

With much recognition that you have received over the years, what piece of art stands out to be your most important and endearing? Why?

LH: I have a special fondness for *Manifold Destiny*, a work I made 32 years ago, in 1990. I had moved forward from the wire and cast-iron work and had just begun to explore the suburban detritus. Midas Mufflers in Staten Island gave me a huge pile of filthy, disused mufflers. They stayed in a heap in my studio. I circled that heap for many months thinking I'd just have it disposed of. Then I thought the only way to save it was to counter the ugly brutality of these eroding arms and legs was to weave them together with pink and yellow chair webbing. I showed this piece several times in some wonderful shows in the early 1990's. although, this one no longer exists, it is a keystone for me to remember to trust the small voice with crazy ideas.

Can you give us a peek into how you live your daily life? What goes on? Family? Pets, loves, interests, travels, etc.

LH: After breakfast, a walk with my husband, David, then emails, I work in the studio every day, sometimes I get started late and then I work late. When I say work, I mean, I'm in my room and



Lisa Hoke *PrecipICE*

2022 Dimensions variable Cardboard packaging, string, glue, plastic IceHouseProjectSpace, Sharon CT

sometimes things happen and other time is spent thinking, reading, chatting, just being in the studio. Since both my studios are in my home I come and go. There is a casualness because it is how my life is defined.

Before Covid, many nights a week I went to openings/gatherings with friends. Seems that is coming back. No pets right now. My son lives in LA. I now go back and forth to Upstate New York, and I am glad to be in each spot once I get there.

What are some aspirations and dreams do you have that you wish to fulfill?

LH: I'm looking forward to seeing Antonio Gaudi's work in Barcelona and I want to see the Aurora Borealis. Iceland is also on my list. My aspirations for my work are met every day that I get work in my studio.

Describe some of the ways you celebrate life?

LH: I take a walk along the river in the city every morning or in the country, I love to swim, read, see films, look at trees, take road trips, time with my friends, other artists, my husband, my son.

What is important to remember and to do when you have artists' block, yet have the need to

create?

LH: Almost anything...take a walk, go to a gallery or museum, read a book. Not to worry, there really is always something to work on, it's a practice, I do it every day. For me, it's not about being inspired, you go to the studio, you work, it is a daily practice, like anything, you teach yourself every day, it is a way of thinking and a way of life. It's not an extra, it is the core.

You recently built a large installation, PresipICE at the ICEHOUSE Project Space, in Sharon, CT., organized by KK Kozik. The exterior of the ICE house that your artwork was in, is painted grey and from the windows, one can peer into and see sections of the installation, an overflowing colorful mix of assorted, recycled commercial packaging: Menorah candle box, Mister Clean, Kleenex boxes, all in hues and shades of blues, yellows, oranges, greens... and other mixes of recycled packaging. This can be viewed on KK Kozik's website: www.icehouseprojectspace.com. What was this work about?

LH: KK Kozik has a gem of an icehouse on her property in Sharon, CT. She invited me to build a work in the icehouse and to consider an aspect of the history in Sharon. I was very captivated by the

building itself and my intention for *PrecipICE* was to occupy the icehouse with a present-day volume of boulders and chunks, composed of the disposable packaging. The title refers to the cyclical idea that we face an uncertain future as our conveniences are leading to the melting of the ice.

It is hard to imagine a denser material than ice when the house was filled to the rafters. That something as mercurial and ephemeral as water could transform so dramatically is almost magical. My project focuses on how that delivery system from rivers, ponds and lakes to homes began what, I believe, is the modern consumer lifestyle, enabled by the ability to gather and store goods for future use. The packaging that I have been collecting daily is a result of a century that has moved us away from nature to a packaged, branded culture. It's been interesting to look further back at this history.

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Thank you Lisa!

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