



## **Expect the Unexpected: Unusual Materials in Contemporary Art**

October 21, 2020 – July 3, 2021

Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*—an oval-shaped painting trimmed with a piece of rope as a frame—is often acknowledged as one of the first assemblage pieces since it incorporated a found object as part of the composition. Picasso's work is also an early modern illustration of the idea that artists sometimes willingly utilize and experiment with materials that were produced for purposes other than art-making.

The advent of industrialization in modern Western societies encouraged the production of more goods and, ultimately, more excess and waste. This reality—as well as the idea that artists were able to focus more on the investigations of personal interests, instead of commissions—led to a whole new arena of possibilities for creative endeavors.

**Expect the Unexpected** features artworks drawn from RAM's collection that incorporate unusual, surprising, or challenging materials. Rather than shying away from the potential care challenges of these pieces, RAM embraces these objects as reflections of the inventiveness and experimentation that characterizes much contemporary art.

While applauding the inventiveness of artists and encouraging further experimentation, as a collecting institution, RAM also acknowledges that preserving works made of unusual materials can present some unexpected needs. A piece like **Wesley Fleming's *Hornets' Nest***, which combines a found hornets' nest with flameworked glass hornets, will pose long-term conservation issues that are far different than those of a ceramic vessel. Similarly, **Joy Raskin's** spoon brooches, whose handles are accented with actual aspirin tablets, necessitate strategies for care that supersede those usually associated with metal jewelry and objects.

### **Biographies and statements from select featured artists**

**Jerry Bleem** is an artist, Franciscan Friar, and a Catholic Priest who holds both his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Masters of Divinity from the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago. Working in the expansive category of fiber arts, Bleem utilizes traditional textile methods like crochet and fine arts techniques like collage in his 2D and 3D works. With a focus on the ubiquitous and disposable objects of everyday life, Bleem addresses ideas of preciousness, waste, and temporality. Bleem is a five time Illinois Council of the Arts Fellowship recipient. He has been teaching in the Department of Fiber and Material Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 2000. Bleem also writes a monthly art column for *U.S. Catholic* magazine. RAM has two works

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by Bleem, both with surfaces covered in a complex network of staples. Wisconsin artist **Teresa Faris** has her BFA from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and her MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, both with a focus in Metals. As a vegan, both her life and art reflect ideas of sustainability. Made with recycled metals, Faris' wearables are often created in collaboration with her pet umbrella cockatoo, **Charmin**. A companion of the artist for more than 25 years, Charmin was discovered in a tissue box outside Faris' apartment, hence the bird's unusual name. Charmin has contributed materials (mostly gnawed ropes, perches, and wooden bits) to more than 100 of Faris' pieces, including the two in RAM's collection. A 2008 National Endowment for the Arts Grant winner and a member of the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG), Faris was also a 1999 Arts/Industry Artist-in-Residence at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin. She has been teaching in the Jewelry/Metalsmithing Department of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater since 2009.

Like many of the other artists in this exhibition, **Karyl Sisson** is interested in daily life, disposability and reuse, and the social value placed on objects. Her artist statement says she is drawn to "undervalued and overlooked materials." Employing a range of fiber methods, including basketry and various forms of needlework, Sisson creates 2D and 3D assemblages using items as varied as paper raffle tickets, zippers, bobby pins, buttons, and even measuring tape. She has her BS from New York University and her MFA from the University of California, and was a 1990 California Arts Council Artist Fellow. The New York native currently resides in Los Angeles, California.

Artist **Jan Yager** builds wearable art using a range of both natural and manmade found materials including crack vials from her neighborhood in Philadelphia and pebbles from the beach. A Michigan native, Yager received her BFA from Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, and her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island. She has been the recipient of both a Pew Fellowship of the Arts and a National Endowment of the Arts Fellowship. Yager's work is represented in collections around the world including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; and the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland. In 2001, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England held a solo show of her work entitled, **Jan Yager: City Flora/City Flotsam**. The culmination of a ten-year project, **City Flora/City Flotsam** featured work made of or inspired by flowers and discarded objects found on and around the city street in front of her apartment.