

*In Between:
Contemporary
Artists Working
in Two and Three
Dimensions
Featuring
Dennis Lee
Mitchell*

Possibly for ease of categorizing, artists tend to be classified by the materials they use most or the types of work most often created—a ceramic sculptor, a jeweler, a painter. Yet, it is not uncommon for artists to shift between media within their creative process—some may favor certain materials but flex between two- and three-dimensional work, while others may use drawing to create stand-alone imagery or blueprints for objects. There are no strict rules that govern the extent or articulation of these changes in working methods.

In Between showcases artists via multiple works made of different materials and/or pieces that reflect a fluency between two and three dimensions, including wearables. Rooted in RAM's collection, the exhibition specifically highlights the work of **Dennis Lee Mitchell**, a Virginia-based artist who once favored clay, but for some time has been creating large-scale "smoke drawings" with an acetylene torch. To create these drawings, Mitchell uses an adhesive on coated paper to capture the soot from a powder applied to the torch. He was led to this process—which has a connection with ceramics in that fire plays a pivotal, albeit different, role—through experiments undertaken while he was a ceramics professor. Testing on paper before moving onto clay pieces, Mitchell saw the potential of smoke as a medium and decided to shift his practice. The work he was doing in ceramic—such as the three pieces in RAM's collection—tended to emphasize elements of the natural world, such as tree branches or bark, in a way that was both representational and abstracted. Mitchell picks up on this ambiguity with the imagery in his smoke drawings—he recognizes that the forms could suggest different things to different people, or even different things to the same person, depending on how they encounter the work.



(right above)
Dennis Lee Mitchell
Under My Skin #3, 1995
Welded clay
Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Artist
in Honor of Valentine Kass
Photography: Greg Staley

(right below)
Dennis Lee Mitchell
Westwater, 2023
Smoke on paper
Courtesy of Dennis Lee Mitchell
and Zolla / Lieberman Gallery
Photography: Studio Image
Courtesy of the Artist

Appreciating the action and immediacy of manipulating smoke in what amounts to a performative act and moving away from the lack of immediacy in firing clay, Mitchell has used two different media to memorialize a natural phenomenon in one way or another. He states: *"My work is a result of my connection with nature—the fact that nothing lasts forever... Smoke is the point where something becomes dust. It's where the magic happens."* While addressing his drawings, in particular, the first part of this quote underscores the subtext that runs throughout what Mitchell creates—his link to the natural world.

Mitchell's situation—where the urge to create is unbound by the perceived demands of a career path or past efforts—is not unique. For some artists, a "new" direction (or what might even look like a major shift) happens in the course of a career. Examples include **Barbara Brandel**, who constructed hand-woven tapestry wall works or wearable garments, but now works on mixed media paintings, collages, and assemblages; **Russell Gordon**, who was known for colorful "pop" image-oriented prints but is also represented at RAM by a ceramic tile mosaic and large-scale painted collages; and **Toshiko Takaezu**, who created prints, paintings, and weavings in addition to the ceramic work that has become her hallmark.

What are the reasons for modifying modes of operation? Are changes made in certain periods for a certain reason, or are they long-term moves? Is the artist returning to techniques favored at earlier points in their career? **Dale Chihuly** made detailed pencil and wash renderings as an interior design student. While heralded as a glass art innovator, he has felt compelled to return to two dimensions to work on large-scale drawings that allow him to express ideas "freely and physically." How do personal, social, and cultural factors impact how an artist operates?

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A retired police officer and sketch artist, **Kevin Blythe Sampson** works across media and dimensions, often creating memorial sculptures from found objects. His new-to-RAM drawings and ceramic works initially seem disconnected, yet are related in that they comment on his broad-based interests in civil rights, community, and race, alongside social and cultural issues. His desire to explore his identity as a Black man and former police officer is also apparent in his work.



Some artists take a favored material and shift the kind of work produced. For example, **Cynthia Toops** has used polymer in slightly different ways over several years. She has formed it into beads for neckpieces or small slivers to create micro-mosaic narratives (which are often the focal point of a piece of jewelry.)

With an interest in the color, texture, and pliable properties of textiles, **Tim Harding** addresses the contours of the human body as he cuts and layers bits of silk into art-to-wear garments or adjusts his process to create two-dimensional wall hangings. Like other artists included in this exhibition, Harding started his artistic explorations in media different than what is on display in the galleries—early interests in painting and photography are reflected in his play with washes of color and surface reflections.

Primarily creating colorful fiber sculptural work at this time, **Kay Khan** sees the echoes of earlier

creative acts in her practice. She states:

"All techniques previously practiced coalesced: I started to 'hand-build' (as in ceramic sculpture) with 'slabs' of quilted material, 'painted' with thread, and, ultimately, constructed sculpture with textiles."

Artists creating sketches or studies for larger works or as stand-alone exercises are perhaps the most obvious articulation of an artist shifting between dimensions or materials. **Jamie Bennett**, **Robert Ebendorf**, **Elsa Freund**, and **Terri Gelenian-Wood** have used sketches to work out ideas for adornment—shape, color, and other elements are articulated to various stages of completion. Utilizing her painting and drawing background, **Renie Breskin Adams** often works out her compositions in sketches before she takes them to the fiber stage, employing embroidery and various other techniques. Her process, which can involve several sketches in various media like colored pencils, ink, watercolor, and digital technology, is multi-layered. **Carol Eckert**—who creates sculpture and wall works with a coiling technique associated with basketry—begins with a series of sketches to help develop the form of a piece and select colors. Numbers on the sketches often correspond to the numbers identifying embroidery floss by color.

Significantly, there are no true guidelines to follow when looking at what motivates creative choices and/or changes. From a theoretical perspective, modern studio artists can choose how they want their work to proceed. Of course, this is impacted by how much someone uses their artwork to make a living and if that path sets up demands beyond the artist's desires. This exhibition only begins to look at how varied an artistic practice can be.

Lena Vigna
RAM Curator of Exhibitions

(above left)
Cynthia Toops
Story Time, 2007
Polymer
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of the Artist

(above right)
Cynthia Toops
Anemone (Neckpiece), 1997
Polymer, shell, bone, glass,
silver, and cotton thread
Racine Art Museum,
Gift of the Artist

Photography: Penina Meisels



Carol Eckert, *Preparatory Drawing for Kingdom of the Birds*, ca. 2000, Ink, graphite, and color pencil, Racine Art Museum, Gift of the Artist, Photography: Jon Bolton



Carol Eckert, *Kingdom of the Birds*, 2009, Dyed cotton, wire, and glass beads, Racine Art Museum, the Karen Johnson Boyd Collection, Photography: W. Scott Mitchell