



VADIS TURNER *Tempest*



Nashville-born artist Vadis Turner transforms commonplace materials associated with women, such as ribbons and bedding, into bold, textured assemblages that assert the significance of female experiences, especially rites of passage that mark the transition from one physical phase to the next. She is also interested in challenging conventional gender roles or, as the artist states, revealing “the underbelly of the female archetype.”¹ This exhibition presents objects surrounding three potential chapters of a woman’s life—the young Wild Woman, the Mother, and the Elder—each with a corresponding destructive agent: a powerful storm, scorched emptiness, and the gradual silencing of voice.

Turner began to make nontraditional sculptures and installations from gender-based media shortly after graduate school. She saw, and continues to see, the act of elevating mundane female items from their original purpose

into fine art as a way of converting them into agents for social commentary. This type of work started with a delicate prom dress fashioned out of wax paper in her mother's kitchen, but morphed into more confrontational forms, including wax paper lingerie (fig. 1) and a tampon wedding cake, in a vein similar to that of feminist artists during the late 1960s and 1970s.² In 2009, the year of her wedding, Turner made her own dowry, a collection of heirlooms and goods that supposedly indicated her worth as a woman. Instead of giving it to her husband's family, however, she exchanged it for professional gain—a mark of her value as an artist.

Although Turner remained focused on feminist matters, she returned to her roots as a painter around 2011, when she created subtler wall-based works from long strips of recycled textiles. A 2013 residency at Materials for the Arts—a reuse program of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, which offered studio space and access to a seemingly endless supply of materials donated by the fashion industry—intensified and enriched this synthesis of painting and fabric. Various ribbons and cords, often hand-dyed, are sewn in looping, draping, or scrunched patterns onto woven backings or vintage quilt substrates. Ranging in color, thickness, and texture, the strips stand in for pigment and brushstrokes and often recall the energetic gestures found in Abstract Expressionist paintings, especially those of Joan Mitchell. The artist, in fact, refers to these works as “paintings” and sees herself as painting when she makes them.

Turner is partly inspired by the history of women's creative production, which was once largely through the clothes they sewed, the food they cooked, and other domestic tasks.



fig.1 *Peek-a-boo*

Today, as more women work outside the home, and with the proliferation of inexpensive clothing and pre-prepared food, many lack the skill, desire, or opportunity to make objects by hand. Turner strives to bring visibility to the often-overlooked handiwork of women in the past, while simultaneously pushing this legacy forward through her practice.

THE WILD WOMAN

The textile paintings in this section represent youthful, uninhibited women who often cause problems rather than behaving as expected and are deeply engaged with their shifting environment. Like a tempest, a Wild Woman's actions often cannot be controlled by others or, with unhappy consequences at times, by herself. Although abstract, several works are meant to visually express alternate or extended narratives the artist has created for female literary characters. *Storm* (fig. 2), with its black bands of clouds and hints of a pink sky, and *Swamp*, filled with a murky green and blue landscape, evoke Eve and the aftermath of her actions in the Garden of Eden. A triptych suggests scenes from the drowning of Shakespeare's tragic figure Ophelia: sinking into marshy water, wearing a wedding dress, with pink and blue flowers scattered on and around her (see cover); continuing down an underwater path that becomes engulfed in smoke; and eventually encountering a burning tree. Both Eve and Ophelia are ultimately consumed by their surroundings, but they are also transformed into influential female forces. Like the Impressionist Claude Monet, Turner is drawn to specific and changing atmospheres. *Storm System* conveys the light and color of an intense storm moving across Old Hickory Lake, which Turner observed from her studio windows. For her, the energy of the Wild Woman and the environment merge.



fig. 2 *Storm*

THE MOTHER



fig. 3 *Empty Vessel*

Since giving birth to her two children, Turner has explored the concept of the female body serving as a vessel—for a time fertile and full, then dormant and empty. She sees a correlation between a bell and a womb, which are both objects of potential even when not activated. Like the American sculptor and printmaker Kiki Smith, Turner periodically uses the body and bodily fluids to express matters related to sex, birth, and regeneration. Her artworks on motherhood include floor-based “puddles” (fig. 6) of breast milk (her own) and acrylic paint, preserved in resin. Charred sticks gathered from burn piles scattered throughout her family’s lakeside property in Gallatin float in various patterns—a poignant fusion of a life-giving substance with the remains of a destructive force. The coupling of the sticks in *Pairs* symbolizes her sons. For the artist, the cycle of life can be witnessed in fire, and in the burn pile it leaves behind: it rages and then smolders, and new growth rises from ashes.³ A series of wall-based works in which ribbons are attached to Plexiglas and covered with a clear, water-like resin specifically address the womb. They evolve from *Full Vessel*, a bright red field, bursting with potency at the height of fertility, to quieter compositions in which white, light gray, and pale pink ribbons sit on black bases made partly with ashes. In the last piece, *Empty Vessel* (fig. 3), the ability to bring life into the world and provide its nourishment has been extinguished.



fig.4 *Object Heirloom, Recipe and Sewing Box Gardens*

THE ELDER

When Vadis Turner and her immediate family moved from New York to Tennessee in 2014, they lived for two years in her grandparents' home—an architectural gem designed in 1968 by local master builder Braxton Dixon.⁴ Very little of the original décor has changed, so the artist was completely surrounded by and interacting with their belongings. This intensified her interest in reexamining the definition of “heirloom” and the value assigned to objects and traditions a woman passes down to her descendants. She invited members of Nashville’s senior community—including women from the assisted living facility where her grandmother now resides—to share with her some of their life experiences.⁵ As Turner collected these stories, which she calls “wisdoms,” she noticed that they featured four types of heirlooms. Some were objects of sentimental significance but typically no financial value, such as a recipe or sewing box (fig. 4). Others were places that families had visited often or where they had lived, like the artist’s own beloved family property, to which her mother had brought her as a baby directly from the hospital, and the artist likewise with her second son after his birth in 2015. Several elders spoke of transmitting quirky rituals, such as adventurous floral arranging, or reminders that the birds on the china “can’t fly upside down” when setting a formal dinner table. For others, religion had had the most impact on their children (fig.5). For example, one woman’s Jewish faith took her from Vienna to Shanghai to San Francisco and finally to Nashville, where her son is a rabbi.



fig.5 *Spirit Heirloom, Moonlight on a Shimmering Rock*

In response to these interviews, and to bestow value on the elders’ intimate narratives, Turner created textile paintings devoted to the heirloom categories: object, place, ritual, and spirit. Each work in this section is informed by and incorporates the wisdoms of multiple women, in a manner parallel to her technique of bringing together disparate elements to produce a unified composition. *Place Heirloom 1, Sunrises and Lakes* pays homage to Vadis Pierce, Turner’s grandmother, after whom she was named. This project is very personal for the artist; yet, because it expresses a near-universal subject, it has the capacity to resonate broadly and deeply, especially among women. Turner’s heirloom works ultimately ask viewers to consider what kind of legacy they will leave to the next generation.

KATIE DELMEZ
Curator

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NOTES

1. Vadis Turner, e-mail to Katie Delmez, March 5, 2017.
2. See, for example, *Womanhouse*, the feminist installation and performance space initiated by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in Los Angeles in 1972. For more information on this period in feminist art history, see *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, edited by Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
3. This close connection between ashes and the land is manifest in Turner's wish to have her remains scattered on the family property after death.
4. Turner and her family now live in Nashville, but her studio remains in her grandparents' home. The property belongs to a land trust and is protected from future development.
5. This project was inspired by Turner's participation in the Metro Nashville Arts Commission's Artist Lab program in 2016, which sought to raise awareness of socially based artistic practices.

ILLUSTRATIONS

cover: *A Rather Violent Merger of a Wedding Dress and a Swamp*, 2011. Ribbon, clothing, quilts, vintage bedspreads, and mixed media, 68 x 65 x 5 in. Collection of Ambassador Matthew Barzun and Brooke Brown Barzun. **pages 2-3:** *Underwater Encounter with a Burning Tree* (detail), 2011. Ribbon, clothing, quilts, vintage bedspreads, and mixed media, 68 x 65 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Geary Contemporary, New York. **fig. 1:** *Peek-a-boo*, 2007. Wax paper, 30 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Geary Contemporary, New York. **fig. 2:** *Storm*, 2013. Fabric, ribbon, and mixed media, 84 x 84 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Geary Contemporary, New York. **fig. 3:** *Empty Vessel*, 2015. Ribbon, acrylic resin, and mixed media, 36 x 48 in. Collection of Ken Morrow, Nashville. **fig. 4:** *Object Heirloom, Recipe and Sewing Box Gardens*, 2017. Hand-stitched quilts, ribbon, fabric dye, wood, resin, and mixed media, 83 x 127 in. Courtesy of the artist and Geary Contemporary, New York. **fig. 5:** *Spirit Heirloom, Moonlight on a Shimmering Rock*, 2017. Hand-stitched quilts, ribbon, fabric dye, and mixed media, 72 x 120 in. Courtesy of the artist and Geary Contemporary, New York. **fig. 6:** *Pairs*, 2016. Breast milk, acrylic, resin, charred sticks, and ribbon. 54 in. diam. Courtesy of the artist and Geary Contemporary, New York. All images © 2017 Vadis Turner



Vadis Turner outside her family home on Old Hickory Lake. Photo © Caroline Allison

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Vadis Turner (b. 1977) returned to Middle Tennessee in 2014 after living in Boston and New York for many years. She received a BFA (1999) in painting and an MFA (2000) in studio teaching from Boston University. Her work has been featured in exhibitions in the United States and Europe and is in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Tennessee State Museum, and 21c Museum Hotels. She is represented by Geary Contemporary in New York and [placeholder] Gallery in Nashville. Turner was recently awarded a prestigious Joan Mitchell Foundation grant. *Tempest* is her first solo museum exhibition.



fig. 6 *Pairs*

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