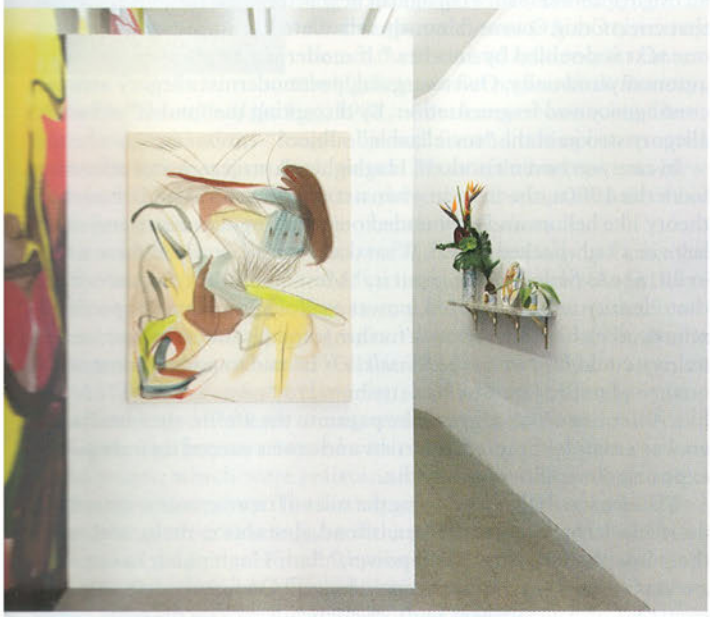
Yanyan Huang
TOMORROW GALLERY

Some seventy or so years after its heroic American heyday, Abstract Expressionism has seen a lot, having been debased, parodied, subverted, enshrined, disavowed, mocked, and reinvented a thousand times by as many artists to as many different ends. An indelible metonym for modernism, it is, as they say, overdetermined, so much so that to make a gestural mark today is to court a certain generic quality—and the nagging sense that whatever you're doing has, regrettably, been done before.

Which is not to say the weight of history dooms gestural abstraction to cliché; to the contrary, its legacy can be wielded as a feature, not a bug. A case in point is the work of the Los Angeles–, China-, and Italy-based artist Yanyan Huang, who, even as she earnestly and skillfully inhabits AbEx's traditions and tropes, is also strategically self-aware about its past and how that might be mobilized today. For her first solo show in New York—which was organized with Alex Ross, director of the Lower East Side's Hester gallery—Huang displayed six AbEx-ish canvases along with four ceramics (a vase, two cups and a plate) and two prints (one on silk, which hangs in the window; the other on self-adhesive wallpaper, which covers one side of the gallery).

Considered as a group, the six paintings have many virtues: Created with gouache and ink, they feature thick, abundant smears of stained color alongside playfully delicate lines. Their palette is lush, Tuscan, and a little bit wild, creating a sumptuous, at times even botanical, feel. The works also have an unmistakable sense of energy and propulsion: The calligraphic scribbles and swirls of gouache promiscuously overlap and mirror one another as if in a pas de deux. One highlight is *Being become present III*, 2016, which embodies the open, airy look of late de Kooning.



Though the paintings are thoroughly entrenched in AbEx, when Huang moves off the canvas and begins realizing her gestural marks in other media, she invariably situates herself within another, more recent spectrum of art practices: those that seek to explore the effects of consumer digital technology. To create the wallpaper and silk prints, she first made high-resolution scans of her gestural watercolor drawings (which were not on view here), collaged them together in Photoshop, and then printed the files out at several times their original size. In the resulting work, she makes no effort to hide the evidence of digital manipulation and mediation. And these artifacts—the jagged, pixelated edge of a dark smear of paint, for instance—may put us in the mind of artists such as, say, Josh Smith, whose process involves the scanning, printing, and collaging of his own paintings as a way to visualize the mutability of images in digital and material networks.

But in the case of Smith and his peers, the choice of medium was often arbitrary, little more than a neutral backdrop for a larger argument about the dissemination of data and information. Huang's choices are more pointed. When she brings her gestural abstractions to ceramics, silks, or even billboard-scale wallpaper prints, she means to inhabit the history and specificities of those media, to assimilate their properties and unique cultural baggage. It is, she says, "my way of injecting my mark into different narratives."

In a nod to AbEx's humanist myths, Huang lets her abstractions act as signifiers of her own subjectivity, which she braids together with other cultures and traditions, from ceramics to fashion to advertising. In its intertwining of the generic and the specific, the universal and the unique, handmade and the disposable, Huang's project becomes—in its own abstract way—a portrait of selfhood today.

—Lloyd Wise

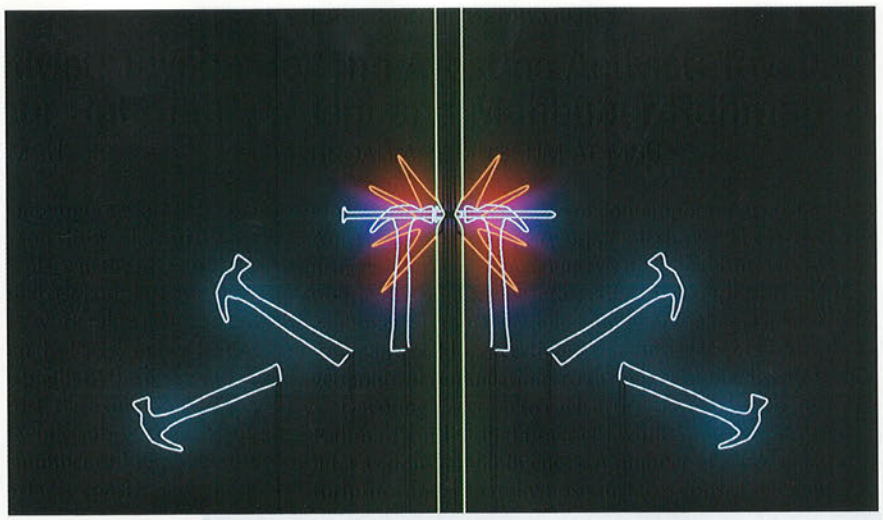
DETROIT

Esther Shalev-Gerz
WASSERMAN PROJECTS

Walter Benjamin never visited Detroit, but his thinking is applicable to the city's contemporary condition. The critic's melancholic fixation on ruins—as well as his desire to unearth revolutionary possibilities in frozen moments of time—resonates with this postindustrial metropolis as it struggles to rebuild itself. The Motor City is, thus, an apt site for a survey of Esther Shalev-Gerz's work, which seems permeated with concepts drawn from German philosophy. "Space Between Time" brought together a selection of work produced between 1998 and 2016, including some of the artist's best-known projects. A philosophical meditation on power, labor, knowledge, and history, the show pointed to the fragility of human endeavor and, like Benjamin's seminal essay "On the Concept of History," to the liberatory potential of the obsolete.

Shown in their current context, Shalev-Gerz's *Describing Labor: Glass Objects*—a subset of her 2012 "Describing Labor" series—a suite of works made by artisans in nearby Toledo, Ohio, evoked the precarious condition of many of the Midwest's once-thriving industrial hubs. Arrayed in open, mirrored cases, these alternately black-and-clear glass hammers (and one black-glass glove) were pointedly unsuited to the uses dictated by their form. The nearby *Potential Trust*, 2012–14, is a blue, yellow, and red neon sign on a rectangular black-painted wood panel featuring six hammers that light up in sequence so that they appear to strike a nail back and forth through a yellow "zip" that bisects the picture plane. An homage to the iconic (and now removed) Carpenters' Union signage of the Professional Plaza in Midtown Detroit, *Potential Trust* remains forever unresolved; it embodies a moment of temporal suspension in which opposing forces oscillate between past and future.

Labor was the theme of many of the other works on view as well. A set of eight large-scale photographs and a two-channel video, also from "Describing Labor," document Shalev-Gerz's explorations of the design collection of the Wolfsonian-FIU museum in Miami Beach, where photographs and a video were also paired with the glass hammers made in Ohio. After selecting forty-one historic photographs,



Esther Shalev-Gerz, *Potential Trust*, 2012–14, neon on wood panel, 37½ × 60".

decorative objects, figurines, and artworks depicting laborers, the artist invited twenty-four people associated with the Wolfsonian (including an art handler, the institution's director, its registrar, and multiple gallerists and curators from nearby venues) to choose a work and then advise on its reinstallation in the museum's storage annex. Shalev-Gerz's photographs document the installation process, and the two-channel video presents recorded interviews in which the participants describe and interpret their choices. An institutional consideration of industrial design, the decorative arts, and their histories, "Describing Labor" contrasts art professionals of today with industrial workers of the past through a mixture of archival and contemporary images and sound.

At the back of the gallery, Shalev-Gerz assembled a collection of objects, photographs, and a video that examines one of the darkest examples of human effort and expenditure—systematic genocide—under the title *Inseparable Angels: An Imaginary House for Walter Benjamin*, 2000–2008. Video footage of a cab ride between Weimar and nearby Buchenwald, once one of Germany's largest concentration camps, captures banal sites along the route (as described by the taxi driver) that bore witness to Nazi brutality during the Holocaust, revealing the close proximity of German genius to German barbarism. (Long renowned as a site of culture, Weimar was home to some of the country's greatest writers, artists, and composers—including Goethe, Schiller, and Liszt—and later gave birth to the Bauhaus.) The video's sound track alternates between the cabbie's observations and excerpts from texts by Benjamin, Kafka, Gershom Scholem, and Paul Klee concerning angels. Klee's oil transfer and watercolor drawing on paper *Angelus Novus*, 1920, the subject of which, according to Benjamin's famous reading, faces the past screaming while being blown backward into the future by "the storm of progress," is a clear point of reference for the work. Surrounding the video were four combination-printed photographs of overlaid and spliced Weimar buildings—the artist's renderings of imaginary homes for the German-Jewish philosopher, who, facing deportation to Occupied France, committed suicide in 1940. Memorials to a martyred critic, the photos signify presence through absence and a collective wound through an individual tragedy. A double-faced clock hung from the ceiling, its hands rotating in opposite directions, one moving backward and the other reaching forward to the future. Transported to the Midwest, the storm of progress once again seems to hang in the balance: Will Detroit's revitalization succeed? Or will forces of racial and economic stratification undo its development afresh?

—Matthew Biro

EAST LANSING, MICHIGAN

"The Artist as Activist: Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman"

BROAD ART MUSEUM AT MSU

One of the first exhibitions of contemporary art from Bangladesh at an American museum, the two-person show "The Artist as Activist" confirmed the South Asian country's place in the art world as it surveyed the politically engaged practices of artist couple Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman. While Lipi's work takes gender as its central focus, Rahman's tackles everything from the legacy of border disputes and their geopolitical ramifications to the plight of the disenfranchised and poor.

Devoting a section to each artist, the exhibition showcased Lipi's and Rahman's individual practices while subtly acknowledging overlaps, intersections, and influences. A number of Lipi's signature sculptures—furniture and apparel whose surfaces consist of chain mail–like sheets of stainless-steel razor blades—were theatrically presented in darkened galleries. Taking cues from Mona Hatoum's weaponized furniture and oversize kitchen appliances, these cold, shiny objects—pulled from a domestic, traditionally feminine sphere usually associated with nurture, care, comfort, and warmth—were recast as items fraught with pain and anxiety. The many blades, fashioned into the shapes of heirlooms such as an antique dressing table and a vintage sewing machine, insert suggestions of violence and trauma into familial narratives. Covering the ornate surface in *My Daughter's Cot*, 2012, they reference both the artist's childhood recollections of delivering fresh blades to local midwives and her (publicly vocalized) grief over her own infertility, compounded by the shame of remaining childless in a society in which a woman's ability to procreate determines her worth. These same razors transform saris into armor—protection, perhaps, from the sexual harassment that is rampant in Bangladesh. Yet the repetition of the material throughout the display diluted its impact, making the razor plating feel gimmicky. The inclusion of short, bipartite video works provided some relief from the sculptures' uniformity. In *I Wed Myself*, 2010, Lipi plays both a bride and a groom primping for their nuptials to the accompaniment of the subtly disconcerting rasp of a knife being honed. Reclaiming agency for and through the self, the video wryly subverts the common practice of arranged marriages (since the artist is, after all, implicitly marrying the one she loves most), yet it also equates marriage with ritualistic sacrifice.

Disparate in form, media, and subject matter, Rahman's work felt rawer and less neatly resolved. The artist's likeness appeared in sets of charcoal drawings of different sizes. *Enjoy the Security 1* and *2*, both