

Concept and Material Form

by Timothy Brown

The ideas that inform our understanding of contemporary art are often intertwined with the materials and processes that are used to create art, as well as the content it represents. These approaches find singular expression in the work of Michael Thron, Hillary Steel, and MK Bailey.

A General View of Concepts

“Cogito Ergo Sum” (I think, therefore I am) – René Descartes

Concepts are associated with ideas, mental formulations that are independent of material form or referent (rationalism). For instance, the concept of beauty remains resolute as an idea, whereas the material form (e.g., the word “beauty” or a “flower”) can take on many guises. As Shelley wrote, “The one remains, the many change and pass.” The concept, in this sense, does not derive its essential meaning from representations.

A General View of Material Form

“Every effect is a distinct event from its cause. It could not, therefore, be discovered in the cause, and the first invention or conception of it, a priori, must be entirely arbitrary.” – David Hume

Material form refers to any kind of representation that can be used as the basis for defining some kind of experience or understanding (empiricism). For example, a mountain can be awe-inspiring or evoke ideas of grandeur. In this case, concepts, or “a priori” principles, are not resolute, but temporal, taking on different meanings when engendered by the physical, visual, or auditory presence of a thing.

In the work of modern-day creatives like Michael Thron, Hillary Steel, and MK Bailey, concept and material form are united in dynamic and unexpected ways. Rather than treat idea and representation as mutually exclusive, all three artists explore the fecund tension that results when material representations overlap with their conceptual moorings.



Hillary Steel

“Much of the work in the exhibition is showcasing my great concern about the state of our world nationally and internationally. Repair the world is really a call for exactly that, which would include dialogue, honest dialogue, and respectful dialogue.”

Hillary Steel’s exhibition *Tikkun Olam* is at once a concept and a call to action. Steel is fully conscious of the interdependent nature of concept and material form, and utilizes both to remake the world, rather than destroy it. Like her art, a dialogue (ideally) is about reciprocity and mutual respect. Similarly, the call to action is about process—the mediation and supersession of dual forces that lead to more fruitful outcomes.

It is not surprising that Steel’s medium of choice is textiles, and the age-old technologies of weaving and dyeing. Dialogue is reimagined as the integration of warp and weft. Action is the “shuttle” that brings them together, and the floor looms are her tools for remaking the world and exploring new possibilities. The inevitable tension between concept and material form is echoed by her use of binding and resist-dyeing techniques, which are synthesized by her complex design structures. Dyeing before and after the weaving process (*ikat* and *shibori*) further reinforces the notion that mind and matter are not mutually exclusive, but part of a shared process of continual evolution. For Steel, art is not the form of pure content or the content of pure form, but the process that engenders new and hopeful outcomes. The spirit of hope is embodied in the work “Tikkun Olam,” which was inspired by the quetzal bird, a national symbol of liberty for the people of Guatemala.

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