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VADIS TURNER

UCCS GALLERIES OF CONTEMPORARY ART

MEGALITHS

VADIS TURNER



Vadis Turner is a Nashville-born artist who explores female experience, intergenerational wisdom, rites of passage, and gender roles—often through the lens of her own family history in the southern United States. Turner embraces both formal technique and traditional handiwork methods to create lush abstract assemblages and architectural sculptures.

Turner's work simultaneously asserts the value of female experience while seeking to question notions of gendered material and "women's work." As a mixed-media artist, she employs a range of traditional and found materials that carry narratives of their own—ribbon, bedding, clothing, paint, resin, sanitary products, waxed paper, charred wood, ashes, and her own breast milk.

In this newest body of work, created specifically for the UCCS Galleries of Contemporary Art (GOCA) solo exhibition *Megaliths*, Turner investigates the Neolithic era and the shift from a hunter-gatherer society to one centered around agriculture—farming the land and domesticating animals.

In the Neolithic era, entire communities erected megalithic stone structures, one of many ways society shifted toward the manipulation and assertion of control over nature. Turner's interest in this shift infuses the work in *Megaliths* and connects to ecofeminist theory, which binds humankind's treatment of the land and nature to society's treatment of women and marginalized groups.

As a theory, ecofeminism first developed in the 1970s alongside the ecology movement. It ultimately highlights what a New World Order would look like with man and woman, human and planet, equally respected and contributing on an even playing field—something close to what existed in cultures before the Neolithic era.

While living in New York for over a decade after graduate school, Turner moved away from years of painting and made her first leaps toward mixed-media sculptural installation. She incorporated household materials associated with women's work and lived experience into her practice: wax paper from her mother's kitchen became a debutante gown, tampons transcended into a wedding cake, and a major exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum culminated with a performative artist talk given in a wedding dress just before her own wedding. These works built on feminist art practices of the late 1960s and 1970s, when artists such as Ana Mendieta, Judy Chicago, and Sheila Hicks elevated and injected women's bodies and handiwork—long considered lower-level craft—into the critical dialogue of the art world.

Turner returned to her training as a painter around 2011, when she began to construct wall-based works from long strips of recycled textiles that she embraced dually as painting and assemblage/sculpture. In 2014, she moved back to Nashville with her husband, Clay Ezell (also Nashville-born), and her young son. I first met Turner when I visited her studio on her family's lakefront property outside the city, in Gallatin, Tennessee, in 2017. During that visit, she shared her interest in the lived experiences of her mother and grandmother both within the landscape and in their home. The land and the handiwork of these three generations of women and mothers inform and shape Turner's work in powerful ways.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Vadis Turner received a BFA and MFA from Boston University. Her first solo museum exhibition, *Tempest*, was at the Frist Art Museum in 2017. Turner was awarded the Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Grant in 2016. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 21C Hotel & Museum, Hunter Museum of American Art, Tennessee State Museum, Kentucky Arts and Crafts Museum and the Egon Schiele Art Centrum. Selected group exhibitions include the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY; Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, ME; Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA; Islip Art Museum, Islip, NY; Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul, MN and Cheekwood Museum, Nashville, TN.

Turner is represented by Geary Contemporary in NYC and Zeitgeist Gallery in Nashville, TN.

In *Megaliths*, Turner's works inhabit and claim both the walls and the floor of the gallery. While the exhibition comprises distinct wall-based works and sculptures, it is meant to be experienced as a single installation. Turner references the stone circles of the Neolithic era and, in doing so, imposes a circular shape on the white cube gallery space. Through this body of work, she seeks to upend assumptions of masculine versus feminine materials by melding domestic materials (bedsheets) with what the artist refers to as “macho” forms and shapes.

Red Gate (center spread right) is composed of braided bedsheets that have been dyed and infused with acrylic medium and resin and pumped up to a monumental scale. It is a prime example of this approach and was the inspiration for the *Megaliths* body of work. As in another monumental wall-based work in this exhibit, **Cumulus Megaliths** (fig. 1), the densely woven braids of slept-in bedsheets pack a narrative punch, fusing domesticity, sexuality, and gendered material. When asked about the particular shape of Red Gate, Turner labels it by turns “a tongue, a sun, a window, a womb, and a curtain.” Dyed a primal cardinal red, it asserts a massive presence against the white walls of the gallery.

Turner recognized this shape's resemblance to an important early sculptural form, the Heel Stone (or Hele Stone). Freestanding, with a flat bottom and rounded top, the Heel Stone functions as a solar calendar marker of the summer solstice for Stonehenge, the megalithic structure erected in the late Neolithic period in England—one of many such structures from this era erected in disparate global locations, like the moai statues of Easter Island, the Aztec pyramids, and ancient Mesopotamian ziggurats.

The Heel Stone shape reappears in **Two Undressed Stones Somewhere Between Unraveling and Revelation** (center spread left). Turner embraces the balance between opposing forces: a wall-bound dark shadow that is unraveling and a freestanding, bright-yellow “contained mess.”

By contrast, **Ghost Megalith** (fig. 4), the final work completed for the exhibit, is all white, drained of color. While it is, like the others, composed of bedsheets, here they have become corpulent with stuffing and are



layered with strands of leather and filled with buckwheat—an ancient agricultural crop staple. At nearly twelve feet tall, the work is impressively architectural, appearing at once as stacked building blocks and natural rock formations. It is truly megalithic in its form and presence.

Vadis Turner is an artist interested in exploring the space “between”—between the wall and the floor, between painting and sculpture, and between gendered notions of male and female in materials, form, and concept. With *Megaliths*, Turner leaps into the void of in-between and invites us all to follow.

Daisy McGowan
Director & Chief Curator,
UCCS Gallery of Contemporary Art

VADIS TURNER: UNCLASSIFIED

Vadis Turner hates classification. She likes things that fall between categories: paintings that look like sculptures, films that look like paintings. Her own work is a reflection of this, finding its place somewhere between decadence and disgustingness, between life and death, straddling the oft-debated line between art and craft.

Originally from Nashville, Tennessee, Turner received her BFA and MFA from Boston University, with a focus on abstract painting. Following graduation, she moved to New York and began to work in mixed media, gravitating toward gender-based materials. Her work referenced themes of domestic roles, rites of passage, and female adornment. Between 2007 and 2009, her work included prom dresses and lingerie made from wax paper, a vintage-quilt sex swing, a bejeweled uterus form, a wedding cake of tampons, and a marital dowry.

When she developed an urge to return to painting several years later, her interest in themes of the domestic and feminine led her to use ribbons, lace, yarn, and rope as unconventional alternatives to paint. Draping, stretching, bunching, weaving, and tying ribbon across canvases, she began to create “ribbon paintings,” compositions that, from afar, appear as large swaths of color resembling color-field paintings. Moving closer, individual strokes of ribbon, lace, and yarn in varied textures, shades, and thicknesses emerge, creating shadows as they tumble across the canvas, bearing closer resemblance to abstract painted landscapes. Turner often elicited damaging processes, such as fire or mold, to push against the femininity inherent in the textile materials.

Turner also uses narrative to contradict the light, frilly aesthetic of the materials. She creates modern-day fairy tales around tragic archetypal female figures, such as Ophelia or Eve, and through series of ribbon paintings depicts their demise. These ribbon paintings are puzzles for the eye, brushstrokes crisscrossing themselves like a network of branches, creating wild compositions evoking the character’s disturbance, a troublemaker’s rampage across the landscape. In the



VADIS TURNER HATES CLASSIFICATION.

Eve series, devastation of the landscape is evidenced in the increasing number of dark ribbons used in the progression of scenes. By the third and final painting, thick black ribbons cross the surface in vertical stripes, stretched tight, like acid rain falling upon a once virgin habitat.

Unlike the instantaneous effect of a paintbrush on canvas, Turner’s lines are often formed methodically, with deliberate and precise plotting to ensure gestural outcomes. Small stitches secure the ribbons to the structure in their drooping wave-like patterns. The ribbon, sewn diagonally, perpendicularly, or vertically, elicits uneasiness in the viewer. Without a single line of perspective, a vanishing point, or any kind of horizon within the composition—





especially in the large ribbon paintings—a kind of unconscious anxiety arises, brought about by the inability to find pause.¹

Following a residency at Materials for the Arts in New York City, Turner began rejecting the stretched canvas, instead building woven fabric frames out of series of interlocked rope, creating stable forms out of the delicate, ephemeral material. Similar to the French Supports/Surfaces group of the 1960s, who debated formal limits of the traditional frame, Turner’s use of fabric cores allowed her to set her own limits; the notion of “support” became fluid as the material assigned its own frame.

After returning to her hometown of Nashville in 2014, Turner stepped away from ribbon paintings altogether, to explore a body of work that engaged with her new role as a mother for a solo exhibition at Geary Contemporary in New York City. For the show, titled *Bells and Burn Piles* (2016), she returned to the formal limits of canvas, confining ribbon on acrylic frames, tacked down under a sticky, shiny resin. She started with a bell shape—referencing the womb, fertility, and the pregnancy of possibility—and moved it through birth, decline, and demise in a series of wall pieces. The progression culminated in two floor works, *Artifacts and Remains*, in which charred nuggets cooled in puddles of resin mixed with Turner’s own breast milk.

In 2017, Turner developed an additional body of work for a solo exhibition at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts (now the Frist Art Museum) in Nashville. After conducting interviews around the idea of “heirloom,” she created a series of textile paintings, titled *The Elder*, devoted to the four categories within which the stories she heard fit: object, place, ritual, and spirit. The room including *The Elder* was situated alongside rooms titled *The Wild Woman and The Mother*, each containing multiple works and representing the three potential chapters of a woman’s life.

The elements that have recurred throughout Turner’s career—juxtaposition of material and form; depth of color; contrast between process and effect—are again apparent in the exhibition *Megaliths* at UCCS GOCA. Here, Turner offers a series of sculptural works released from the frame, erected out of traditionally domestic materials. The soft textiles, primarily bedsheets, once dormant and horizontal, become rigid and upright through an exertion of human effort, such that they resemble hard stone formations. Turner’s use of traditionally female materials in the historically male domain of sculpture re-genders the textiles, essentially becoming a cultural statement on domesticity. Like much of her past work, this series falls somewhere between sculpture, painting, and textile.

Ultimately, Turner’s works, converging at some point between two and three dimensions, show an allegiance to abstract expressionism and find commonalities with artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement, as well as those of the Supports/Surfaces group. Using a single set of terms to describe them seems limiting; they can be talked about in relation to fiber arts, installation and sculpture, or traditional painting. In a day when agility is a valuable and necessary asset for both artists and markets, and at a time when material hierarchies are heading toward a confusing and contested demise, perhaps Turner has situated herself where everyone else will eventually end up: in the realm of the unclassifiable.

Grace Reff holds a Master’s in Decorative Arts, Material Culture, and Design History from Bard Graduate Center. She currently works as the Director of Development at Peters Valley School of Craft, an international center for craft education in Northern New Jersey.

¹ See *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, by Erwin Panofsky, 1924.

RECONTEXTUALIZING DOMESTICITY

Wadis Turner's exhibition trajectory is rivaled only by the originality of her art. The incorporation of manufactured feminine and domestic products associated with contemporary home life is at the heart of her process, with textiles as a primary base. Her latest work, *Megaliths*, contains a core thread that has pointedly evolved out of previous work, and marks another emphatic turn in her reconceptualization of domestic materials. She uses slept-in, dyed, tightly wrapped bedsheets to create strong, vertical, wall-mounted or sculptural forms, which in juxtaposition to the softness of the textiles strips away the meaning derived from their default use by gendered couples.

The work in *Megaliths* is the third iteration in Turner's career-long conversation with soft domestic materials and mixed media presented through installations, sculptures, and ribbon paintings. In her highly exhibited ribbon paintings, ribbons—hung, woven, and tied—were the focus and the medium. Patterned as an original mixed-media extension of traditional painting, the ribbon paintings ushered the artist's entrance into the art exhibition world. The initial phase of work, 2009–15, utilized dyed ribbons, and sometimes paint, to create large- and small-scale ribbon paintings that a viewer might at first term abstract, though on continued viewing the clear lines of fabric indicate the specificity of their involvement with the eye, moving the work out of a comparative interpretation and into an original space of its own.

In between *Megaliths* and the ribbon paintings, which exhibited in galleries and museums around the world, Turner used resin to create works that embodied aspects of the original ribbon paintings, but with a strict presentation and pointed sense of reflection. In previous works, the artist had utilized female tears, sweat, and breast milk. She incorporated feminine products into some of her first installations, like *Best in Show* (2009), exploring the marriage dowry as a form of female access to a male-dominated world through the assemblage of tampons, sacred religious books, and underwear. The items all had a tactile pliability and immediate awareness of softness.





In the resin ribbon paintings, the contrast apparent between hard and soft extends this exploration of traditional gender roles.

This second phase of the artist's work in ribbon, 2015–17, utilizes resin as a way of affixing meaning. Resin holds otherwise loose and free ribbons distinctly in place, denying them the opportunity to move. Though the resin-coated ribbons offer the strength of unified presentation, it doesn't allow for growth, response, or change, unless the viewer changes their viewpoint. Here, Turner's commentary on domineering maleness is concise: maleness often believes it does not have to change, that it is the interpreter who must change their perspective. Overall, the work illustrates the tension between growth and changeability, and between the security of immutability and its inherent risk.

With *Megaliths*, Turner continues to evolve the conversation around gender theory by dyeing used sheets slept in by couples and transforming them into monoliths, divested of their traditionally feminine association with outdated, though still prevalent, household gender roles. The history of the megalith as object signals male authority of presence. The first known megalith was constructed in 9500 BC in Turkey, and megaliths are found throughout Egyptian, European, and American history, with the most recent and visible example being the Washington

Monument. Megaliths, including America's, were created by men to honor men or male-dominant societies. Turner's *Megaliths* de-genders the viewer's access, repurposing a traditionally feminine material through the use of dye and charred wood, in a process that reflects the painstaking steps inherent in change toward unity.

Turner created the smaller studies in *Megaliths* after the large pieces. The order of creation—large to small—speaks to the importance of reexamining a large idea by inspecting its value and applicability on a smaller scale, and shifts the focus to the individual. *Megaliths* is a clear response to Picasso's and Schnabel's macho abstract works that embody an overt maleness. Turner's work, in contrast, embodies a unified essence of singularity that allows the viewer to be a person encountering the art of a person, a spirit of oneness that removes traditional roles and points to the potential for partnership and equality free from gender-based perspectives.

John Gosslee coedited *50 Contemporary Women Artists* (Schiffer, 2018), which won a Women's Studies award from Foreword Reviews and an IBPA award for best art book. He edits *Fjords Review*, and his latest little book is *Fish Boy* (Nomadic Press, 2018).

1 *Cumulus Megaliths*, 104 x 167 x 7 inches, braided bedsheets, dye, acrylic, resin, wood, breastmilk, mixed media, 2019

2 *Vadis Turner with detail of Undressed Stones Somewhere Between Unraveling and Revelation*, 126 x 144 x 72 inches, bedsheets, quilts, dye, acrylic, resin, ashes, ribbon, yarn and mixed media, 2019. Photo: John Schweikert

CENTER SPREAD
Installation view of *Megaliths*

LEFT *Undressed Stones Somewhere Between Unraveling and Revelation*, 126 x 144 x 72 inches, bedsheets, quilts, dye, acrylic, resin, ashes, ribbon, yarn and mixed media, 2019

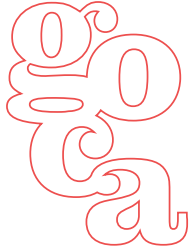
RIGHT *Red Gate*, 118 x 120 x 10 inches, braided bedsheets, dye, acrylic, resin, mixed media, 2018

3 *Cumulus Megaliths (detail)*, 104 x 167 x 7 inches, braided bedsheets, dye, acrylic, resin, wood, breastmilk, mixed media, 2019

4 *Ghost Megalith*, 144 x 86 x 8 inches, bedsheets, leather, buckwheat, pillow stuffing and mixed media, 2019

5 *Ghost Megalith (detail)*, 144 x 86 x 8 inches, bedsheets, leather, buckwheat, pillow stuffing and mixed media, 2019

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