

Generativity: On Michelle Grabner's Recent Sculpture

David J. Getsy

Reproduction pervades bronze sculpture and its meanings. The themes of replication and transmutation that emerge from bronze's materiality have been sources of anxiety or strength over the course of the history of Western sculpture, depending on the artist. To make a bronze sculpture most often involves casting, a one-to-one scale practice of representation. No matter what the prototype object is, the cast of that object always becomes a three-dimensional image of it. Passing through the negative space of the mould made from the prototype, the shape of the cast object is imprinted across a series of material phases in such intermediate materials as wax and plaster. The final artwork is the result of the passing of these three-dimensional images from one generation to the next in a chain of material transmission and transmutation that results in the final sculpture. Bronze has been the canonical material endpoint for this type of surrogacy, and artists from Cellini to Rodin to Bourgeois have capitalized on its ability to capture nuanced touches and lustrous marks. When looking at the final metal object and its engaging surfaces, it is easy to forget (as many viewers do) that most bronze sculptures are the progeny of this multi-stage process of casting and re-casting from an object or a form no longer extant.

There is generational memory in the final object, however. This material distance from initial form to final object invests sculpture with the traces of its other phases, its past states, and its reliance on material procreation in the shifts from one kind of matter to the next. One is never looking at the thing itself, but rather an offspring forged through negative spaces of moulds and the spread of liquefied solids. This inherent reproductivity is the material unconscious of bronze sculpture, and it invests all bronze sculpture with echoes of past incarnations of which the present object is the cumulative three-dimensional image. It is this inescapable image-making of the casting process that many late twentieth-century sculptors rejected in their search for objecthood and literalism. The bronze sculpture, for them, too readily spoke to its previous past phases and the series of generative embraces that formed the shape. To see a bronze sculpture is always to see a descendant of something else no longer present but only memorialized in its current state as durable metal effigy.

Michelle Grabner's recent sculpture capitalizes on casting precisely for its relationship to reproduction, and she thematizes the issue of generativity in her choice of subject matter and in her engagement with the material unconscious of

bronze. That is, she uses bronze casting because of the ways in which its own generative process echoes the concerns embedded in the objects she has chosen to reproduce. Her sculptures are of textiles that themselves served as generative models for her abstract paintings. While this familial bond with her paintings may not be evident to all viewers, these sculptures are nevertheless familiar because they represent objects often associated with care, warmth, and home — the handmade blanket or afghan. Such objects are often created within family contexts by one generation for another, and the care and commitment that goes into crocheting or knitting by hand is frequently an act of love that becomes figured in the object meant to hold and give warmth. The issues of generations and generativity, that is, are central both to the material process of making these works and to their content as representational sculptures. Grabner's works uphold the embrace — be it of the casting mould, the pattern for a painting, or the gift of the blanket — as the material metaphor for the contact and familial transmission between generations. Her sculptures, despite the decoy of their initial simplicity, stage the imbrication of these modes of generativity. They point to lost objects, to previous material states, to other artworks, and to the lineages engendered by the handmade textile that has now been monumentalized in bronze.

These lineages begin with the prototype objects for these sculptures — the "spent" textiles that have served as patterns for some of Grabner's abstract paintings. Using the geometric complexity of the crocheted or knitted blanket as a stencil, she makes marks across the surface of the canvas to create a regular pattern from the negative spaces of the crocheted or knitted textile. Much like Eva Hesse's iconic drawings on graph paper in which she filled each square of the grid with a hand drawn circle, these marks are both regular and individual. They are recognizably part of a pattern of sameness while retaining their resilient individuality against the homogenization of the geometric grid. Grabner's textile-pattern process, in this way, speaks both to the debates in the history of abstract painting as well to the larger histories of textiles. The paintings cultivate the embedded intelligence and systematicity of these long-standing practices of domestic labor, offering them as a challenge to the conventional and chauvinistic equations of mathematics with a disembodied universalism. She turns the opposition between high modernism and craft on its head in order to show how both share the necessity of commitment, perseverance, consistency, and care. In



this, the regular geometric pattern and the grid become sites of contestation and inhabitation, and Grabner has used modernism's emphasis on the grid's repetitive and endless structure as a place where difference emerges out of sameness and where determination is evident in the grid's expansion across the surface. Grabner's work is explicitly feminist in this attack launched on the implicit maleness that underwrote dominant accounts of geometric abstraction. (Accounts that have been, for decades, under sustained critique and revision.) Her works make central the counter-narrative posed by the accumulated history of textile production — a history that has all too often been sidelined as “women's work” in traditional (and outmoded) art-historical narratives. In this, she adds her voice to the many artists who have challenged the dominant narratives of abstraction from the perspective of gender's difference or multiplicity. In her paintings based on these textiles, she interweaves indexical representation with ostensible abstraction to show how the systems that geometric minimalism supposedly laid bare have been for centuries an arena of exploration and experimentation in the artistry and domestic labor of hand-made textiles, blankets, and afghans.

For years, the prototype blankets were for Grabner's studio tools only, and their intimate relation to their painted counterparts was visible to her alone. In 2014, however, she embarked on a process of giving these handmade objects new life in the monumentalized material of bronze. The knits, throws, and blankets that begat her paintings' forms became images again in this process. This time, however, the inherent representational effects of the bronze casting process resulted in a three-dimensional, durable sculptural image of the prototype object.

This twofold generative relationship to abstract painting and to three-dimensional image making is important to remember when looking at one of Grabner's sculptures of blankets. The prototype textile has been doubly procreative in being the basis for both an abstraction and what we must recognize as a *realist sculpture* of the prototype object. Like the paintings indebted to it, these new sculptures also performed the complexity of geometric pattern and repetition that is embodied in the process of crocheting or knitting. Now, however, this was manifested as material presence rather than painted absence. Much the way that she short-circuited the false isolation of abstraction from the daily experience of geometric system (in the form of the textile), Grabner also shows how that same

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Importantly, however, Grabner's sculptures are not just the grids and geometries that make up the knit or crochet. These works take on a shape all their own, warping their internal grids and patterns with their reminder of weight and give of textile's materiality. This signification of weight is a result of Grabner's process. To make the initial moulds into which the bronze would be poured, she created a wax positive of the blankets that, themselves, generated the negative spaces of the mould. In this process, the wax positive was made through the sacrifice of the blanket, and she held two corners of the blankets in order to dip them in the molten wax. This required speed and dexterity to get the position right before the wax hardened around the blanket. The stiff wax-covered blanket is then cut into sections, which each become the basis for a ceramic mould. The molten bronze is poured into these moulds, burning out both the blanket and the wax that captured the details of its surface. Grabner then meticulously reconstitutes the form of the blanket from these component sections, making it whole again. Each sculpture is unique, and Grabner leaves the metal untreated and unpatinated so that its own history (of oxidation, of the viewer's touch) accrues on its surfaces and the tonal variety across them.

The shape of these sculptures bears the evidence of this process, and their shroud-like form suspended from two corners should always remind us of Grabner's hands spreading and suspending the textile. In this way, the sculptures take on the traces of the scale and exertion of the artist's body. With this embodied material history in mind, one could even go so far as to say that the larger ones offer a kind of embrace that we associate with extended and raised arms. Such an association is also underwritten by the sculptural image of the object intended for warmth — the blanket. Blankets and throws are patterned after the scale of the body and intended to enclose it. For all these reasons, the impact of Grabner's sculpture — despite the cold hardness of bronze — is human in scale and bodily in reference. She wryly reinforces this in the two leg-like stanchions on which the sculptures stand. Even the smaller sculptures convey these corporeal associations and these resonances of the figure. Like many statuettes, they activate relative scale between viewer and object as a means of inciting bodily projection and identification onto the smaller figurative object. Across the range of variations in Grabner's recent sculptures, it is clear that she is not just thinking of these two-legged objects in relation to the history of abstract painting but also, and importantly, in relation to the statuary tradition.

These works combine this bodily address of the warm embrace with their unmistakable citation of the canonical power of the monumental statue. From at least the Greek Archaic *kouroi* onward, Western art has relied upon the freestanding statue as an image of an ideal, whether that be of an abstract concept, a powerful leader, or a hero. The meanings of the freestanding format for statuary are tied up with this aspiration to ideality, and the history of sculpture has taken the freestanding statue's contested public meanings as a driving issue. In these histories, it must be said that gender has also played a circumscribing role. The majority of the canonical history of the freestanding statue as sculpture's highest genre has showcased the male-identified body, and it conventionally equated the verticality of the statue with an idealized subjectivity that was narrowly gendered as male.¹ Grabner's sculptures explicitly take on this format and this problematic history. They stand before us and stand up to us, and one of the most important

aspects of these works is their freestanding verticality. It is important to highlight this transformation from the horizontal embracing blanket to bipedal standing statue. In their new form, these textiles reflect the viewer's stance in a way they rarely would if they were their former selves. Blankets and throws are primarily experienced horizontally and, in a knowing inversion, Grabner has transmuted them into standing figures. Activated by the bodily memories of the warm blanket and by the viewer's potential awareness of the artist's acts of holding it, the human body is invoked strongly by these objects. Consequently, in the high-stakes material of bronze, they also become heroic statues.

It should also be remembered that this shift from horizontal to vertical is also a feature of postwar American painting, and much has been written about artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Lynda Benglis who used the difference of horizontality as a complication of painting's assumed internal gravity and historical conventions. As flat objects, Grabner's sculptures also allude to this history and to her own abstract painting's engagement with these debates. Like the intergenerational links between textile, painting, and sculpture in Grabner's practice, the individual statues speak to the interconnectedness of these normally distinct histories. They do so, however, not by being abstract but rather by being realist representations of blankets, made through the multi-stage reproductive process of bronze casting and made to stand free like a statue or statuette.

The clearest signal of the shift from horizontal to vertical is the represented sagging of the crocheted or knitted geometric structures of the textiles. The grids we see in her standing sculptures are neither perfect nor universal. Rather, they become unique and temporary. They are the result of that moment of bodily engagement when the blanket was dipped in wax. The flatness and regularity of the afghans would be evident if they were spread out on a table or a bed, and the perfection of the geometric structure could be more evidently seen. If the grid is the modernist ideal, then these blanket-images give us the grid's life as a blanket — as used. In this way, the sculptures both call forth our knowledge of the grid's endless geometric regularity and extension while, at the same time, demand that we attend to the particularity of the event-based modification of it that has been preserved for us. This move reiterates the theme of generativity central to these works. The grid's structure produces the capacity for such individuations

¹ For a longer discussion of the restrictively binary gendered logics of verticality and horizontality in the Western history of the statue, see my essay "Fallen Women: The Gender of Horizontality and the Abandonment of the Pedestal by Giacometti and Epstein," in *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from Renaissance to Post-Modern*, ed. A. Gerstein (London: Paul Holberton, 2007), 114-29.

that, themselves, are temporally (not spatially) endless. With each new crocheted blanket comes a different geometric web or grid, and its life involves that web becoming folded, wrapped, embraced, stretched, and shaped. If all crocheted objects rely on the same mathematics, then their daily lives as objects of use and care show how flexible, particular, and personal those geometries can become.

Grabner's sculptures foster such temporal associations and conjure the blankets' past lives. Her initial choice to use them as patterns for her works gave these textiles a new life and purpose, and in making paintings from their structures she honored the embedded intelligence in the domestic labor and traditions that produced them. In turn, she monumentalized this generative object in a sculptural practice that itself relied on transmission through contact and multi-staged processes of making one thing from another. Rather than just any casting material, however, she chose the canonical material of bronze and made these works into the format of the freestanding statue. This canny engagement with conventions of both sculpture and abstract painting combine to make a twofold case: first, for the powerful familial associations and intelligence born from traditional artist practices embodied by the blankets she chose and, second, for the larger place of such "women's work" of making handmade textiles as crucial to major debates in Western art's history. In their sophisticated layering of the meanings and uses of these blankets, throws, and afghans, Grabner's sculptures demand a different kind of attention to the complexity and capacity of such traditional artistic practices, themselves often handed down generation by generation. At the heart of these works is Grabner's powerful demonstration of just how generative these ostensibly humble, handmade, everyday objects really are.

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Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 36¼ × 12 × 8 in. — 92.1 × 30.5 × 20.3 cm





Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 77½ × 24 × 18 in — 196.8 × 61 × 45.7 cm
>>detail>>

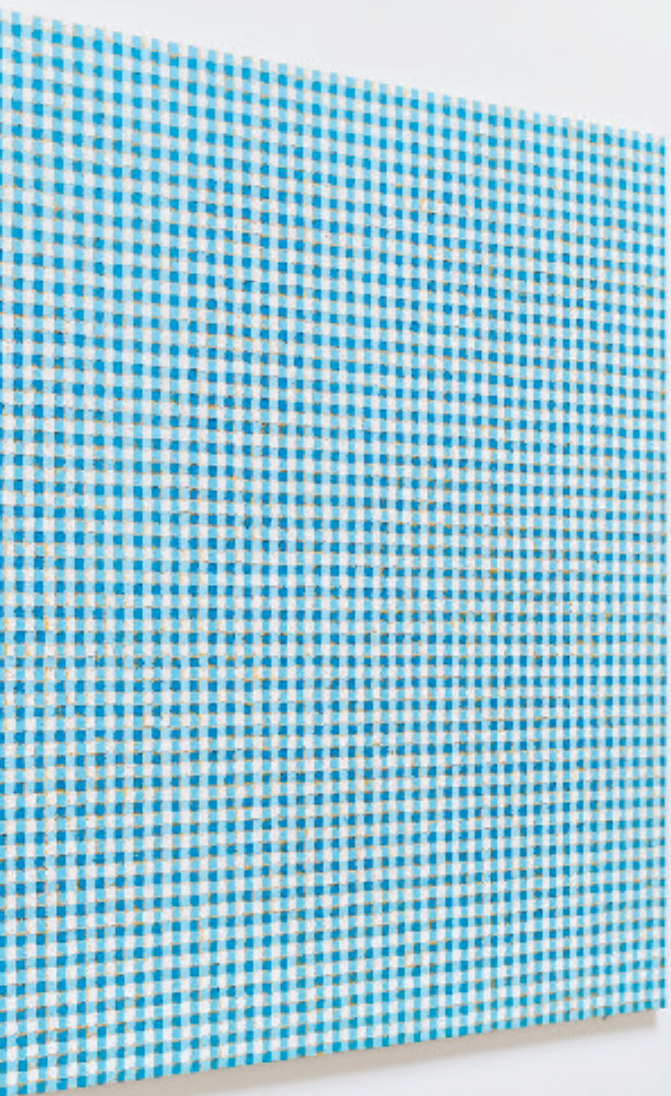




Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 28 × 15 × 10 in — 71.1 × 38.1 × 25.4 cm

Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 74½ × 34 × 18 in — 189.2 × 86.4 × 45.7 cm









Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 31½ × 13 × 9 in — 80.0 × 33 × 22.9 cm
>>detail>>





Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 53 × 20 × 12 in — 134.6 × 50.8 × 30.5 cm
>>detail>>





Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 35½ × 16 × 12 in — 90.2 × 40.6 × 30.5 cm

Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 62¼ × 18 × 12 in — 158.1 × 45.7 × 30.5 cm





Untitled 2016 — Bronze, unique — 25 ¼ × 12 × 8 in — 64.1 × 30.5 × 20.3 cm

Michelle Grabner
Bronze



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