

Steven Skov Holt and Mara Holt Skov



# MANUFACTURED

The Conspicuous Transformation of Everyday Objects

## Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction: Art, Craft, and Design Realigned</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>From Readymade to Manufactured: Some Assembly Required</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Form Follows Dissection: Régis Mayot</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Form Follows Fabrication: Cat Chow</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Form Follows Accretion: Jason Rogenes</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Form Follows Fusion: Sonya Clark</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Form Follows Provocation: Constantin and Laurene Leon Boym</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Form Follows Subversion: Harriete Estel Berman</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Form Follows Infection: Laura Splan</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Form Follows Variation: Livia Marin</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>Form Follows Manipulation: Hrafnhildur Arnardottir</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>Form Follows Ornamentation: Marcel Wanders</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>Form Follows Perception: Devorah Sperber</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>Credits and Extended Captions</b>	<b>157</b>

Marcel Duchamp  
*Fountain* 1917/1964  
Glazed ceramic urinal with black paint

Steven Skov Holt

# FROM READYMADE TO MANUFACTURED: SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Arguably, the most important piece of sculpture in the entire twentieth century—perhaps the most significant cultural creation in all of the visual arts—was barely even seen as a work of art when it was first submitted for exhibition. If anything, it was seen as a joke. As an example of art's untimely yet predictable demise. As a protest over the artist's conceit that it was possible to create something new just over a decade after Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque had fractured the flat picture plane in their Cubist explorations.

In the end, the piece was never shown in the context it was created for—The Society of Independent Artists 1917 exhibition in New York City. It was barred from display and disappeared shortly thereafter. But its story has not been lost and the sculpture has since been accepted into the canon of modern art history, labeled by academics and practitioners alike as one of the twentieth century's most influential artworks. From the time of its creation, the object's message was as simple as it was radical, that **art might be anything**, and **anything might be art**.

That piece, of course, was a white ceramic urinal laid on its side, signed R. Mutt, and given the logical if comic title of *Fountain*. It has since become an iconic symbol for its artist (Marcel Duchamp), its movement (Dada), and its time (the early twentieth century). *Fountain* was one of Duchamp's classic readymades—sculptures that were never sculpted, art objects artfully made from found manufactured products. It was a lightning bolt that sparked numerous isms and movements: among them, surrealism, pop art, minimalism, and conceptual art. Duchamp has not only been credited with helping to push sculpture off its dusty pedestals, but more important, *Fountain* left in its wake an impact that has been felt by nearly every subsequent generation of artists since it was first *never* seen.

Today, nine decades later, the readymade is giving way to its twenty-first-century successor, the manufactured object. It is almost as if the spirit of Duchamp reappeared in the mid-to late 1990s, animating artists, craftspeople, and designers alike with a new and liberating sensibility that could be utilized to repurpose, if not extract, life from manufactured goods. Now not only might anything be art, but **anything might be art, craft, and design.**

The result has been an entirely new and fascinating class of objects. They are strangely familiar, although they look like nothing anyone has seen before. They have emerged not only from the art community but from the craft and design communities as well. The fact that this new work comes from all over the creative map portends a new period of fertility for object making. *Manufactured* focuses on a particular group of practitioners who have come to regard finished products (existing consumer goods) as their own unique raw material. Their work provides an unexpected model for creativity—a way of showing how innovation, invention, and beauty can emerge from anywhere, even the most familiar, ordinary, and seemingly banal sources.

From ancient times to the present, humans have always found creative ways to reuse materials for pragmatic, economic, and even political reasons. They have repainted canvases, melted down sculptural metals, even pilfered columns or entire buildings for new purposes. In the modern art and craft worlds, this creative reuse has consisted primarily of scavenging throwaway items and reemploying them as raw materials for collage and assemblage. Picasso affixed a scrap of printed chair caning to canvas and called it art. Robert Rauschenberg created aesthetically and socially charged “combines” from found furniture, painted signs, photographs, and fabrics. Louise Nevelson assembled ragtag stacks of turned table legs and wooden objects into structural modules, unifying them through the application of pure black or white paint. The quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, sewed together bits and pieces of worn-out clothes and made unmistakably bold graphic statements (and warm blankets) in the process. Dan Friedman combined furniture parts scavenged from Downtown New York streets to create resplendently fluorescent pieces that were for looking at and thinking about (rather than sitting on). All these approaches have given found objects and materials new life and uncommon purpose.



**Pablo Picasso**  
*Still Life with Chair Caning* 1912  
Oil and oilcloth on canvas, rope frame



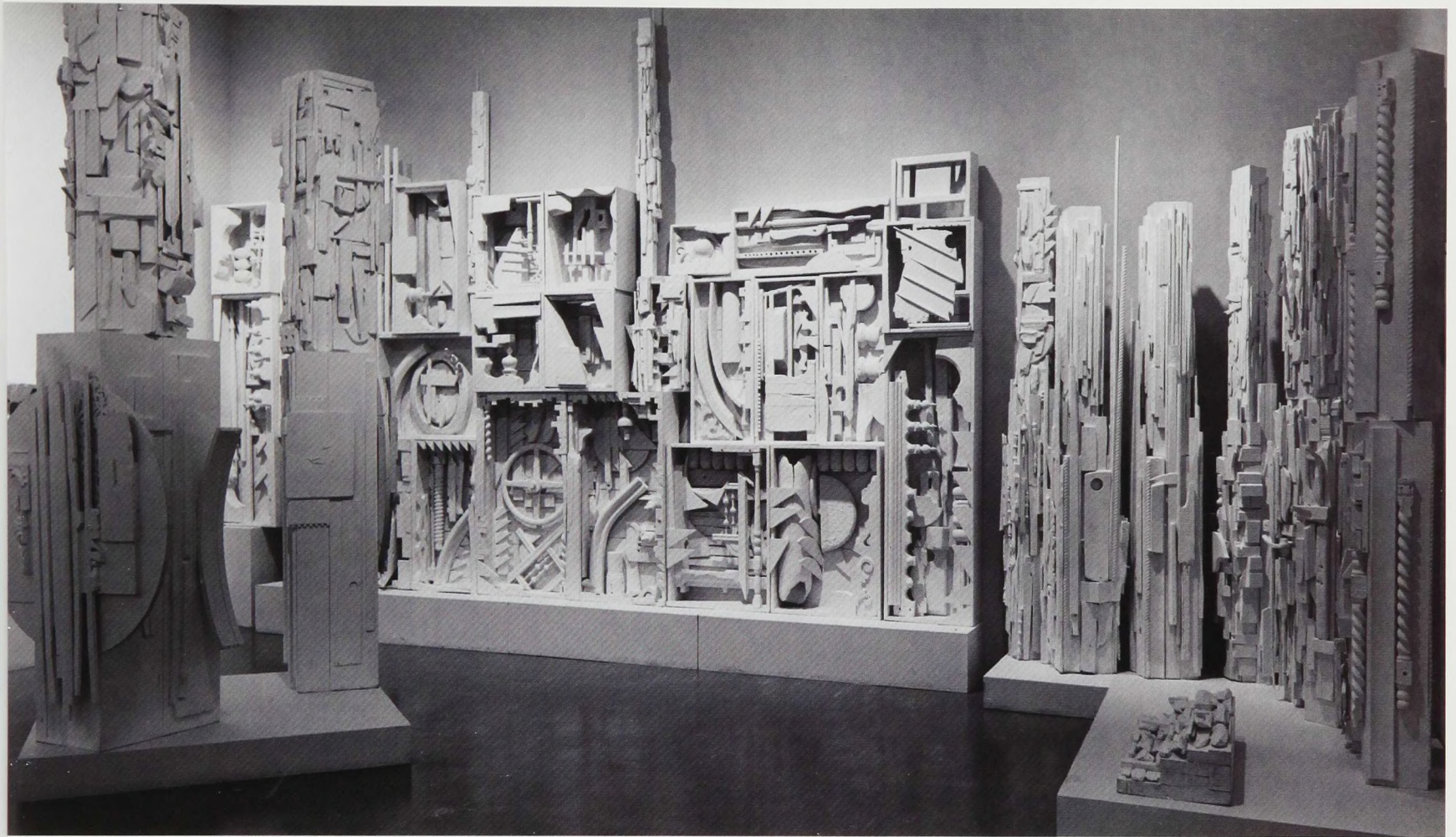
**Robert Rauschenberg**  
*Bed* 1955  
Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, sheet on wood supports

*Opposite page*

**Louise Nevelson**  
*Dawn's Wedding Feast* 1959  
Wood construction painted white  
Installation at the Museum of Modern Art,  
New York, New York

**Dan Friedman in collaboration with  
Paul Ludick**  
*Mutant Chair* 1985  
Painted wooden furniture parts

**Qunnie Pettway**  
*Lazy Gal Variation* quilt 2003  
Corduroy



## The pattern that connects...John Chamberlain and Sarah Sze

Both artists manufacture transformative sculptures that make the banal seem dramatically sublime and that make use of materials that are otherwise neglected. Each stages a cosmic act of redemption for those quotidian materials such that they become ground-breaking and extraordinary, visually energetic indicators for the way in which a disposable culture might be simultaneously explored and exposed for what it is. Their disorienting, room-dominating sculptural pieces are capable of blurring, blending, and playing with the lines between life, work, and creative output—and in the same spirit between art, craft, and design.



John Chamberlain  
*Glossalia Adagio* 1984  
Painted, chrome-plated steel, vehicle panels

Sarah Sze  
*Things Fall Apart* 2001  
Mixed media installation with vehicle







Nina Katchadourian  
*Austria* (photo) 2006  
C-print of dissected Austrian road map

The thing that is new in manufactured objects, the phenomenon that is gaining momentum, is this: It appears to be the first time that such creative reuse is pulled from the racks of pristine manufactured goods. **Finished products are the newest raw materials** in today's art, craft, and design realms. Because these products are produced in such profound abundance, they can be acquired in vast quantities with the relative ease of getting one's groceries. Such materials can be accreted and multiplied by whatever power the artist chooses. Pedestals can overflow, corners can be filled, whole walls can be covered; complete rooms can be outfitted, dwarfing the metric of human scale.

The craft of these objects and installations is evident, but it is clear that this is not the craft of yesteryear. The typical craft-world features are absent—particularly the technical mastery of a single natural material. In their place is an attention to detail of a new type and a new scale, but one that still comes straight out of craft traditions. It is almost as if the manufacturing process, which turns out scores of perfectly identical units, has paradoxically encouraged the creators of manufactured objects to be even more obsessive and thorough in the conception and assembly of their work.

Manufactured objects have certain inherent qualities. They routinely favor richness, ambiguity, and vitality over their more pure or traditional counterparts. They are hybrid, compromising, distorted, ambiguous—yet also accommodating, meaningfully redundant, multileveled, vestigial, and formally and functionally innovative. They are a new kind of combinatory construction, surprisingly open to multiple interpretations. By combining the root “manu” with the word “fracture” to indicate the fragmented nature of our contemporary moment, manufacturing presents a model whereby creative intervention can heal our fragmented culture. Taking something apart and putting it back together in a way never previously seen is a strong endorsement for the merits of creative process—and a testament to the optimistic, can-do, and even whimsical spirit that is simultaneously threaded and embedded throughout many of these pieces.

Boris Bally  
*Pennsylvania 79* c. 2001  
*Ride!* c. 2005  
*Man in Stereo: Muybridge Platter* 2007  
Recycled traffic signs



**A manufactured object is one that has been made not once but twice. Both Nina Katchadourian's and Boris Bally's highway-inspired projects were first brought into the world via industrial mass production and then transformed through hand-based, idea-driven manipulation: a road map in which all but the roads have been cut away, and highway signs that are “humanufactured” into die cut and pressed bowls and platters. In these projects the original form and function is forever changed and a new kind of preciousness is revealed. It is the dismembering and fragmenting—both physically and contextually—that is the key to their creation.**

## Conspicuous Transformation

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), economist and social critic Thorstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe what he saw as the desire of the moneyed elite to acquire goods as an overt and ostentatious display of their wealth. More than a century later, what we are seeing in art, craft, and design is “conspicuous transformation,” with consumer products used as base components in overt displays of intellectual and creative wealth. Although more than a century apart, what unites conspicuous consumption and conspicuous transformation is that in both, consumerism, materialism, and creativity are in powerful alignment, although to very different ends.

Each of the artists, craftspeople, and designers in *Manufactured* embody the concept of conspicuous transformation in one way or another. They use a vast array of consumer goods as their raw material: tin cans, paper plates, detergent bottles, cellophane tape, marker caps, foam packaging, plastic combs, drinking straws, and more. They take these often virgin products of consumer culture and either separate them into modules, or aggregate them together in great numbers, or both. This is **manufacturing; the active and thoughtful accumulation, organization, and transformation of materials through a novel combination of hand, tool, machine, and production processes.**

Conspicuous transformation as a strategy for object-making has changed the conditions for the practice of art, craft, and design. The result is a new fusion of sensibilities whereby the creators of objects look outside their profession-bound sources for fresh insights. The search for potential materials has taken them to unconventional places—to grocery and hardware stores, to recycling and scrap piles, to cosmetics counters, even directly to manufacturers. They are in search of manufactured goods that are plentiful and inexpensive—either brand-new and straight from the warehouse or barely used post-consumer finds—and they have found them in abundance.

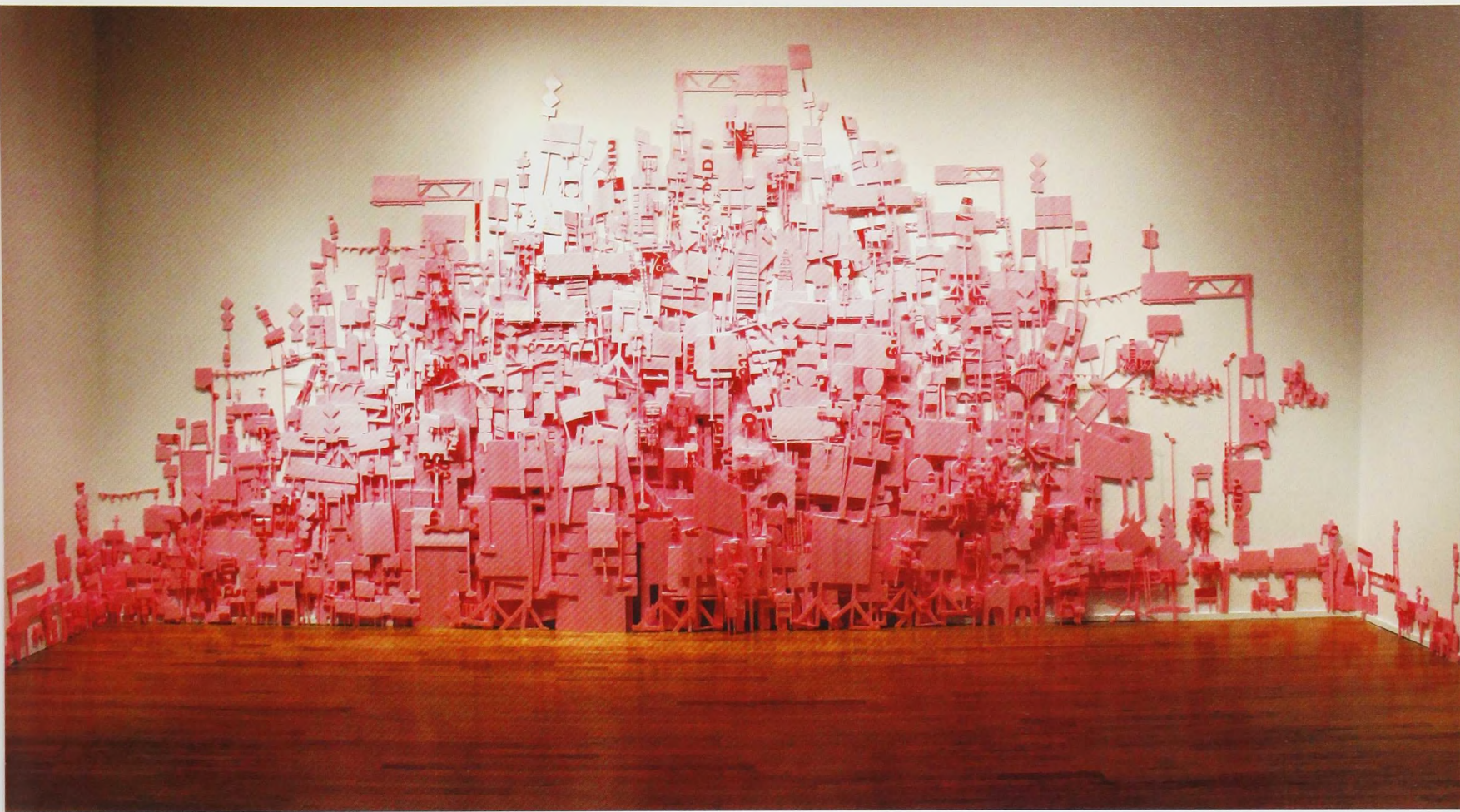


**Gaetano Pesce**  
*Pharmacie Bleu bowl* 1988–92  
Glass bottles

**Kim Beck**  
*Holymoley Land* 2006  
Laser-cut insulation foam, paper chipboard,  
wall drawing

**Hella Jongerius**  
*Groove and Long Neck Bottles* 2000  
Glass, porcelain, plastic packing tape

**The creators of manufactured objects conspicuously transform manufactured products into unexpected new forms, making strong statements about our current cultural conditions of abundance and overload. Sharp attention is focused on reconsideration of the ordinary: Gaetano Pesce’s scavenged bottles are melted together to form a multi-layered bowl; Kim Beck’s branded, imprinted construction foam is usually hidden by finished architectural surfaces; Hella Jongerius’ molecularly impossible vessels (glass/porcelain combination) are fused together with pre-printed packing tape. Through the labor-intensive processes of cutting, stacking, and layering their materials, they create work that is equally of the present moment at the same time that it provides conceptual models for future exploration.**





# FORM FOLLOWS FUSION

**Untitled** (detail) 2008  
Plastic combs, thread

**Mara Holt Skov**

Born in Washington, D.C., works in Richmond, Virginia

**Sonya Clark.** Shiny black teeth layer upon intertwined layer—a mass of controlled chaos. Hundreds of fine-toothed combs are composed in ordered stacks, gravity-defying spheres, circular basket-like constructions, and wall installations that recall textiles. A mass-manufactured, utilitarian grooming tool “Made in USA” is repurposed as a raw material for sculptures that defy both convention and logic while at the same time they display a wealth of expressive possibilities.

The fine-toothed comb is the stuff of Sonya Clark’s art. Familiar to the point of banality, the comb is an object we all know from our earliest days. But Clark helps us to see the comb in a new way. She has appropriated it as a raw material for her exploration into issues of identity, beauty, form, and freedom, all under the guise of textile art. For Clark the comb offers a kind of structure with each set of teeth playing the role of warp or weft. By consciously choosing a manufactured plastic comb as her “fiber,” she shakes the very notions of what a textile can be.

In one piece after another, Clark tests the expressive limits of the comb as a material for art making, all the while striking a careful balance between exploiting its formal attributes and recognizing its significance to culture and identity. The comb is, of course, an ancient object loaded with meaning and intimately connected to human history. For millennia, humans have used such tools to tame the mass of hair on their heads. The earliest combs were made of found natural materials— wood, ivory,



Raw material

"The primordial fiber art is hair dressing." —Bill Gaskins, critic

and shells. As the quest for beauty and adornment found physical form, combs began to occupy a more prominent position, becoming art objects themselves. Intricately carved and bejeweled, made of ivory, ebony, bone, shells, and fine metals, combs not only served an obvious useful and decorative purpose, but they also were a place to openly display the taste, wealth, power, and social standing of their wearer.

Sonya Clark's first intimate connection with combs was with the more humble variety. It began like that of nearly every young girl, squirming on a chair while an adult armed with a comb and good intentions attempted to bring order to the disorder on her head. In Clark's multiracial, multicultural family—her mother is Jamaican of African and Scottish origin, her father is Barbadian and Trinidadian with deep Yoruba roots—she remembers being the only child whose hair defied treatment with a fine-toothed comb. Her response to the pulling, tugging, and parting was deep and lasting, leaving her with a complicated relationship to the comb. Yet Clark also realized what a gift it was to be groomed by the hands of others, as it drew her into a special closeness with family members.

Later as an artist, she began working out some of the issues of identity and culture imbedded in hair and hairstyling. Beginning with textiles, she worked with the combed and woven "hair" of plants and animals—cottons, linens, and wools—striving to get to the deeper, more symbolic aspects of textiles. She made headdresses, hats, and wigs—all objects that crowned the head, the seat of the soul, as her father's Yoruba heritage taught.

**Dryad** 1998  
Cloth, thread

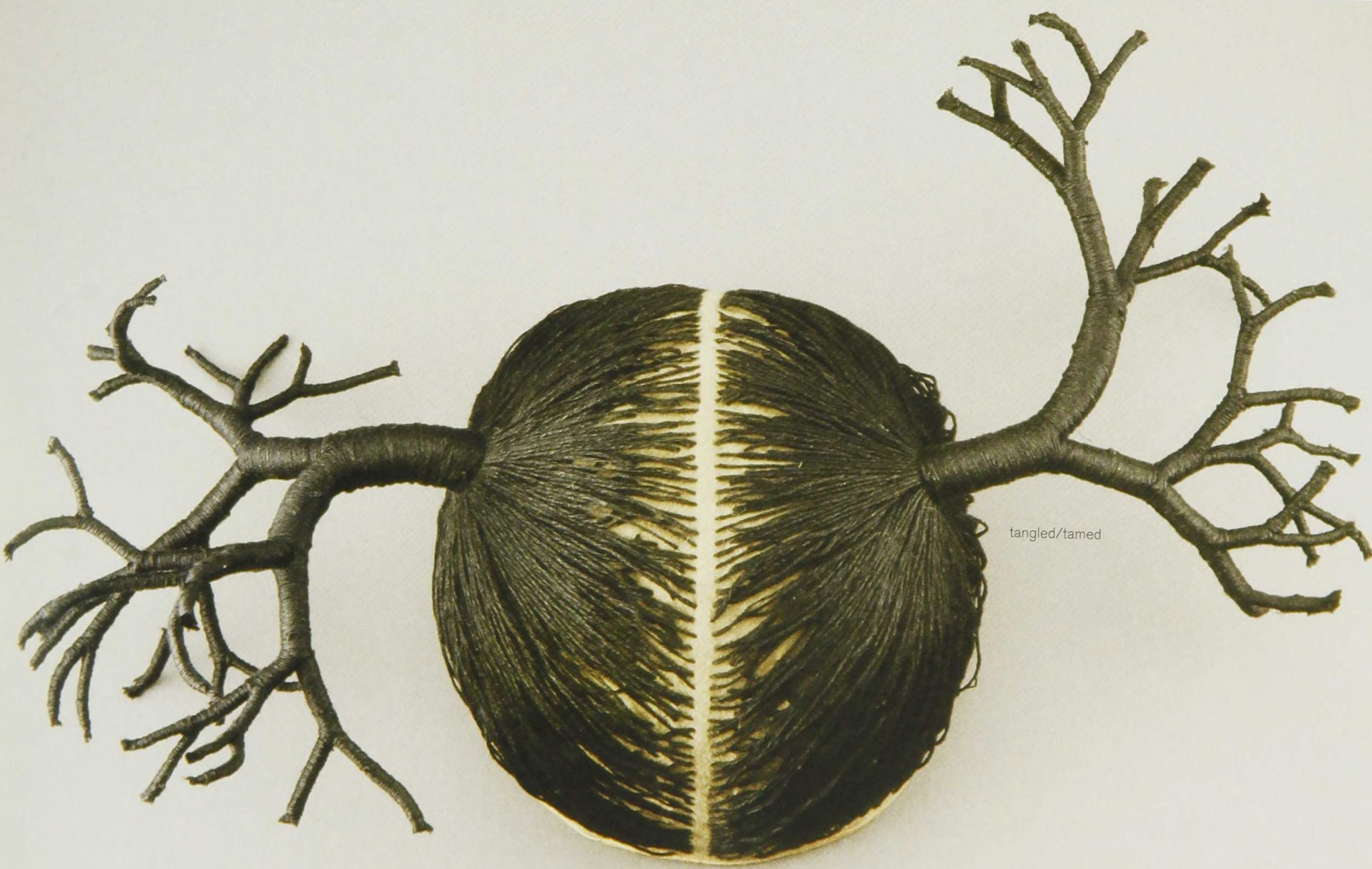
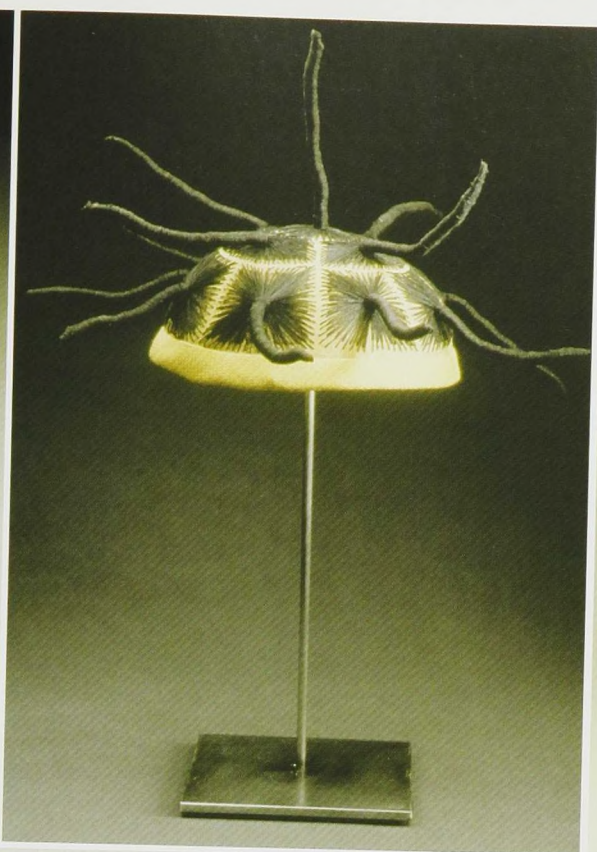
**Onigi 13** 1997  
Cloth, thread

**Triad** 1998  
Cloth, thread

**Two Trees** 2002  
Cloth, thread

**Onigi 13** (detail) 1997  
Cloth, thread

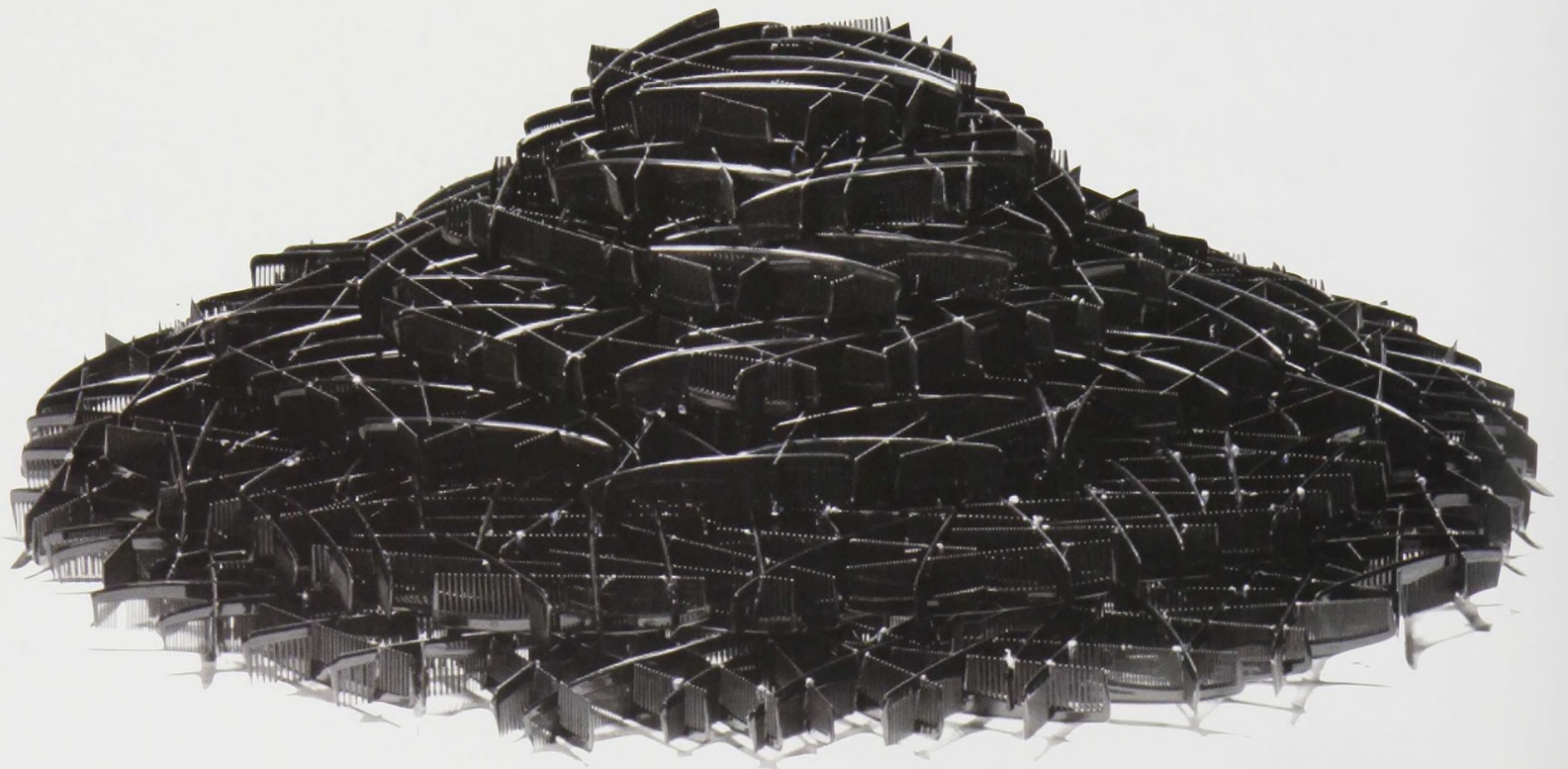




tangled/tamed

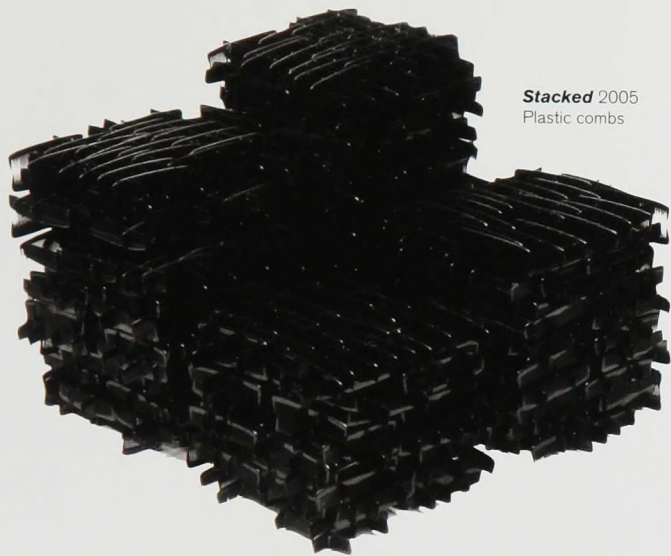


“Take something. Do something to it. Do something else to it.” —Jasper Johns





"[7 Layer Tangle] is also a Hegelian device. . . . The comb is the thesis, the tangle the antithesis and the 'combs as tangle' the synthesis." —Sonya Clark



**Stacked** 2005  
Plastic combs



**Wavy Strand** 2005  
Plastic combs

In 2005, Clark began what would become the *Comb Series*, a group of works in which she confronted the combs of her childhood and made them her new sculptural raw material. What had once been an adversarial relationship, she now embraced. One of the first pieces in the series, *7 Layer Tangle*, implies that the comb (like hair) can be systematically organized (into an exact number of layers), but in the end, the parts will ultimately end up in disarray—the tangle.

More orderly is *Wavy Strand*, in which each comb assumes a straight-at-attention position as it curves right and left to mimic a single strand of the artist's own hair, but shown in exaggerated relief. The tight, pure form of *Wavy Strand* stands in direct opposition to the chaotic *7 Layer Tangle* as an observation and expression of the tension between order and disorder.

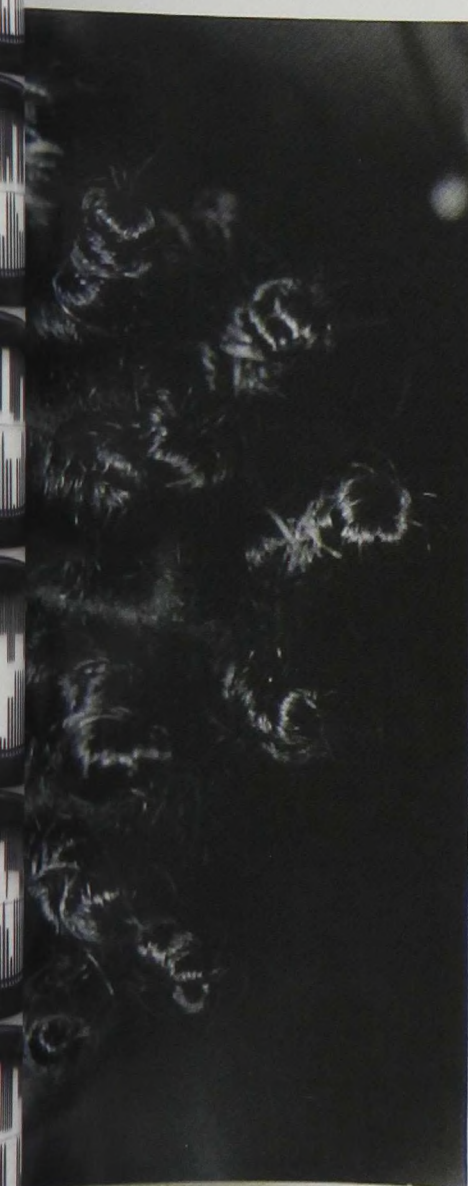
*Stacked* provides an even more orderly display of the three-dimensional possibilities of Clark's raw material—a meditation on repetition, structure, and volume. The piece combines modular sections of combs, following a systematic pattern of organization. Clark's unwavering interest in exploring seemingly simple materials and pushing them to their formal limits is what makes works like *7 Layer Tangle*, *Wavy Strand*, and *Stacked* so curious and enigmatic.

**7 Layer Tangle** 2005  
Plastic combs



text. texture. textile

Little girl with the press and curl  
Age eight I got a Jheri curl  
Thirteen I got a relaxer  
I was a source of so much laughter  
At fifteen when it all broke off  
Eighteen and went all natural  
February two thousand and two  
I went and did  
What I had to do  
Because it was time to change my life  
To become the woman that I am inside  
Ninety-seven dreadlock all gone  
I looked in the mirror  
For the first time and saw that HEY



Sonya Clark studio walls  
Summer 2007



I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am not your expectations no no  
I am not my hair  
I am not this skin  
I am a soul that lives within

—India.Arie, from the album *Testimony, Vol. 1: Life and Relationship*, 2006

When it comes to the actual making of these pieces, Clark employs a kind of kinesthetic intelligence that kicks in automatically when she begins to work. Each individual comb is secured in position, one after another, until the overall form begins to take shape. As the piece grows, she enters a kind of meditative state in which her body does the work while her mind is free to wander. In this meditative state, she finds the open-ended creative space where her next pieces are born.

Pieces such as *7 Layer Tangle*, *Wavy Strand*, and *Stacked* proved that combs could fit together to create a wide variety of structurally and aesthetically successful sculptural forms. But would the comb stand up when expanded into a full wall textile? Were the teeth of the comb warp and weft enough for weaving? The answer lies in Clark's wall installations. There she develops the two-dimensional properties of the comb, resulting in works that function aesthetically and psychologically as textiles. For Clark, who defines herself as a textile artist, it was imperative that her new materials could find a form that resonated with her past artistic production.

Although historically, combs have occupied an important position as precious personal objects, now suitable primarily for museum collections, the combs that Clark uses are essentially throw-away items, shiny plastic mass-produced products made by the millions. But Clark shows us that there is beauty to be found in the simple fine-toothed comb and she asks us to think of it as a valuable object again: to look beyond its ordinary nature.

Sonya Clark's comb pieces not only elevate manufactured objects to a higher plane. In addition, they carry heavy loads of conceptual and social significance, and they do it in an aesthetically engaging way. Her strategy of addressing materials, making, and meaning in the same simple object elevates Clark's work from its banal material source into a thing of beauty, artfully assembled.

**Untitled** 2008  
Plastic combs, thread

**haiku for s.c.**  
semiotic tool  
kinesthetic invention  
for connecting lives  
—s.s.h.

**Connections: The Ornamental Comb**

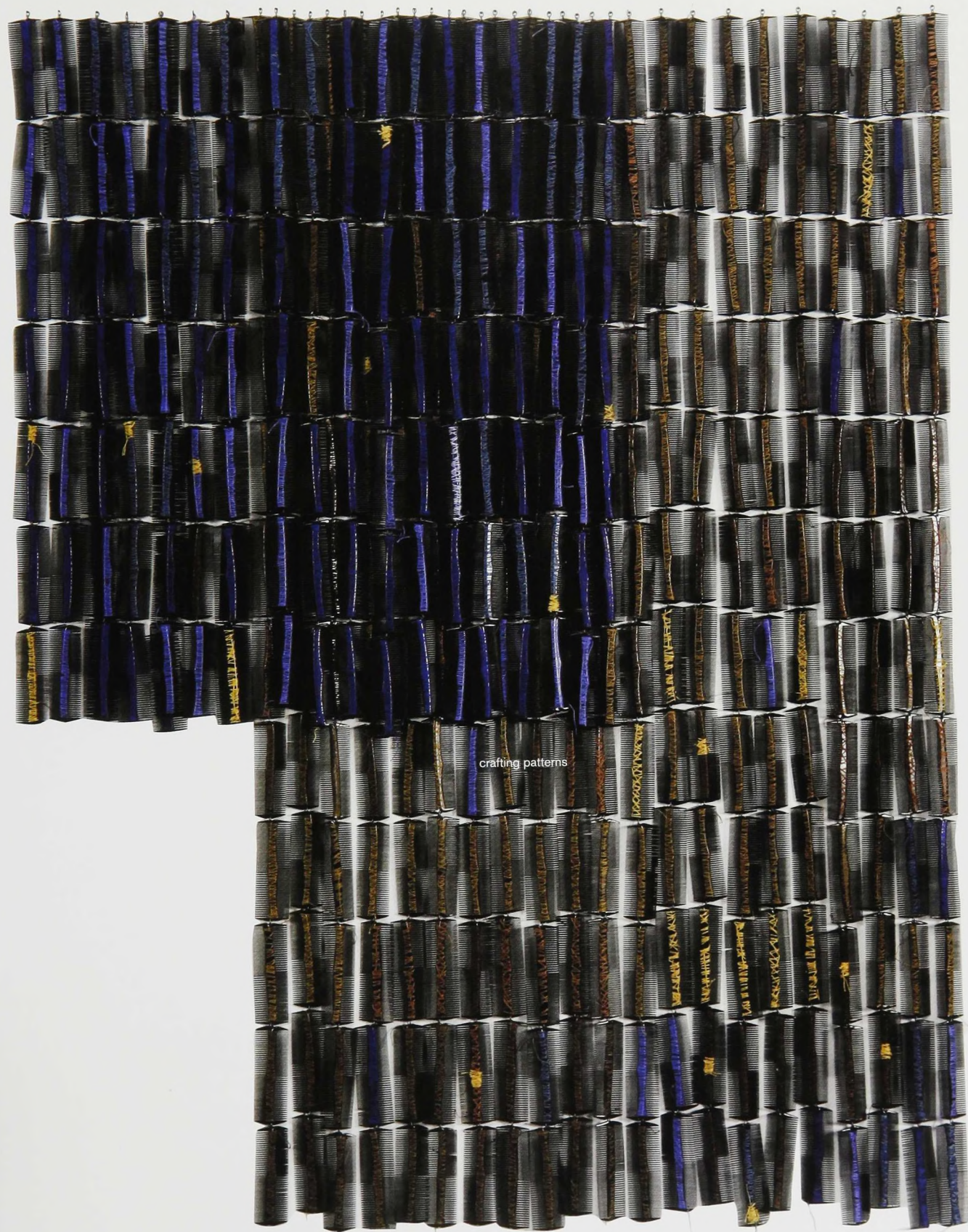
Until the Industrial Revolution, combs were one-of-a-kind status-defining artifacts laboriously crafted from precious materials. Mass-produced plastic changed all that. Now Clark challenges the plastic comb's commodity status—treating each one like the bone, ivory, bronze, and gold examples of the past.

**Ivory comb with the story of Susanna at her bath**  
Gothic period

**Comb decorated with Ashanti allegorical figures from Ghana** n.d.

**Comb ornamented with Scyths in combat from Solokha, South Russia** 6th–4th BCE





crafting patterns

**Increasingly, artists, craftspeople, and designers are gathering familiar mass-produced goods as their new raw materials and employing techniques drawn from the craft world. In *Manufactured: The Conspicuous Transformation of Everyday Objects*, authors Steven Skov Holt and Mara Hoit Skov explore this appropriation of quotidian consumer items, identifying one of the foremost trends in art, craft, and design today. The result is a collection of the pioneering work from a wide range of international artists whose medium combines the industrially uniform with the uniquely handmade. The scope of projects presented here—along with insightful commentary and fresh perspectives—illuminates this bold new movement in visual and material culture.**

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