

Lily Cox-
Richard
Weep
Holes

MASS MoCA



Weaving and Unweaving the World

By Denise Markonish

“Magic is an art of changing trajectories, of weaving fate into a form that works for us—a form that works with us.”

—Aidan Wachter, *Weaving Fate: Hypersigils, Changing the Past & Telling True Lies*, p. 19

What does it mean to weave our own fate, to manifest how we want to see the world? Does this literally involve mending and weaving materials together to assemble a new whole? These acts of reconstruction, tenderness, and care lie at the heart of Lily Cox-Richard’s exhibition *Weep Holes*. It is here that she weaves together new forms that hold the potential to change ideas and trajectories through matter transmuted. The phrase “weep hole” is visceral, conjuring a repository for collective sorrow. In reality, the phrase is a construction term for the holes placed in buildings, in particular masonry, that allow the façade to breathe and for water to escape safely. This alleviation of pressure, both materially and metaphorically, is the starting point for Cox-Richard’s new works.

In *Weep Holes*, Cox-Richard addresses ideas of stewardship, beauty and threat, collective action, and building/dismantling (or weaving/unweaving). She began conceptualizing the exhibition by posing a series of questions to herself: “How do we get to the future and do so while taking care of one another; how do we mend the damage that is already done; and what are the tools needed for this dismantling?” This questioning began when the artist’s ongoing interest in recycling and how we value objects brought her to the Recycled Artists in

Residency Program (RAIR) in Philadelphia in 2015. At the time, she was making baled copper sculptures, which referenced material value. However, at RAIR she saw a giant bale of tinsel in the backyard, an object that has not escaped her imagination since. She was taken by its continual transformation—it would be rendered nearly invisible when covered in dirt, and then after a cleansing rain it would sparkle once again.

Cox-Richard continued thinking about the fate of this object during the 2016 presidential election and subsequent administration. She found herself pondering the notion of stewardship and how we can mend the damage done, while responsibly getting to a future in which care can take center stage. Now, in 2022, the work is being completed against a whole new backdrop of conditions, from the tension around the 2020 election, to the divided politics of America, the continual violence against the BIPOC community, and a global pandemic. The 2016 invitation for Cox-Richard to exhibit at MASS MoCA was a beacon for the artist who, upon hearing the show was in 2022, stated, “We’ll have a new president by then,” but then further added that while it felt good to be planning for that future, “first we have to get there, to the mess on the other side.” We now know that our current climate is still in need of care, and through this work Cox-Richard weaves together the possibility of willing a new future into being, one where tenderness can be a form of political action and resistance.

This mess on the other side, and what it may look like or grow into, is imbued in *Weep Holes*.



Drone chandelier test flight, Richmond, VA, April 11, 2021. Video by Lily Cox-Richard and Sharad Kant Patel

The works shift in scale and play off the architecture, while making the presence/absence of the viewer's body palpable in relation to the objects. The first two galleries contain works such as weavings of fire hose around the existing columns, sand castles bursting out of bags usually meant to contain floodwaters, starbursts fabricated from tomato-growing cages woven with the invasive vine, kudzu, and prints made from the soft wax stains that candles have left on paper. All of these works mend and tie together disparate materials to create new forms and connections, while elevating the residue of daily life. The sculpture's collective nature and inability to be easily categorized references the notion of willfulness as discussed by writer Sara Ahmed in her blog *Feminist Killjoys*. She states: "Willful stones do not stay in the right place...they move around. That their movement begins with dissatisfaction tells us something...when the stones do not stay in place, they bring our walls down. Willful stones would be those that bring the walls down." This willfulness and the scattering of objects and ideas as stones

are central to Cox-Richard's exploration of sculpture as aggregate—casts of objects mixed with plaster and other materials to create a new kind of building material, one now woven together.

In addition to these smaller interventions, there is a video installation that depicts a curious drone flying around an even more curious object. This is the first appearance of the tinsel bale in situ at RAIR. Just as the tinsel no longer adorns a Christmas tree, this is not your ordinary drone; instead it has another job, which is to produce rainbows. The drone is embellished with crystals, turning it into a drone carrying a chandelier—shifting this once stealth object into a producer of prisms. In the video, both the drone and the bale glint as they catch the sun, two new friends forging a path forward from their intended fate.

The final gallery of the exhibition is divided into two parts. First, we encounter a large two-story high hand-tied broom so huge it becomes architecture, or grows out of the existing

building materials—something the weep holes have sprung forth. The broom serves as a metaphor for all we need to sweep up. Additionally, for Cox-Richard, these materials aren't discarded; they are reconfigured, rewoven into new forms. Even the broom itself is a recasting of materials, made from backer rod, a material consisting of small round foam used to back joints and help control the amount of sealant used in construction. The material is the same foam used in floating pool "noodles." Cox-Richard worked with a zero-waste company, Nomaco, that produces the product but also melts down and recycles the waste. The material for the broom will be recycled yet again after the exhibition.

The inspiration for the broom also comes from the history of broom-making itself. In his article, "How the Broom Became Flat," J. Bryan Lowder states that "before the 19th century, broom-making was an idiosyncratic art; most were fashioned at home from whatever materials were at hand. The basic design involved binding the sweeping bundle to a wooden stick with rope or linen twine."



Brethren's Shop, Hancock Shaker Village.
Image by Lily Cox-Richard

(*The Slate*, June 6, 2012). It was the Shakers who later transformed the broom into a bundled handle radiating into a flat-shaped whisk creating a more efficient cleaning tool. The Shakers, an offshoot of Quakerism, were formed in England in 1747 before coming to the United States and settling in New Lebanon, NY (about 45 minutes from MASS MoCA). They are a unique utopian society that practices celibacy but also encourages equality between the sexes; they believe in frugality, hard work, feminism, and pacifism, and stand by the adage "Hands to Work, Hearts to God." Cox-Richard's broom uses frugality as recycling and sits in the gallery, as if it has broken through the walls. The sculpture is surrounded by additional kudzu sculptures and a series of handcrafted fire pits cast out of the interiors of baskets (another symbol of holding and care). These fire pits were distributed to friends and used over the summer of 2021 and bear the residue of this separate yet together activity. Uniting these parts is the actual drone chandelier that swings through the space. But rather than the militaristic buzz that usually follows these machines, Cox-Richard replaced the drone sound with recordings of kittens purring, transforming the machine into a messenger of calm. And finally, at the back of the gallery the tinsel bale itself sits floating on a platform, resolute in its objecthood and gleaming like a sentinel of the future, a future we can all weave together.

Feminist theorist Audre Lorde states that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." This signaling for change is Cox-Richard's call to arms, arms that embrace, that take care of each other, and can take down the houses they did not build. These stones become the tools; they are not for throwing, but instead aggregate to build a new future from its fallen past. In Cox-Richard's hands these stones betray their lithic nature, instead becoming pliable, weaving together a new fate as if by magic.

Lily Cox-Richard (she/her/LCR) makes sculptures and installations that take up details of cultural and material histories to explore porousness, energy exchange, and paths of resistance. LCR has been awarded an Artadia grant, a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, a postdoctoral fellowship in the University of Michigan's Society of Fellows, and residencies at the Core Program, Millay Colony, RAIR Philadelphia, and the MacDowell Colony. Recent solo exhibitions include Yvonne (Guatemala City), Artpace (San Antonio, TX), DiverseWorks (Houston, TX), Hirschl & Adler Modern (New York, NY), The Blanton Museum of Art (Austin, TX). LCR studies, forages, and practices in Tsenacomoco territory/Richmond, VA, on land that, for thousands of years, has been inhabited and cared for by Indigenous people, including the Pamunkey, Monacan, Chickahominy, and many other tribes untold and forcibly disappeared.

Lily Cox-Richard: **Weep Holes**

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Curated by Denise Markonish

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Interior flap: Detail of tinsel. Image by Sofia Taylor



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