

Using ordinary building materials, defunct equipment, and other objects that have been discarded or fallen into disrepair, Virginia Overton creates a dynamic visual poetry of reclamation and renewal. While traces remain of the original functions of her sculptures' components, Overton adds layers of meaning and free association through an improvisatory process of dismantling and constructing, altering and remixing constituent parts. She shows them as having been worthy of regard before they became art, even as they have now gained new visual interest. As she encourages viewers to see beauty and find value in humble materials, Overton counters the economics and ethos of disposability that drives consumer culture.

Overton's works have plenty of touchstones—the readymades of Marcel Duchamp (think the famous mounted urinal, ironically titled *Fountain*); minimalists like Robert Smithson, who focused on the physical presence of and interactions between industrial materials as symptoms of social entropy; and the Italian arte povera movement, with its use of "poor" materials as a statement of solidarity with the working class—resonating, perhaps, with Overton's own agricultural background. There also seems to be a kinship with self-taught southern artists like Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley, whose assemblages of found objects tell of oppression and invention, survival and identity.



fig. 1

None of these approaches wholly mesh with Overton's, but they share with hers an interest in enabling objects to communicate about their own histories and existence. She harnesses and examines associations intrinsic to materials, machined or organic, which retain aspects

of their former lives. After their stint as artwork, components may return to their earlier function or get dismantled and recycled into new artworks. In one sculpture commissioned for New York City's High Line, Overton drove her pickup truck to an exhibition site,

a horizontal brick wall fit tightly within its bed (fig. 1). While the detachment of the wall from its normal purpose was clearly meant as a playful aesthetic gesture, passersby could have assumed the truck to be a vehicle of delivery rather than display. When it was time to remove the sculpture, Overton simply got in and drove away suddenly, it reverted to a delivery truck. The bricks can be used in another artwork or construction project, and the truck is freed to haul things to and from her studio.



Born in Nashville, Overton spent much of her childhood at Wedge Oak Farm in Lebanon, Tennessee, but has long lived in New York. Her work often reflects this dichotomy, pairing city and farm, industrial and organic, refined and rough. For Overton, this approach lends itself to semiotic play, the exploitation of double meanings as we confront the slippery relationship between words and images. The exhibition's title, Saved, suggests that while the practice of saving discarded materials to repurpose

into artworks can be progressivist doctrine, it may also suggest the religious belief in salvation even for the most cast-off among us. This link is overt in Untitled (SAVE) (fig. 2), a sheet of plywood the artist found at a construction site with the word SAVE spray-painted onto its surface. She has mounted the board over a neon light, providing a backlit halo. Installed in the gallery as if on an altar, the worn piece of plywood presides over a platform holding various objects that have also been saved, a congregation of the reenvisioned.

Placed on the platform with a seemingly random group of altered objects—a neon-and-copper piece that includes a refrigerator's icemaker supply line; a three-dimensional letter a covered in hundreds of spikes; and Untitled (standing assemblage) (fig. 3), an abstract



fig. 3

structure featuring a circular shape and other elements on a stool, standing tall like a sentinel is the video Tennessee Trash (fig. 4), which alters an anti-littering public service announcement that aired frequently when Overton was young. The original video shows a disheveled man in a dirty T-shirt driving a beat-up convertible down an open highway. As he wildly throws trash onto the road, the messy trail of his degraded passage evokes philosopher Walter Benjamin's vision of an "angel of history," who faces back into the

past to see catastrophe piled onto catastrophe, constituting what civilization would call progress, but Benjamin, anticipating war, saw as a growing storm.¹ Overton turns the message around by simply

reversing the film. Her version starts with the car surrounded by rubbish, then moves backward in time so detritus jumps from the road back into the car. A call to environmental responsibility, the reversed video reflects Overton's own practice of breathing new life into the outworn and unwanted.



fig. 4

After owning the Hillsboro Village Baskin-Robbins (now gone) for years, Overton's parents moved the family from Nashville to the farm, where her sister still lives and raises livestock. Overton visits often, making work and finding materials for her art. *Sister Ham* is a bronze cast of a cured ham from a pig raised on the farm (fig. 5). Before being cast in bronze, the ham itself was presented as a sculpture, suspended from the ceiling in Overton's 2016 exhibition *Sculpture Gardens* at the Whitney Museum of American Art (cover). The original ham elevated a found object into art status while

defying the museum rule against having food in the galleries. The bronze version is altered in material and reading: a familiar farm product is now transformed into an object of aesthetic contemplation which, unlike the Whitney ham, couldn't be used in any other way. We may not always think of actual food as a memento mori, a reminder of the inevitability of death that often appears in Dutch still life paintings showing abundant piles of food. But when food is transformed into an artistic depiction as it is in Sister Ham, its symbolic impact is fully realized.



fig. 5

Other works were made at the farm specifically for this exhibition. To create the most recent, Overton collected metal implements and other artifacts from the farm and suspended them from a commercial gantry to create a large chime (fig. 6). Visitors to the exhibition can reach up and play this musical sculpture, which is rich with visual ingenuity and actual sound. While not all of Overton's sculptures are interactive, the chime aligns with her interest in crossing boundaries between things that are used and things that are only to be seen.

Individual artworks throughout *Saved* embody the creativity of seeing aesthetic possibilities within anything and everything around us. A larger *gestalt* is at work as well—each work inflects each other and adds levels of meaning to the surrounding architecture. Overton's manipulation of objects and materials shows that hierarchies of value and quality, even distinctions between art and nonart, are not necessarily useful when trying to reinvigorate the resonant things of the world.

Mark Scala Chief Curator



fig. 6

Note

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 258.

About the Artist

Virginia Overton earned her bachelor of fine arts and master of fine arts degrees from the University of Memphis. She has had solo exhibitions at Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland; Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. In 2018, she became the first woman to have a solo show at New York City's Socrates Sculpture Park. This year, she had a solo exhibition at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art in London; installed a permanent site-specific installation at LaGuardia Airport in Queens, New York; and is included in the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, curated by Cecilia Alemani, in Venice, Italy. She is represented by Bortolami Gallery in New York City, White Cube in London, and Galerie Francesca Pia in Zurich.

Images

Cover: Ned Overton views *Untitled (KO's Ham)* (2016), Whitney Museum of Art, 2016. Photo: Virginia Overton.

Fig. 1: Installation view of *Untitled* (2012), Edison ParkFast, West Twentieth Street, New York, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery. © Virginia Overton. Photo: Austin Kennedy

- Fig. 2: *Untitled (SAVE)*, 2020. Plywood and neon; 60 x 36 x 3 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery. © Virginia Overton
- Fig. 3: *Untitled (standing assemblage)*, 2020. Metal stool, steel split ring, steel square tube, cast iron pipe, steel and concrete pipe section, metal filter frame, plastic light gel, L-shaped anchor bolt, and braided mason twine; 66 x 14 x 21 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery. © Virginia Overton Fig. 4: *Tennessee Trash*, 2012. Video; 51 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and
- Bortolami Gallery. © Virginia Overton Fig. 5: *Sister Ham*, 2021. Bronze; 30 x 14 x 7 in. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery. © Virginia Overton
- Fig. 6 Installation view of *Untitled (chime)* (2020), a precursor to *Untitled (farm chime)*, The Ranch, Montauk. Courtesy of the artist and Bortolami Gallery. © Virginia Overton. Photo: David X Prutting/BFA.com

Virginia Overton

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