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7 Artists Reinventing the Ancient Art of Mosaics

By Ariela Gittlen on Feb 2, 2018

From the floors of ancient Pompeii to the walls of the New York subway, mosaics have been a feature of urban life for thousands of years. Beloved by hobbyists and DIYers, these assemblages, typically created by arranging pieces of glass or stone, are often categorized merely as craft, reducing their appeal to artists who would prefer to avoid those associations.

Yet there are others, not so easily dissuaded by the medium's workaday reputation, who have approached it with an inventive spirit. The famously experimental painter Jack Whitten explored the form by creating tesserae, or mosaic pieces, from slices of dried paint that he shaped into sculptural forms resembling stone or tile. While many of the artists that follow don't exclusively make mosaics, each is determined to push this often intransigent medium in a fresh direction.

Jim Bachor

B. 1964. Lives and works in Chicago



If you've spent any time traversing the city of Chicago on foot, you may have stumbled across one of Bachor's pieces. They're installed in potholes across the city, brightening the pavement with images of everything from rocket pops to tulips to Burberry plaid.

Bachor is impressed by the long history of mosaics, but he also resists it. "Mosaics carry a lot of baggage. There are entrenched, preconceived ideas as to what they are," he continues. "My approach is to try and drag mosaics into the 21st century by exploring contemporary subject matter, modifying techniques, and rethinking the process when I can." Bachor's interest in advancing the medium has led him to create mosaics that are meant to be viewed with 3D glasses and others that incorporate the actual material of the object they depict—Starbucks coffee or carbonized Twinkies mixed into the mortar in which the piece is set.

But it was the longevity of mosaics that first caught Bachor's attention during a visit to Pompeii in the 1990s. "I can still remember the guide saying that marble and glass don't fade, so the artwork looked essentially like the artist intended almost 2,000 years ago," he says. "It's the thought that drives my work to this day—the idea of making an enduring mark in this world, however slight."

Isidora Paz López

B. 1975. Lives and works in Hinterweidenthal, Germany



López is known for her ambitious public art projects that have covered thousands of feet of her native Chile in mosaic tile. She loves the form because it makes an impact on the community and gives her a chance to go big. “With mosaics you can make meticulous work with tiny pieces and precious little details, but you can also use big pieces and make huge things, like murals, interventions in architecture, and urban art projects,” López says. In 2012, she assembled a team to create mosaics depicting native flora and fauna on over 80 pillars along a metro train line in Puente Alto, a suburb of Santiago, Chile. Then, in 2014, López went even bigger: She organized the 1st International Urban Mosaic Intervention, a two-week-long event that brought together some 80 artists from 22 countries to create a massive mosaic on the facade of a municipal building in Puente Alto. López sketched out a basic design on the wall in chalk, but each artist was free to choose whether to follow her lead, to modify the design, or to deviate from it completely. The biggest challenge of the project was making the seams where one artists’ work met the

next feel harmonious, but in the end, López was pleasantly surprised. “The result was much better than expected,” she says. “Friendly collaboration, compromise, and the talent of the artists made it possible to create something cohesive and beautiful. It was really magical.”

The generous notion of a mosaic as a catalyst for communal bonds, and a site where disparate components can meet, is at the heart of López’s practice. “You can use a wide variety of materials, from the most luxurious ones to recycled objects or materials collected from nature,” she says. “I mainly use ceramic tile, but I love to experiment and mix it with other things.”

Benjamin Lowder

B. 1974. Lives and works in Otter Lake, Illinois



Rather than the traditional glass or stone, Lowder’s mosaics are composed of reclaimed wood, often sourced from barns, and metal signage—materials that reflect his Midwestern milieu. In some, bits of hand-lettered typography appear in a reorganized jumble. It’s like looking at an old country store through a kaleidoscope. And yet, references to religious

icons and celestial phenomena suggest a sort of spiritual geometry, taking Lowder’s compositions beyond remixed Americana. They’re more reminiscent of the diagrams in illuminated medieval manuscripts.

Lowder’s current body of work uses triangles of reclaimed wood and vintage metal signs as the base unit for his mosaics. “Many of my aesthetic choices about how the triangles fit together in my works are based on the proportions and patterns of natural growth structures,” the artist explains. He’s interested in “self-similarity,” a mathematical phenomenon sometimes found in the natural world, in which each individual part is a nested reflection of the whole—as is the case with ferns, snowflakes, and cauliflower. It’s easy to see why mosaics would offer the ideal medium to explore these relationships.

Jason Middlebrook

B. 1966. Lives and works in Hudson, New York



Jason Middlebrook, Underlife, 2010-13. Courtesy of the artist.



Work by Jason Middlebrook. Courtesy of the artist.

Middlebrook's mosaics can take on mythic proportions, as in the case of his giant tentacle-like root forms covered in glass or stone. "I started working with mosaics because I wanted a material that was painterly yet could also act as a skin for sculpture," Middlebrook explains. His monumental outdoor work *Underlife* (2010–13) glitters with glass tile, making the work seem almost animate, a hungry creature on the hunt.

Middlebrook cites Louis Comfort Tiffany and Antoni Gaudí as inspirations for his work, particularly in terms of their committed attention to detail and meticulous techniques. Yet the enduring association of mosaics with craft irks him. "I don't like that mosaics are labeled 'craft,' so the challenge is to make them into a contemporary medium," he says.

Middlebrook's work has changed dramatically from when he first arrived in New York in the mid-1990s to participate in the Whitney Independent Study Program. "I was making air freshener sculptures and drawings of muscle cars—think Richard Prince meets Robert Rauschenberg," he says. Those works were a far cry from the mosaic of delicate flowers that Middlebrook created in 2011 for the Avenue U subway stop in Brooklyn. "I guess I got seduced by the material and its generous possibilities," he concludes.

Takako Hirai

B. 1975. Lives and works in Ravenna, Italy



Hirai first fell for mosaics while on a university trip to Rome as a painting student in 1997. Originally from Kumamoto, Japan, Hirai returned to Italy in 2003 to study mosaic art, then moved to Ravenna permanently in 2005. At first, Hirai worked in a mosaic studio and saw the practice as more of a day job, albeit one that could inform her painting. “I did not know anything about mosaics, or even any mosaic artists,” she says. “I discovered the possibilities for artistic expression while training.”

Hirai’s work, with its natural shades, gentle gradations of color, and irregular stones, feels earthy. She often captures natural moments of growth or change—a sprout breaking the surface of the soil, or wind blowing in the leaves of a tree. Other, more abstract compositions mimic the sparkle of light on water or the impression of a crater in stone. Hirai emphasizes that the cracks between the tesserae are an important avenue for communicating meaning. “I utilize the space between fragments and hide feelings there that I want to keep secret,” the artist says. “But I also want that feeling to appear in the landscape when you look at my work.”

Enzo Valentinuz

B. 1946. Lives and works in Romans d'Isonzo, Italy



Enzo Valentinuz, *Building*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.



Enzo Valentinuz, *Hawthorn*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Valentinuz's art is inseparable from the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region of northern Italy. His fascination with this part of Italy stems from the area's striking beauty as well as its dark history; the Italian border where he was born and still lives was the site of bloody battles during World War I.

Originally trained as a fresco painter at the Academy of Fine Arts of Venice, Valentinuz would have an encounter with nature that ultimately turned his attention toward mosaics. Fifteen years ago, during a walk on the Karst plateau—a rocky plain that extends from northeastern Italy to western Slovenia—he noticed the way that the beauty of rocks contrasted with the landscape's painful history.

"I felt the violence of cannons and mortars as the origin of the splinters falling all around. It occurred to me to use those broken stones, which had seen or felt the fighting, as a pictorial element in my artworks," he explains. Rough-hewn, often painted, and arranged in orderly grids, circles, or towers, Valentinuz's stones suggest modern-day menhirs or collections of raw pigments sorted according to color.

Cassandra Emswiler Burd

B. 1983. Lives and works in Dallas, Texas



Cassandra Emswiler Burd, My dreams will pull you through this garden gate, 2014. Photo by Kevin Todora. Courtesy of the artist and Dallas Contemporary.

You might argue that Burd doesn't make mosaics at all. The Texas-based artist uses whole tiles, rather than broken or cut ones, to make her work. Yet she employs them to the same end: creating patterns and images via a process of assemblage. Burd's compositions look like one thing at a glance, and quite another upon closer inspection. Her tiles are printed with photographs of her family, home, and environment, but at a distance they appear to be the quotidian patterns you might find on a kitchen floor.

Burd is interested in how tile can create architectural space as well as how it can hold memories. "The history or conditions of the site in which the tile is installed are always a primary concern," she says. "I'll often incorporate photos of the site into the design, or the graphic motif might derive from its architectural features or commemorate a person connected to the place."

Among her interests and influences, Burd lists French philosopher Gaston Bachelard and the history of landscape, gardens, and vernacular architecture, and her work reflects this mix of theoretical concerns and functionality. Since buying a home, she's been installing her own tile in the bathrooms and kitchen. "This leap into domestic space has been exhilarating," Burd reports. "The tiles are inspired by the pattern on the kitchen floor of my childhood home. So being able to bring them into the space of my first home as an adult is like the completion of some sort of sacred loop—it's very special to me."