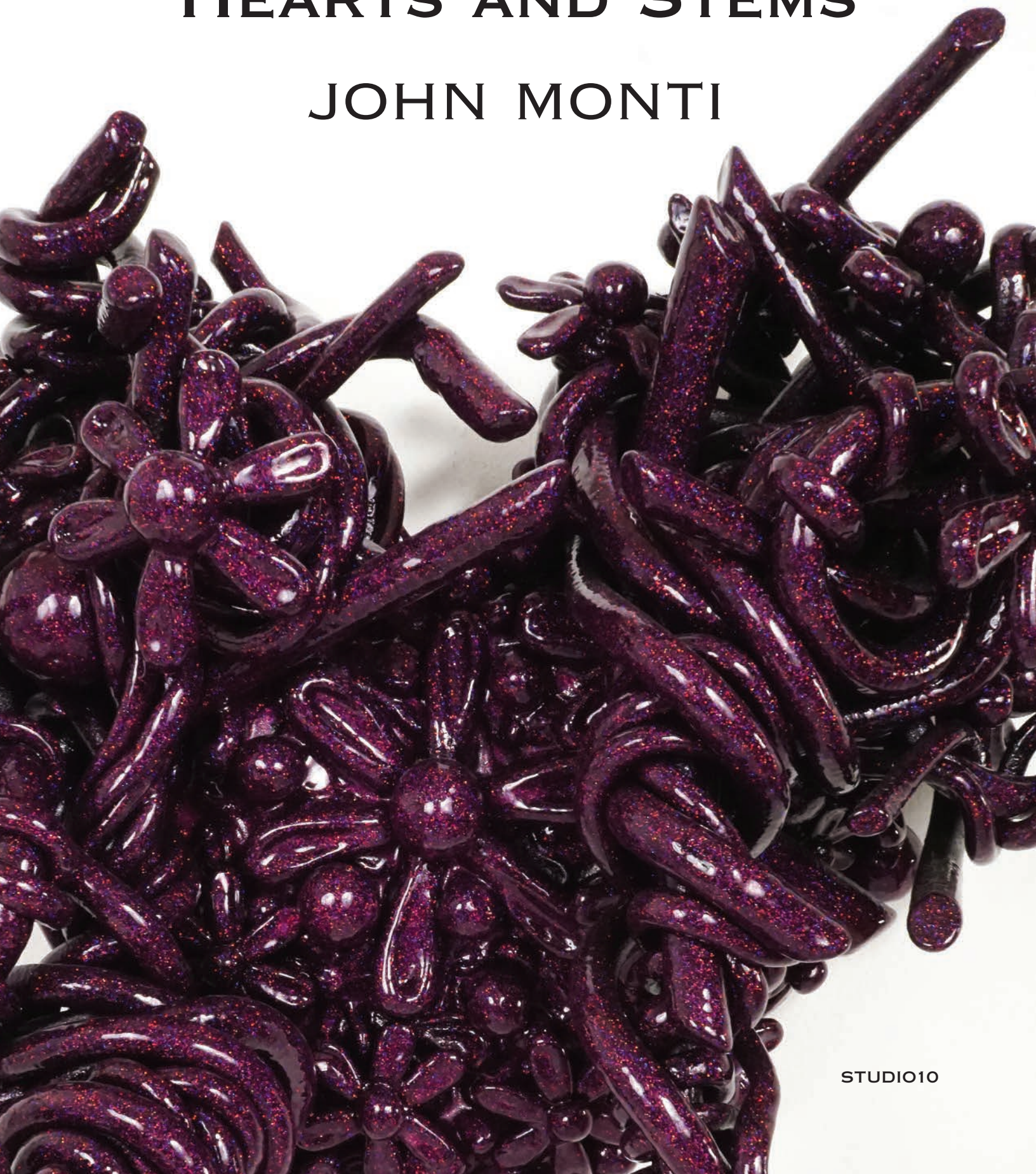


HEARTS AND STEMS

JOHN MONTI



STUDIO10



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FEBRUARY 8 TO MARCH 10, 2019

Black Stem (detail), 2019
100 h x 44 d x 21 w inches
Urethane resin, pigment, glitter

STUDIO10
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EROS + ORNAMENT

*Your temples, where the hair crowded in,
Were the tender place*

— Ted Hughes

There is a genealogical thread traceable through John Monti’s work. It unwinds something like this; in Nineteenth Century England, architect Owen Jones’ interests hop-skip between Moorish decoration at the Alhambra and Rococo revival. From there it is one easy step (even if one feels a little blind sided) to the grand excess of Ludwig’s Linderhof Palace. And thence, gliding perhaps upon Ludwig’s gilded canoe, we are left becalmed before the bacchanal of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*. Whereafter redemption through love might be a destination. Now I’ll grant that as a through-line it is a tad crooked. And, stay alert, because there will be detours.

The heart shape, as it has come to us in the terrifyingly ubiquitous ‘hearting’ of NY (or Texas, or Paris, or ...) or as an emoji haunting our iPhones is so very un-Rococo, so, so pedestrian. The ideogram itself has one of those wonky histories where no one really seems to know its source. Nonetheless, it has come to stand for the idea of the “heart,” the heart in its metaphorical or symbolic sense, as the core of emotion, affection and love. It is the logo of romantic love.

In practical terms this image was a starting point and a stumbling block for Monti in *Hearts and Stems*. A basic mold shape of this logo-of-the-heart had been knocking around Monti’s studio for several years yearning, as it were, to find a home in his sculpture. Previous work of his has clustered gargantuan, leering blooms, glamorous and dangerous as science fiction villains. And there have been so called *Beauties* decked out in flamboyant colors while conveying comic, monstrous intent. But inner organs, particularly ones so prone to metaphorical exploitation, have, until now, been left to, what—fester? In the current work Monti renounces the previous glamor, if that is the word, of vivid colors for a strangely dreamy black and white. The *Heart Clusters*, florally laced, entwined, and black hued, redolent as they are of some collusion between sex and death, are greatly outnumbered by cut stems which muster gigantic proportions. Thus cut flowers, a standard household ornament, hijack the entire

How I would like to believe in tenderness.

— Sylvia Plath

gallery as if for Don Corleone’s funeral while simultaneously performing yet one more feint towards Valentine’s Day sentimentality. (Yes, the show is installed in February.) The brittle seeming hearts and stems, with sharp dagger like ends, manufactured from hard, hard plastic retort our sturdiest romantic projections. And, now that this logo-of-the-heart mold has succeeded, found the home it craved in Monti’s work, it is of note that in the finished installation this heart is there, very present as the core of the heart clusters, yet it is all but invisible. It lies interred beneath the sumptuous pleasures Monti takes, and offers, in ornament. Monti has concocted an act of concealment. He has performed a vanishing act on love.

Owen Jones was the great theorist of ornament, shaping a Nineteenth Century sensibility of the European built environment. As a European architect appropriating Islamic design, he chose to see ornament as “that which conceals.” Ornament hides the seams in architecture. It covers up the messiness of making things. In a very pre-Modernist mode ornament un-bares the device. Thus there is that which remains hidden and one might surmise somewhat forbidden, taboo and mysterious. Somewhat further along the years, as the centuries turn from nineteenth to twentieth, as the calendar tick-tocks toward those who inaugurated Modernist thought and practice, we might think of it as that which is, say, repressed, displaced, sublimated.

As a sculptor grappling with architectural space Monti has, in his own way, offered us an allegorical geography of love. The gathered blooms and the clustered, filigreed plastic hearts (even if concealed) chart strains of ambiguous emotion and ritual through actual space. Rites of courtship —the long stemmed blooms— or territories of romance flicker in and out as the relation between the stems and hearts enact a play of acceptance and withholding across the gallery space. Monti’s geography is kin, we could think, to European allegorical maps of love from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These maps sought to steer a steady path through the

vicissitudes of courtship, marking passage through trials such as the “rocky shoals of betrayal” or “the currents of passion.” Such maps were indeed about finding an auxiliary mode to language in representing the, oh so hard to represent, world of desire, love and betrayal. The maps underscored the inadequacy of what could be said about love. They parodied the frailty of the whole enterprise of romance while upping the rhetorical gambit. And, not to be ignored, this is also why in culture, as in relating, we resort so often to the operatic or melodramatic to speak of love.

In *Hearts and Stems* the melodramatic flourishes, the ornaments, do not simply conceal a collapse of language. There is something more of an evolving journey through the borderlands of sculptural rhetoric. The seam, feared by Owens, is of course the border and how links are made across that threshold between the mist and haze of affect – emotion– and its representation is this sculptor’s task. The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion in his essay, *Attacks on Linking*, which is, in so many ways, exactly about how human subjects ‘link’, i.e. love one another, suggested that, “Freud’s analogy of an archaeological dig with psychoanalysis was helpful if it were considered that we were exposing not so much a primitive civilization as a primitive disaster.” Monti’s rhetoric of the borderlands is an attempt to skirt the disasters of kitsch representations of love by sifting through the archeological debris of sculptural rhetoric. It is an attempt to not end up with, for example, Wagner’s kitsch, un-linkable bacchanal and its disastrous opposite, romantic love. In Monti’s borderlands scale, sculptural gesture, etc. collide, but they do not explicitly contract with one another; rhetorical devices hold them apart. A stem, for example, will have a flower head –of course– but it is a cartoon. A Disneyesque flourish will sequester it apart. It is a matter of, as was said above, a play of acceptance and withholding between the elements. How does one device, one rhetorical strategy play out, or link with another— or not? How do rhetorical devices build, if they do, into full statements of affect?

Thus looking back to our crooked through-line we can think of Ludwig at his Linderhof grotto, or Wagner before his *Tannhäuser* set (which was in fact the model for Ludwig’s grotto), as genuflecting before overwrought representations, or florid allegories of love. The latter, Tannhäuser, was to be a staged spectacle of passion as choice –the bacchanal or romance. While the former was to be Ludwig imposing the performed spectacle of the

bacchanal upon his own lived life. They are each, in their separate ways, pulling representations of love out of the mist and haze of affect into the concreteness of elaborate ornament and arabesque.

Monti’s predicament is that contemporary visual culture —or to be more precise, what is sometimes called advanced art— avoids romantic love, gives it a pretty large cold shoulder. While just about 99% of all other culture everywhere, always has been about love, want, desire —the misery of desire, rejection— the agony of D–I–V–O–R–C–E and the like. For Monti that plastic mold of the heart kicking around the studio was both rock and hard place, it made love difficult to avoid.

Importantly I think, Monti’s take on the heart is not especially sentimental; that is, it is not directed toward sentimentality. And, anyway, given that the emoji of love just slipped through his studio clutter, it would inevitably insist —a pop cultural prerogative as it were— that the work somehow be about love and, in the end, the clunky ways of love being spoken of, and of love’s happening and not happening.

However, a question that has haunted the decorative arts, and I suppose, decoration as it emerges in advanced art is, does decorative mean ‘minor’ as an aesthetic category? Is decoration just there to embellish, to, per Owen, “conceal” the mark of cultural production? Does decoration rescind the offer, the rigor, the promises of Modernism?

The question could of course be premised falsely. Perhaps instead we can say that decoration is, here, about a certain confusion, or better put, an imprecision, in speaking about feeling. Decoration is an aid in working through the blunders and defects we perpetrate in translating the aforementioned mist and haze of feeling when we talk about love. After all, how does one represent feeling when one is stuck with a kitsch icon to convey a freight train of borne affect? Ornament is, in this sense, patching over the seams in language, if not, then ornament is itself the expression of that freight train. So sometimes, yes, it seems that ornament is for patching over the seams — in architecture, in maps, in kitsch. But perhaps ornament, poetry really, is also for patching over the cracks in tenderness.

— Fintan Boyle

A writer based in NYC. More of his writing can be found at Romanovgrave.com



Heart Cluster: White Pearl with Black Stem, 2018-19
33 h x 22 w x 23.5 d inches
Urethane resin, pearl pigment, glitter



Heart Cluster: Black with Silver, 2018-19
59 h x 22 w x 18 d inches
Urethane resin, pigment, glitter



Stems Besetting, 2018-19
 Dimensions variable
 Urethane resin, pearl pigment, glitter



Heart Cluster: Magenta, 2018
19 h x 15.5 w x 8 d inches
Urethane resin, pigment, glitter



Heart Cluster: White, 2018-19
54 h x 27 w x 14 d inches
Urethane resin, epoxy



Black Stem, 2019
 100 h x 44 d x 21 w inches
 Urethane resin, pigment, glitter

ABOUT JOHN MONTI

Born in Portland, Oregon, John Monti received a BS from Portland State University in painting, and later an MFA in sculpture from Pratt Institute. Monti has exhibited extensively nationally and internationally both in museums and galleries and has completed public commissions and set-designs for dance. Exhibitions include the Brooklyn Museum, Weatherspoon Art Museum, Sculpture Center, White Columns, Artists Space, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, Curt Marcus Gallery and the Wakita Museum of Art, Japan. His work is included in major private and public collections, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Brooklyn Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, The Weatherspoon Art Museum, The Eli Broad Family Foundation, The Portland Art Museum and the Wakita Museum of Art, Japan. Grants include the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Pollock Krasner Fellowship Grant, The New York Foundation for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Monti’s work has been featured in many publications, including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *Arts Magazine*, *Artnews*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*. Monti lives in Brooklyn, NY and is Professor of Graduate Fine Arts at Pratt Institute.

Find out more about the artist at www.johnmonti.com



Special thanks to: Fintan Boyle for his insightful essay, Larry Greenberg of Studio 10 for his support, Joyce Weiner of Hallets Cove Studio for her excellent catalog design and Irène Hultman for her many years of continued support and clear-eyed thinking.

On the cover: *Heart Cluster: Magenta (detail)*, 2018, 19 h x 15.5 w x 8 d inches, Urethane resin, pigment, glitter

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(Clockwise from entrance)

Heart Cluster: Magenta, 2018

19 h x 15.5 w x 8 d inches

Urethane resin, pigment, glitter

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33 h x 22 w x 23.5 d inches

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Heart Cluster: Black with Silver, 2018-19

59 h x 22 w x 18 d inches

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Black Stem, 2019

100 h x 44 d x 21 w inches

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Heart Cluster: Black Pearl, 2018-19

40 h x 20.5 w x 14.25 d inches

Urethane resin, pearl pigment, glitter

Heart Cluster: White, 2018-19

54 h x 27 w x 14 d inches

Urethane resin, epoxy

Stems Besetting, 2018-19

Dimensions variable

Urethane resin, pearl pigment, glitter



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