

JOSEPHINE DURKIN IN HER STUDIO. PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL BRYAN.

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Josephine Durkin, *Untitled*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Erin Cluley Gallery.

## JOSEPHINE DURKIN ON HER JOURNEY FROM OBOIST TO EMPATHETIC SCULPTOR

Sculptor Josephine Durkin has many talents. She can manipulate just about any material – albeit mechanical, viscous, craggy, or textured – into provocative form. Years ago, before becoming a professional sculptor, she played one of the most difficult instruments in the symphonic repertoire: the oboe. Confronted early on as an undergraduate at Virginia

Commonwealth University by the choice of “two studios,” life as a classical musician or fashioner of form, she chose the latter. Rather than attending an art school, Durkin went onto Yale University for graduate school because it offered the possibility of experimentation in other fields beyond the fine arts, such as music and engineering.

After earning an MFA in Sculpture there in 2005, Durkin came to Texas for the position of Professor of Art at Texas A&M, Commerce. With a penchant for solving problems, machines, and engineering, her artwork is dynamic and process oriented. Striking a feedback loop with the viewer, it moves and is moving, literally with the kinetic fervor of hidden motors and metaphorically as her abstract pastel-colored shapes pull wistfulness and cool rumination from observers. She tinkers with automobile engines, and has a particular penchant for the Volkswagen Karmann Ghia. Her unfettered pet advocacy spreads across all parts of her life, fueling her imagination in the workshop and methods in teaching. Rescuing and fostering cats and dogs is not simply something she does in spare time. It is part of Durkin’s holistic life-work-play ethic.

She is energized, even giddy about teaching a studio art course on “empathy” this coming fall at the university, where she earned tenure in 2012. She is currently represented by Erin Cluley Gallery in Dallas.

Durkin has another skill: a talent for the compression of time. She has amassed all of these successes by the young age of 35. A+C contributor Charissa Terranova visited Durkin at her studio located in a beautiful craftsman bungalow built in 1916 in Greenville, Texas as she prepared for an upcoming solo show at Dallas’ [Erin Cluley Gallery](#) which runs May 9–June 6.

**A+C: You started as an Oboe major. How did music make its way into your practice as an artist-maker? Did it provide any kind of foundation?**

Ultimately, in college, I had to decide which studio I wanted to focus on – the art studio or the music studio. After taking a 3D Design class, I was hooked on the kind of conceptual and mechanical problem solving, as well as inventiveness that was needed to complete each assignment. I then switched my major to the visual arts, and, upon learning just how flexible, fluid, dynamic, and all-encompassing sculpture is and can be, it made sense for

me to study sculpture. This way, I could include use anything as a material or element in my work – including sound, music performance, and/or instrument making. I could play the oboe in the critique room or gallery, and that could be the work. I could make my own instruments or viewer-based systems that created sound. Sound, music, subject, medium, format, object, installation are limitless under this enormous umbrella called sculpture. You can use painting, photography – whatever is needed in the work.



Josephine

Durkin, *Flora 7*, 2015. Courtesy the artist. Photograph by Paul Bryan.

A+C: You seem to live a holistic life in which your practice as an artist, teaching, and role in the community as an animal advocate come together as one. How do you see this working out on a day to day basis? In studio, class, and the city...

Anything can influence ideas and art making, including your surroundings and those who you surround yourself with. Animals, and caring for them, are a big part of my life. I have cats in my home, and two indoor/outdoor dogs, whose beds are in my woodshop. Both the cats and dogs are usually very quiet and calm, and are great company who allow me to think.

Recently, I had students team up and research dog behavior and preferences, as they relate to sound, color, scale, weight and touch of dog toys. Then they had to create toys that doubled as treat containers – so dogs would have to work, play – essentially, hunt, to get their treats. The goal was to design and make a toy that satisfied their natural prey drive, provided them with physical and mental exercise, which would make them happier and more relaxed. Ultimately, I wanted to make the students care and appreciate animals while developing their design and construction skills. By turning my rescued dog Roger into their client whose life they could make better, they engaged with and cared about Roger. They developed a greater appreciation of all animals and their individual needs. By helping animals or the environment through research and invention, we can learn the importance, and positive impact, of being kind to all beings – humans included.

Teaching empathy through design is of great interest to me, and I am currently working on a proposal to teach an interdisciplinary class to do this at Texas A&M University – Commerce. Similar to the dog toy assignment – the Empathy class will work together to help solve real-world problems and improve the lives, environments and communities through research and design. On a global perspective – this is consistent with projects that have started in other parts of the world. Cat cafes where customers get to feed and socialize with adoptable, rescued cats while enjoying their coffee or tea, prisons that double as animal shelters where once homeless dogs are paired with inmates to help rehabilitate each other, DIY, relatively low-cost dog dog cart builds with shared designs to provide improved mobility and comfort for handicapped dogs – such as Jerry West's *Rolling Dog Project* – and cat libraries where people – children and adults – learn to read, by reading aloud to judgment-free, rescued shelter cats, who double as kind,

listening and reading companions. Humans help animals. Animals help humans. The same is true with the environment.

A+C: Simply put, cybernetics is a scientific approach to understanding such holism according to the human-machine interface. Merriam-Webster defines the word “cybernetics” as “the scientific study of how people, animals, and machines control and communicate information the scientific study of how people, animals, and machines control and communicate information.” How does this play out in your work?

Some of the work I’ve made includes kinetic and/or interactive objects and installations. I’ve built mechanical systems that allow for movement in the work. Pieces of torn paper have moved to look like flying birds, personal theater boxes have anthropomorphized blocks of fabric that move up and down, against each other, from side to side, pencil sharpeners have become the instruments for sound and other things, that are either familiar or initiated from the familiar take on movement that suggests specific movements and interactions of animals and humans. These sculptures can make the viewer more aware of their own gestures, emotions and concerns, while they function as human or animal surrogates.

A+C: Where did your passionate love and sense of empathy for animals originate?

I grew up in a large house with multiple cats and dogs – and can’t imagine not having them in my life and in my home. They are highly intelligent beings – very similar to humans with emotions and feelings, but in a different physical format. They provide a certain calm, positive and always interesting presence in my life, and I learned about their needs, language and the importance of rescuing and getting them fixed at an early age. I started to learn how to sew and make patterns when I was four – because I wanted to make clothing for my cat. I learned about space and construction, and how to design with their behavioral patterns – preferences and instincts – in mind, when I made houses for them out of cardboard. There were multiple floors that they could navigate through – like cat condos with cutouts for windows. There were curtains and flashlights so I could adjust the lighting. An interest in something, whatever it is, often fuels the learning of new

tools, skillsets, and the need to further explore the interest, and other, relating interests. I wanted to learn about my companions, who just happened to have four legs and be of a smaller scale. I do not believe they are inferior in any way, and, as their friend, advocate, and family member, I wanted to make their lives better. This has not changed. In doing so, I learn, teach and participate in difference things along the way. This has not changed. What do you want to do? What is the goal? What do you want to learn about? What do you want to build or make happen? The approach to research, questioning and the desire to make change in the classroom or community, is the same as it relates to art making: Learning by doing. Getting or making things better through investigation, trial and error.

**A+C: Please tell me about your latest body of work that will be showing at Erin Cluley Gallery.**

All of the work is new, and will include plastic, cast sculptures, kinetic sculpture, sewn collages and installation. All of the work started with either photographing or casting studio residue – the stuff left over from making other work – to create imagery and objects that result in sewn collages or cast sculptures. I am interested in the merging of realism and abstraction along with making work that pairs authenticity with reproduction while elevating the status of what would have been discarded material.

**A+C: Where do you see your next body of art going?**

I see imagery, objects and installations becoming both more abstract and anthropomorphic. We'll see!