

Eli Baxter

b.1970, Seattle, Washington, lives in
Honolulu, O'ahu
exhibited in *Biennial VII*

The Garden Stories: Transitory, 2012

recycled bicycle inner tubes, electrical wire

The Garden Stories is an ongoing series that draws its inspiration specifically from a combination of various elements found in nature. Through interweaving and juxtaposing manmade recycled media and detritus with highly suggestive organic forms, I am continuing my ongoing exploration and inquiry into the relationship and interaction between human beings and the natural world. This relationship is complex and multifaceted, both positive and negative. Themes of worship and cultivation are mixed with domination and control, disintegration and destruction. The artistic process and the media used in this series, suggest additional themes of labor, transformation, and consumption. Architectural or structural elements are also key in *The Garden Stories* site-specific installations, further highlighting both the physical and psychological relationship between the industrial and the organic.

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Desire—that delicious entanglement of want and need—may be one of the most potent of human emotions. Ranging from persistent longing to compelling obsession, it shapes thought and action and provides the impetus for the quests that shape the trajectories of our lives, quests that often prove to be more exciting in process than in fulfillment. Human nature and its quotient of focused longing provide a conceptual focus and a point of departure for Eli Baxter, whose work suggests both the dynamics of desire and the fetishized qualities of its objects.

Desire as an engine of human nature is, in Baxter's analysis, directed in two primary ways, or towards two categories of objects: one, the sexual partner that may fulfill the imperative of procreation (an imperative that humans share with all other living entities in nature), and the other, the material thing that may be acquired and in some cases consumed. The fact that both of these involve production finds a significant corollary in Baxter's labor-intensive, even obsessive approach to her work.

Now best known for her sculptural work, Baxter began as a painter, but even then was interested in creating textured surfaces through the addition of such things as knitted wool and found objects to the canvas. During one of several visits to The Netherlands in the 1990s, she worked with combinations of

wool, steel and latex, setting up the domestic/industrial fusion that would continue to manifest itself in later work. An initial consolidation of this hybrid sensibility occurred during Baxter's study in the Art Department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa beginning in 2003. For her thesis exhibition, an installation entitled *an exercise in domesticity*, prepared for the MFA in Intermedia that she earned in 2006, Baxter worked with a distinctive, even somewhat disturbing combination of materials—white fiber, black rubber; pendulous, amorphous entities and metal apparatuses—that invoked a domain somewhere between kitchen, assembly-line, and morgue. At this time Baxter also focused on reiterative processes such as wrapping, tying and knotting, building complex forms through the repetition of simple acts, much—as she would later reflect—like the accumulation of daily activities. Reflecting on *an exercise in domesticity*, she wrote "...intertwined with this are ideas of sexuality, fertility and reproduction, as well as an exploration into the ways in which humans try to control or manipulate their own bodies and their surroundings." The installation, resonant on a number of conceptual levels, touched on the gendered aspects of production, pointing both toward the compensated labor of industrial production that resulted in the making

of things, and the uncompensated work of the home, which so often was focused more on creating or restoring order.

It was during her initial years in Hawai'i that Baxter began to work in a more concentrated way with inner tubes, a material initially explored while she was in The Netherlands, that now forms an essential part of her visual signature. In this black, tubular, sheet-like material, not without its own strange sensuality, the artist found an ideal tool with which to explore further the hybrid world she had begun to create. In *floruous* (2004), flat lengths of rubber were coiled and cut on one edge to create dense rosettes then densely clustered in a large circle. This, and other floor or pedestal pieces including *lush* and *paisley* (both 2005), created seductive analogues to the natural world, in all its extravagant fecundity, using a material connected only in the most attenuated fashion to that world. The organic, animate aspects of these works are also evident in *slither* (2004), an ominous but witty entity comprised of countless sections of tubing cut on the diagonal at their upper ends, all spikes and scales and undulations. *Valve venus*, another work from this period, engages more anthropomorphic aspects, its bi-lobed form suggestive of head and torso and studded with bicycle inner tube valves—another key item in Baxter's toolbox.

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Baxter's choice of materials as well as her processes of fabrication do a lot of the conceptual work that provides a foundation for the pure but also disturbing aesthetic pleasure the objects provide. The black rubber of the inner tubes is itself evidence of nature transformed by industry. Its re-use in works of art—Baxter is intent on recycling surplus materials—offers tangible commentary on the patterns of consumption and over-consumption that fuel cultures of desire. The color too is laden with meaning: black as a color of power, black as emblematic of the negative, black as evocative of the apparatus of bondage. And black is a color not often found in nature's flora, thus further emphasizing the tension—organic/natural vs. fabricated/industrial—inherent in the forms themselves.

A delicate inquiry into mixed emotions, the installation of Baxter's most recent work, represents both a consolidation and an extension of many of these ideas, now realized on an expanded scale. The largest of the components, *medu*, constructed of rubber and ribbon, is suspended from the ceiling on heavy woven rope. It is reminiscent of the simpler hanging forms in the earlier installation *an exercise in domesticity*, but also of the pendulous pod forms of local vegetation. Into the loops and folds of *medu* are tucked

numerous conical protrusions of wrapped lengths of rubber; these are repeated, like cast-off seeds, or offspring, in *thema*, a grouping of similar coiled forms resting on the floor beneath. A second hanging piece, *monema*, is comprised of numerous rubber rosettes wound around hollow cylindrical cores, and accompanied also by *thrix*, a cluster of individual elements lying below.

Where these forms manifest undeniable organic tendencies, they are also connected to a more recent set of associations. In contrast to the extravagant multiplicity of nature, as well as the mass production of the factory, Baxter is also interested in the "special" object—that unique, perhaps handmade or one-of-a-kind thing that satisfies high-end desire and consumption, and circulates as what the artist identifies as "an object of power and prestige." Thus *medu* and *monema* are each meant to suggest a chandelier, an emblem of the elite environment. At the same time, and typical of the artist's ability to juxtapose contradictions, she is also aware that the culture of commodities that shapes and manipulates the desire for possession and seeks to democratize access to luxury goods for the sake of expanding the market also cultivates a culture of deception, in which a brand name may connote only a semblance, an illusion, rather than material truth. But as the artist

notes, "...I am not interested in attacking luxury brands. I am interested in how they work on driving human consumption and how the objects themselves make people think and feel."

Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature*, a classic of botanical illustration that also possesses a strong aspect of the fantastical, provided the inspiration for naming the species in Baxter's strange mechano-botanical paradise. Here one also finds *epi 1, 2 and 3*—vine-like elements that wind their way across walls, slender stems giving way periodically to circular clusters of dense growth. Flourishing here too, close to the ground, are various forms of *roidea* (1-13 in the series.) Here Baxter has introduced a newer material—thick rectangular bands of hard rubber that have been knotted, joined selectively with mitered corners, and copiously studded with inner tube valves of varying types, much like the earlier *valve venus*. The strangely androgynous quality of these appendages, suggestive of both nipples and phalluses, underscores the subtly perverse nature of much of Baxter's work, giving rise to those "mixed emotions" she so delicately but assertively probes.