





MOIRE 2

CRUSTY CRUNCHY ROUNDY SMOOTHY

**Amy Brener**

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**To From In:**  
**The Sculptures of Amy Brener**  
Liza Eurich



The recent sculptures of Amy Brener are marked by an intriguing set of dichotomies. From a distance, and often in photographic documentation, one is immediately struck by the crystal-like appearance of her structures. Their solidity and weightiness is further enhanced by their stature, as several of her freestanding pieces are upwards of 7 feet tall. In line with this, titles such as *Kiosk* (2013) and *Pillar* (2012) affix these lengthy forms within an architectural framework, which suggests notions of stability and strength. Rather than being defined by these qualities though, her sculptures appear much more vulnerable upon closer inspection – their density dissolves and their synthetic materiality becomes apparent. At their edges the multitude of layers used to create them are perceptible, as is their surprising weightlessness. The viewer is now confronted with slight leans, thin widths, holes and fissures, where a solid mass once seemed to stand.

These nuanced characteristics are indicative of Brener's material choices, choices that are marked by the inclusion of found objects within a constructed matrix. While she has used an array of objects such as coral and beads, her incorporation of Fresnel lenses, mirrors and glass lend themselves particularly well to enhancing the precarious qualities of her sculptures, as does the graded pigmentation and semitransparent layers of resin that these objects find themselves embedded within. This combination of materials also causes the work to possess subtle optical effects, which in turn affords them with a sense of movement. Triggered by the reflected and refracted lighting within the gallery, their direction seems to mirror that of those in the space. Proceeding around and past a piece illuminates this, where a sideways glimpse elicits the sensation that the sculpture is appearing to shift or flicker. In many instances this enhances the precarity of these works, as they already appear to narrowly impede the pull of gravity.

As the experience of viewing Brener's work is one that requires a constant renegotiation of expectations; likewise, her process can be defined in a similar manner. At the center of her methodology is a balancing act between artistic intentions and chance actions. Her process does not employ chance blindly; rather, it sets potentialities into motion through a series of strategies, which to some extent allows for a predictable outcome, but also permits the possibility of unexpected occurrences. This is something that becomes evident through a more thorough explanation of how she constructs these works. The initial stage

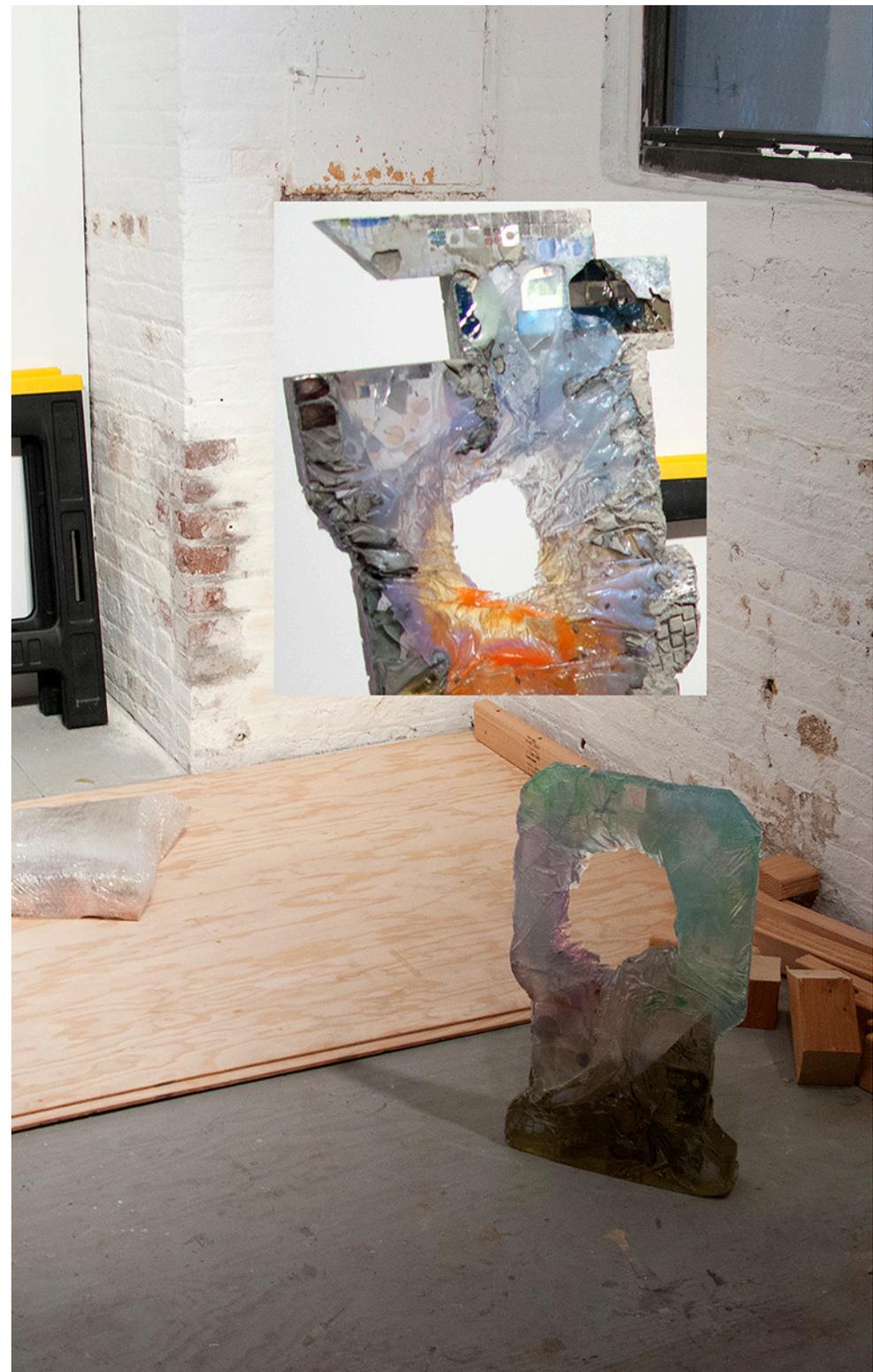
entails developing a preliminary structure made from plywood, this framework does not “directly refer to a preexisting object or speak to a particular style” Brener contends, but rather originates from discoveries or thoughts that come about during the creation of previous pieces, a tactic hinted at in the title of her sculpture *Harbinger*.<sup>1</sup> Once the framework is decided upon, it is coated with a plastic drop cloth, successive layers of resin are then poured into the structure, while found objects (as listed above) are positioned within selected areas. The use of resin requires a time-sensitive reaction, which limits the period in which revision or modification is possible. Accordingly, much of the pouring process and its outcome are dependent on unforeseen variables.

In discussing the implications of process driven work, Lucy Lippard states that “the risk, or the gesture, rather than being made by the artist from the inside out, as a direct expression of himself, is an ‘act’ of the sculpture, almost independent of the creator, its scale in meaning deriving from materials, context and situation rather than psychological necessity.”<sup>2</sup> Specifically in the case of Brener’s work, the formation of her sculptures is directly related to their materiality, whereby gravity shifts and pools resin into the pits and crevices of the plastic covered frame, enveloping the objects in its path. This allows for chance encounters and unexpected reactions, but does so in a manner that still adheres to a series of set parameters. When the last layer is poured and dry, she proceeds by de-molding the piece. It is only at this stage, near completion, that the ‘front’ of her sculpture becomes visible for the first time.<sup>3</sup> It is also the point at which the integration of intention and chance is evident.

Brener’s work opens up a series of seemingly oppositional characteristics and approaches – those that exist between solidity and precarity, stasis and movement, intention and chance. The ability to oscillate between these poles lies in the works capacity to ‘act’ both in its own making, but also within the exhibition space. Personified as such, the work has an ethereal quality the pulls the viewer in and consistently gives them pause.

#### NOTES

1. Brener, Amy. Email to Liza Eurich, August 29, 2013.
2. Lippard, Lucy R. *From The Center: Feminist Essays On Women's Art*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976.
3. Brener, Amy. Email to Liza Eurich, August 29, 2013.







## Conglomerate Moment

In the summer of 2013 artist Kelly Jazvac met with Amy Brener in her Brooklyn studio, they decided to continue their conversation via email. Below is an edited version of the interview that ensued.

**KJ:** When I visited your studio in July, you mentioned an interest in tools that show the effects of their use. I thought that this was interesting because it's akin to, but distinct from, a patina or weathering of a material over time. The former is an active thing, the latter a passive one. How do you see these two states operating in your own work (both in the making, as well as through the implied action of your machine-like forms)?

**AB:** During our visit I remember bringing up David Cronenberg's film *Existenz* (1999), and that horrible gristle-gun that Jude Law's character assembles out of his Chinese food. The gun is used to kill, but is also vulnerable to injury and oozes blood when damaged. I'm drawn to art objects that seem to be worn down by their making, and exhausted from all the meaning that has been injected into them. For instance, Claes Oldenburg's sculptures have a defeated look to them, as though they are slumping after years of hard work, trying to be the objects they were meant to

represent. The artist's struggle is visible, but there's also a desperation inherent in the sculptures themselves and this is something that I strive for in my own work.

I conceive of my current sculptures as machines, but I don't go further into defining what functions they might serve. I allow the process of their making to build a narrative within them and the final results are unpredictable. I attempt to make work that remains mysterious to me, and I want this desire to show. The spontaneous variations that occur in texture, translucency and color help to spark the end surprise. I've always taken an alchemic, or even frankensteinian, approach to art making and continue to pursue the metaphor of the artist as inventor. I weather down my sculptures in order to imbue them with an unknown history, and I build switchboards on their surfaces to point to a vague future technology. If the works are successful, they'll teach me something about themselves.

**KJ:** That *Existenz* gun is an interesting object. The gun itself

**(made from the bones of Law's meal, plus his own dental bridge) is a machine, but one that is entirely organic. The gun is powerful enough to kill, but can also evade detection through metal detectors. I'm intrigued by these kinds of portrayals of the future. Here the future doesn't look like an Apple showroom, it looks messy, abject and bodily; it's a place where you have to negotiate the carcass on your plate in relation to your own body (any good apocalypse movie will tell you the same thing).**

**AB:** Yeah, there's something romantic in there, at least when compared to the slick future vision in which our animal selves have been conquered by computers. A gritty and organic future is getting further from our reach as technology becomes increasingly seamless, invisible and integrated into us. My sculptures point in the opposite direction, where technology can be bulky and calciferous, and have a conversation with the body rather than invading it.

**KJ:** Oldenburg's *Ray Guns* have a similar quality for me. The ray gun is obviously something of the technofuture, but many of Oldenburg's *Ray Guns* look (or are) organic.

**AB:** Yes, they have the look of guns

from the future (circa 1950s sci-fi) that have been left for millennia to decompose and become petrified or fossilized. Which is funny, because a lot of the *Ray Guns* are actually just weirdly shaped pieces of wood or rock.

**KJ:** I also like the idea that something could be exhausted from all the meaning that has been injected into it. Any idea of who is doing the injecting?

**AB:** I guess there are different layers of injecting: first the artist injects and later the viewer/critic/art historian. This isn't necessarily intentional; it is often a result of familiarity and the work resembling something that already exists.

**KJ:** This baked potato must be the antidote to exhaustion though. It is erupting... <http://collections.lacma.org/node/207457>

**I visited you on the heels of a research trip to Hawaii, where I accompanied a scientist who was looking for examples of synthetic materials melting into the geologic record of the earth (aka the rock record). The rock record is a layered accumulation of sediment, fossils, rock, etc., that is studied to understand the earth's geologic history. The layered accumulations of your sculptures**

**seemed particularly poignant after seeing rock forms made through a similar type of process of layering and accumulation. My experience in your studio left me visually in awe, not just because of the gem-like qualities of the work and the visual connection to what I had just seen in nature, but also because I felt like I was seeing speculative evidence of the Anthropocene. What you're making, of course, materially has very little connection to the natural world (or at least as much as a Ho Ho has a connection to a raw vegetable), given your predominant use of synthetic materials. Could you describe what you find compelling about synthetic materials, and how you see them plugging into the world?**

**AB:** That sounds like an amazing trip you went on and I'm glad it inspired such a fascinating question. I've had people ask me if my sculptures are made out of crystal and I find this notion humorous, yet beautiful in its impossibility. Though the sculptures have a crystalline appearance, I'm more interested in their synthetic nature. When seen in person, the texture of plastic becomes more evident and they take on a somewhat noxious appearance. The works embody approximations of natural forces such as sedimentation, erosion

and fossilization, but these are clearly fabricated elements. I'm not interested in replicating nature, but rather in the desire to replicate nature, and the inevitable failure that comes along with such a goal.

**KJ:** I am also very interested in both that drive and failure, and I hear the test tube hamburger didn't get great reviews....

**AB:** Yeah, it had the right "mouthfeel" but lacked soul.

**KJ:** I also hear you have a background in video. Do you see any crossover there in terms of how you employ light in your sculptures?

**AB:** I did make several videos in grad school, but I also built sculptures in which electric light was a key component. I was always frustrated that the light still seemed to be an external feature, no matter how integral I tried to make it to each piece. It always felt gimmicky, and the electrical cord was a problem I went to extreme measures to try and solve. In my current work I've finally found a seamless way to incorporate light, without the bulbs and wires. I think my interest in light comes from a desire for my sculptures to transcend themselves, and exist beyond their forms by activating the space around them.

**KJ: That is a great answer. And it is hard to reconcile the cord. What kind of non-art objects are you interested in?**

**AB:** I like looking at random assemblages of things in puddles or at the beach – shiny garbage that's all sludged together by nature.

An important influence is my family's sailboat named *Reality*. It's a beautiful wooden boat that was custom built for my parents before I was born and I grew up traveling on it. When you're at sea, you spend a lot of time looking at things, and I remember staring up and memorizing every nut and bolt in the ceiling of the cabin. When I was little, I would crawl inside of every nook and cranny and it felt like roaming through the innards of some great animal.

**KJ: This is interesting. I often wonder what makes artists able to look so closely at things. Was boredom an important factor to this close looking? Or more that the boat was already so evocative for you?**

**AB:** The continuous motion on a boat causes you to slow down and observe. I was also an only-child so I had to entertain myself when my parents were busy on deck. I guess I was pretty easily entertained! I think artists tend

to notice things that other people find boring... maybe that's part of the job.

**KJ: What kind of art objects are you interested in?**

**AB:** I've always been drawn to a particular kind of assemblage work in which a variety of materials and objects combine into a seamless fusion, yet are still possible to decipher and pick apart upon closer viewing. Examples of this would be the works of Louise Nevelson, Nari Ward, El Anatsui, and Jedediah Caesar, to name a few.

I've also been thinking about my dad's kinetic works that he made through the eighties and up until his death. A few favorite pieces are *Tahiti* (1984), *Orient Express* (1985), *Other Forces at Work* (2005) and *Slow Turn* (2005). He engineered these works by himself and his hand is so evident in them. Their construction is crude yet delicate and I see so much determination in their making. He spoke about these works as introducing a less passive encounter for the viewer, but I also see the artist's need for a more active experience with his own work after completion. Though they are automated pieces, there still seems to be something unpredictable about them and an opportunity is presented for the artist, as well as the viewer, to notice something new upon each viewing.



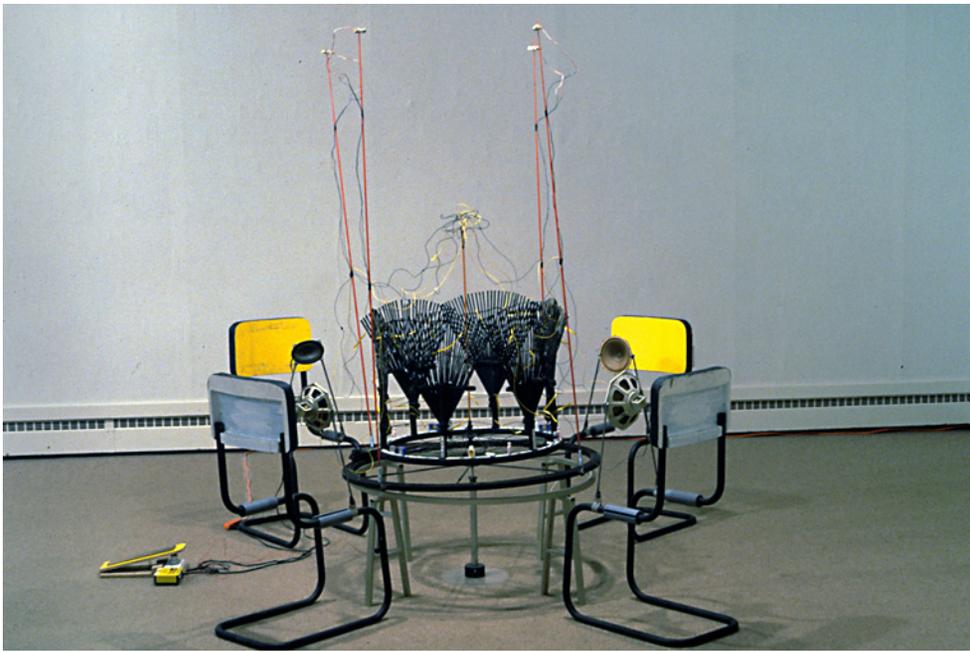
**KJ: I'm so glad you brought up your dad, Roland Brener. I once had an impressive studio visit with him (impressive not because of me, because of him), and his last exhibition at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria was remarkable. Talk about the artist as inventor! Every work felt like a new techno-chemical experiment.**

**AB:** That exhibition included some of the computer generated sculptures from 1999-2004, as well as the works he made in the last two years of his life when he returned to a studio-oriented practice. I was very happy to see him puttering around in the studio again, after a long period of designing work on the computer. His decision to make work by hand again was concurrent

with my decision to study sculpture at UBC. By watching him, I noticed that we shared a similar physicality when slowly moving through the studio and contemplating objects.

**KJ: Have you ever considered your work in relation to your dad's mid-career and later work, including the resin *Genies* and *Swingers*? It just occurred to me now from this conversation, but I am thinking about the potential for a conglomerate moment in between his later computer generated figures and his earlier DIY robotics that also include altered commercial objects (like rakes, shipping tubes, lightbulbs, etc.).**

**AB:** I see some shared formal



interests between my work and his figurative pieces because they are singular, stand-alone sculptures, in contrast to his earlier installations that contain complex parts. Though it's an important factor in all of his work, the relationship to the floor is emphasized in these singular sculptures and is of particular interest to me. When it comes to materials, I relate much more to the 1980s work and the last sculptures he made, which incorporate a range of materials that were culled freely from around the house, thrift stores, the beach, etc.

**KJ: In closing, I have one more question about the artist's hand, as it has come up in this conversation in a couple of different ways, and I'm interested in how you see it operating**

**in your work, which, depending on your viewing angle and distance, can read in many different ways. There's a part of your work that looks as though it has been made/petrified by nature; a part that looks industrially produced; and another aspect that looks like the future-tinkerer at work. How important is the role of the hand, for you, in your own work?**

**AB:** It's very important to me. I used to want to be a writer and part of that interest has carried through into my art practice. I like the relationship between the author's voice and the artist's hand. I see my work coming from a source that is outside of my day-to-day self, almost as though it's being conveyed through a narrator. I've always been



interested in reflexive artwork that builds its own context over time. As a writer I was enthralled by the task of developing a sense of place. Even now, I imagine my sculptures as being from a particular place and I hope that by accumulation they will flesh out that place, wherever it may be.



**Crusty Crunchy  
Roundy Smoothy**  
Ella Dawn McGeough



“A ROUND FOUR BLOCKS of print I shall postulate four ultramundane margins that shall contain indeterminate information as well as reproduced reproductions.”<sup>1</sup> This is the first sentence of Robert Smithson’s *Quasi Infinities and the Waning of Space*. Amy Brener’s sculpture *untitled (disk)*, 2013 suggests a similar circumnavigation of space, process, and material. Like Smithson’s exploration of a universe expanding and contracting through the art objects of his contemporaries and others, my discussion of this object will have obstacles and be around-about and about roundness.

The first obstacle is to trust the ancient Greeks when they say that seeing is touching at a distance. This concept is so intimate it makes me feel dizzy with power.

However, in an inversion of this obstacle, the general shape of the object itself grabs hold of my eyes before they can handle the work’s specifics. In other words, before I can touch *it* – *it* touches me. *disk*’s geometry, at odds with the architectural linearity of Brener’s growing portfolio from the last few years, is round. Or at least I feel that it aspires to be round. I suffer compassion for this object and for its struggle to be something perhaps more ideal than it is. Perfect or not, its shape is sympathetic to the eye; mine enjoy feeling its near roundness cup against them. In fact, as I begin to decipher inner and outer rings, I wonder, if – like J.W Goethe’s proclamation that, ‘If the eye were not sun-like, the sun’s light it would not see’ – I see *disk* because my eyes are *disk*-like?<sup>2</sup>



The outer ring, the iris, at first glance appears as a thick grey matter and yet, in no time at all, begins to crumble apart and arrange into concrete, technological bits, pigment, resin, Fresnel lens, plexi, and some other stuff. My eyes sift through all this in order to sort and categorize. I focus upon concentrations of specific colours: the colours of things – the blue of delphinium dots the upper left corner, the vermillion of poppy patches across the lower round, green moss spreads itself throughout, while light reflects off fragments of lens in a polychromatic array.

This outside holds on tight to an inside – an interior circle of gauzy semi-transparent resin, more cornea than pupil.

Again, an obstacle: I have a hard time believing this inside is hard. It takes a leap of understanding to accept that it is a solid instead of a briefly suspended viscous, yolky, gelatin. So real is this daydream that it exists in my mouth. I can feel the chewiness of the milky yellow stuff between my teeth. I flip-flop back and forth between this apparent hallucination and a nearly unacceptable reality.

Carl Jung, who was also a sculptor, described getting to know a dream as analogous to understanding a stone.<sup>3</sup> Learning the inside begins with feeling, by touching the outside not looking for what you want to see. In collusion, Charles Ray tells us that, “[what] is essential in a work of art is found in the method of its construction.”<sup>4</sup>

What method of construction pushed these materials together and gave them a category?



The extreme heat of igneous, the tremendous pressure and time of metaphoric, or the mish-mash of sedimentary?



Sedimentary: human hands mixed, poured, and placed these materials, quickly. It became a stone, a rock, a boulder, a sedimentary plasticonglomerate from the Anthropocene epoch. Conglomerates rely on quickness; it is their medium. Often, they form near a river's head around the heaviest jagged materials. At other times, they form from the human-refuse collected in oceans. They are obstinate and irregular and this is the secret to the speed of their creation. In comparison to other sedimentary rocks, which slowly compact and coalesce, conglomerates are like a wild geologic party, where a variety of substances of all sorts and sizes get hastily stuck and pressed up against each other to form something new. Then they break up, move around and like us, are "in the act of act of perpetual becoming."<sup>5</sup>



As with Jung's dreams, my understanding and judgment of this object shifts shape as I simultaneously take it apart and put it back together. In order to do this my eyes must give way to obstructive hands and with full palm outstretched I begin to paw *disk's* surface.



I feel its brittleness. The outer-ring's crunchiness breaks up the surface into cracks and crevices that help my fingers begin to make sense of the thing, forcing them to recognize details over pure mass. Ridges come and go; rough areas slow me down as I inspect their gravelly, sandy quality while smooth patches seduce. Reliefs of



computer parts – circuit boards and keypads are pressed against and into the upper and right sections. These provide straight lines to run along and symmetrical indents to feel assured by, but then they end and there is some new texture to contend with. I am in danger of being cut when I slide around the crusty razor-sharp left edge. At the bottom of the outer circle a rupture suggests a direct hit and a crack radiates outwards. Who or what hit it and where are they now?

The little wrinkles, where inside pool of resin meets outer ring, creates a palpable threshold between the changes in substance. The inside circle is lovely to touch: smooth little waves in the resin resist the press of my full two hands, like warm ice. After the previous irregularity, the near singular material of this inside gives me pause. I rest.



And with this rest, suddenly the intensity of my feeling has reached extension. It drops.

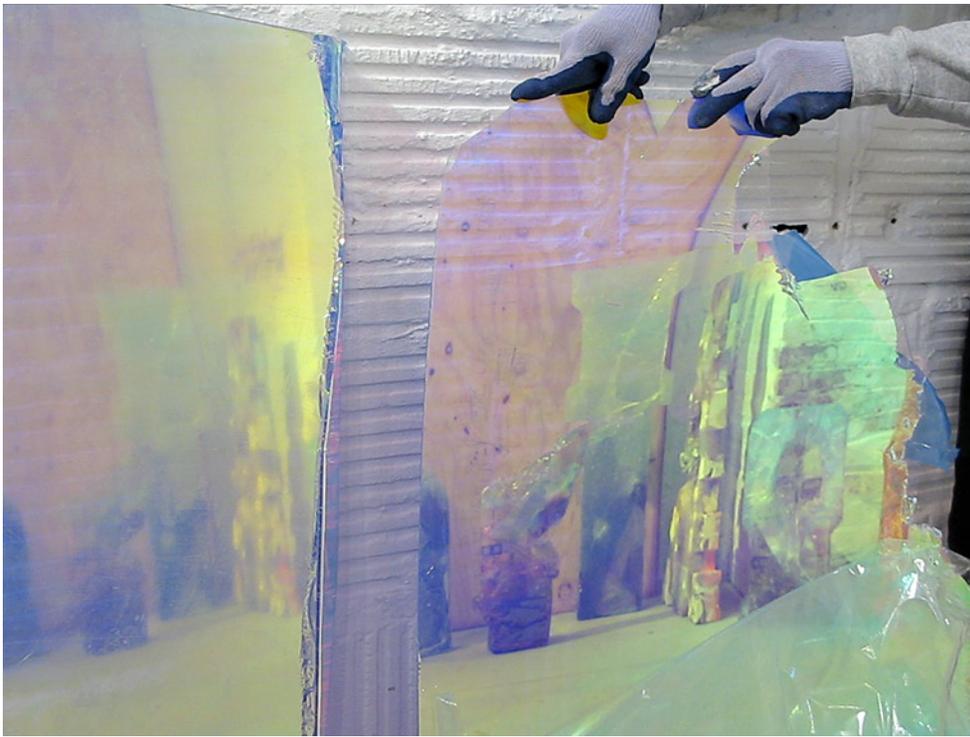
All these details that were forcing me to recognize them and turn them into metaphor overwhelm. I am tired. I want to forget and return to the thing as complete and obstinate. With this wish, this thing that touch animated into subject turns back into an object that is slightly too heavy and awkward to pick up. I understand that while it faces me, it also faces the wall. It has two sides and I can only see one.

*Disk* belongs where it is –neither cradled nor handled– leaning up against the wall and touching the floor.



NOTES 1. Smithson, Robert, and Jack D. Flam. «Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space.» *Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings*. Berkeley: University of California, 1996. 34-37. Print. 2. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von, and Douglas Miller. Preface. *Scientific Studies*. New York, NY: Suhrkamp, 1988. Print. 3. Jung, C. G. *The Undiscovered Self: With Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. Print. 4. Ray, Charles. "A Four Dimensional Being Writes Poetry on a Field of Sculpture." *Matthew Marks Gallery* (2006): 3+. Web. 5. *Ibid.*, 10.





*Mirrored Tilt* (2014). HD colour video, silent, 1:09 min.

[\[VIEW\]](#)

## Afterword

Colin Miner

There is a temporal curiosity within the space of Amy Brener's sculptures in which surface layers are melded and at times barely discernable underneath. This is the matter of palimpsests, of material layered both transparently and opaquely to catch the light or hold the darkness. This space fascinates our eye with the time to comprehend the qualities of a discontinuous and fractured experience.

It is difficult to materialize this curious movement and duration of the passage of time and our place in it. These sculptures grasp at doing so in their transformation through illumination. They exhibit the unsteady position between past and future, as an ungraspable nowness in which light has substance as material. Enthralled, our eyes are illuminated in the tenuous act of seeing and knowing, of comprehending this transcendence of space in time. Struggling to discern depth from surface partially obscured Fresnel screens shaded in petrified folds of material, cause the eyes' focus to waver in and out. Light glimmers, pooling under layers, shimmering on edges, and ebbing within resin. The boundary of surface is sought out by the light and with this comes contrast. Surface becomes depth and depth becomes surface through the play of lightness and darkness within and without.

It takes time to work with these sculptures, to adjust *with* them. Each finds a place in space with light falling on, then in and off. In this movement a number of them tilt, coaxed by their off-center weight. In order to get the right angle it is necessary to adjust the lighting; in the darkened intervals something competes to take hold. Sculpturally, a material density of light is now absent in the presence of darkness. Pushed from my eyes the lightness (the illumination) is in complete disproportion to their weighty substance.

*Mirrored Tilt* (2014) was made in collaboration with Amy Brener at her studio in Brooklyn, NY. It is a reflection as conversation of surface and depth in the space between material and light.

## List of Works

Amy Brener, for detailed information see [www.amybrener.com](http://www.amybrener.com)

*Harbinger*, 2013, Resin, pigment, concrete, fresnel lens, glass, plexiglass found objects, 54" x 17.5" x 7" / *untitled (disk)*, 2013, Resin, pigment, hydrocal, concrete, fresnel lens, glass, found objects, 44" x 41" x 1" / *Bit*, 2012, Resin, pigment, Hydrocal, found objects, 37.5" x 15" x 3" / *Key*, 2012, Resin, pigment, fresnel lens, glass, plexiglass, found objects, 43 x 14 x 5" / *Glowstick*, 2012, Resin, pigment, plexiglass, 61.25" x 3.75" x 3.25" / *Wing*, 2012, Resin, pigment, concrete, glass, fresnel lens, plexiglass, found objects, 33" x 15.5" x 3.5" / *mini 4*, 2013, Resin, pigment, concrete, glass, fresnel lens, plexiglass, found objects, 24" x 12" x 5" / *mini 7*, 2013, Resin, pigment, fresnel lens, glass, plexiglass, found objects , 22.5" x 13" x 3"

### Roland Brener

p19. *Slow Turn*, 2005, rubber, motors

Collection: Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto.

Artist's note: "Rotating length of rubber at 1 rpm. Floor to ceiling."

p19. *Other Forces at Work*, 2005, various materials

Collection: Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto.

Artist's note: "Live talk radio alternating between two units as a result of continuous pendulum movement and mercury switch."

p20. *Orient Express*, 1985, various materials, electric train and recorded sound, 80' x 60' x 15'

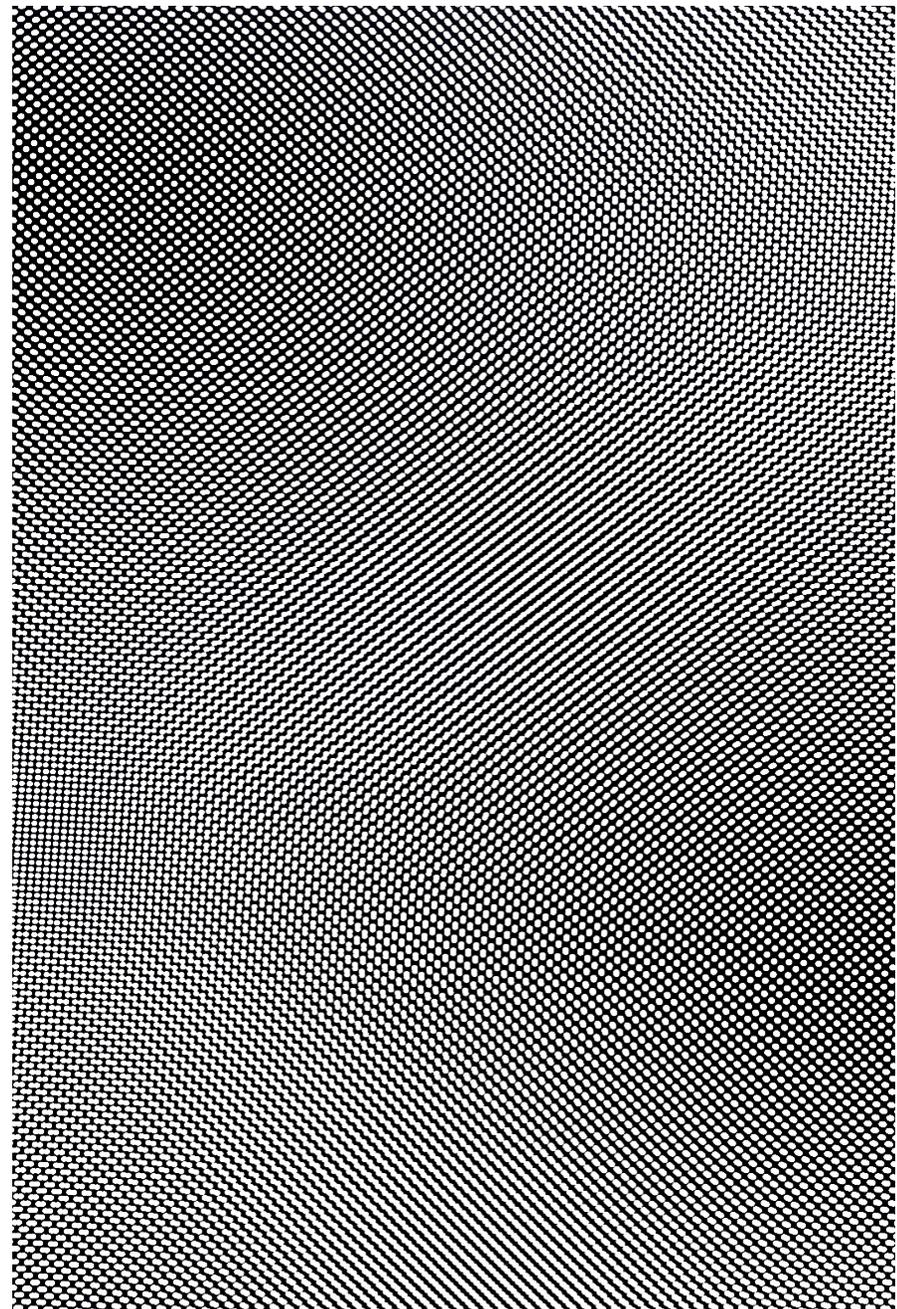
Collection: Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada.

Artist's note: "Viewer activates work by standing on peddle. An electric train circles the elevated track, activating recorded conversation from each speaker on the four chairs. Conversation disintegrates gradually once peddle is released."

p21. *Tahiti*, 1984, various materials, bicycle generator, batteries, radio and sound, 8' x 3' x 5'

Collection: Lethbridge University, Canada.

Artist's note: "A radio player activated by the viewer hand peddling the bicycle generator fades shortly after input. The work was somewhat inspired by an impression of technology apparent in Tahiti."



Moire 2 / March 2014

Colin Miner, Ella Dawn McGeough and Liza Eurich

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