

# Reiterations and Rifts

## Brenda Mallory

by Richard Speer

**The backstory of Brenda Mallory's mixed-media sculptures lies at the confluence of environmental awareness, feminism, and entrepreneurship.**

In the mid-1990s, the Portland, Oregon-based artist founded GladRags, a company that produces re-washable, reusable menstrual pads made out of cotton flannel. There were often stray strips of cotton lying around her home office and the workshop where the products were assembled, and it proved difficult to find a source that could reliably recycle them. While studying at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 2000, Mallory decided to incorporate pieces of the extraneous fabric into one of her class assignments. Dipping the fabric in hot wax and using it as a sculptural material, she was fascinated by how it behaved: the strips curled up; they could be shaped; they lent themselves to being used in multiples. In the past, she had worked in ceramics, whose properties she now found similar to the wax-dipped cotton. "There's something about this waxed cloth," she observes, "that has the malleability of clay but not the fragility. It also has a mysterious quality; people look at it and don't know what it is."

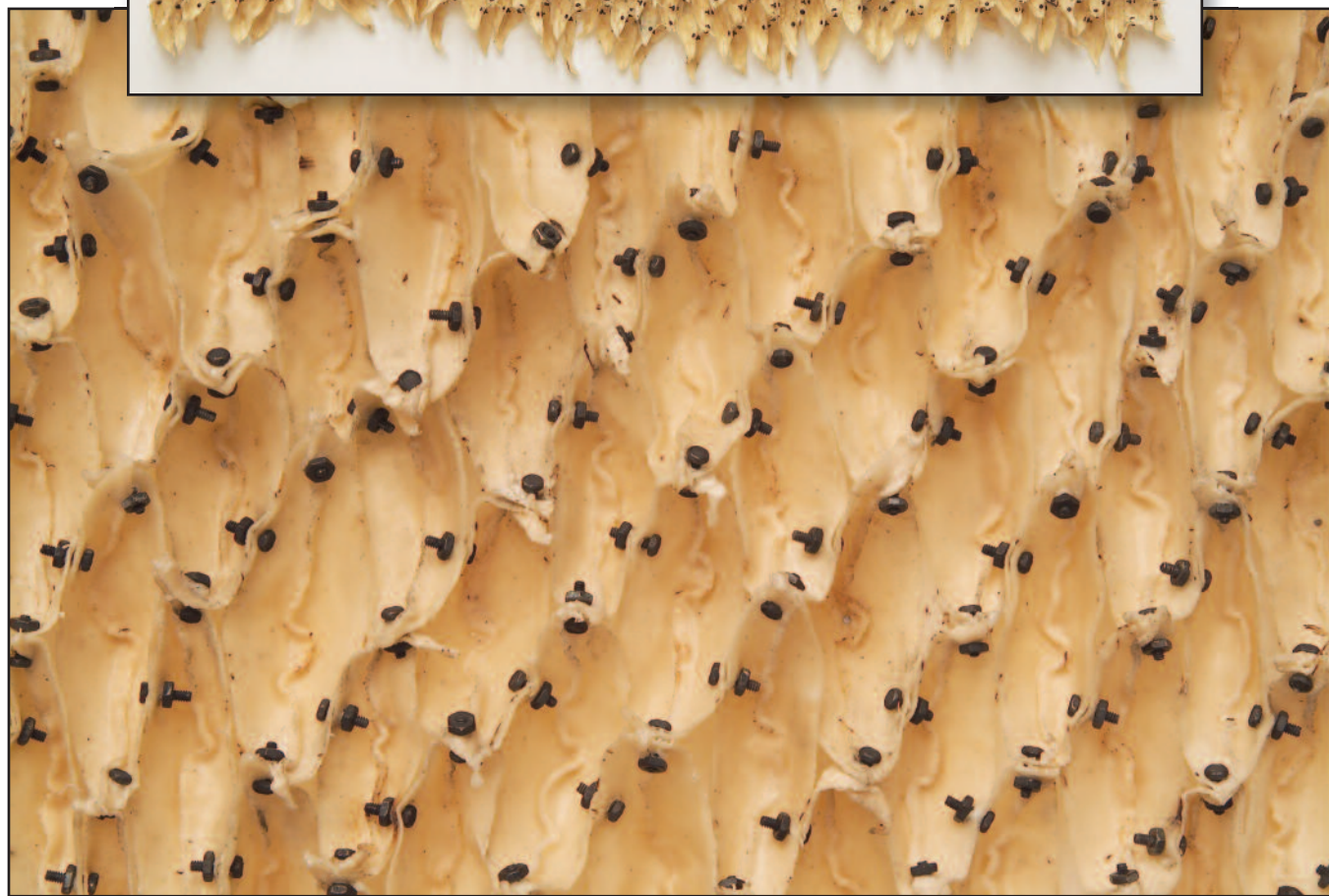
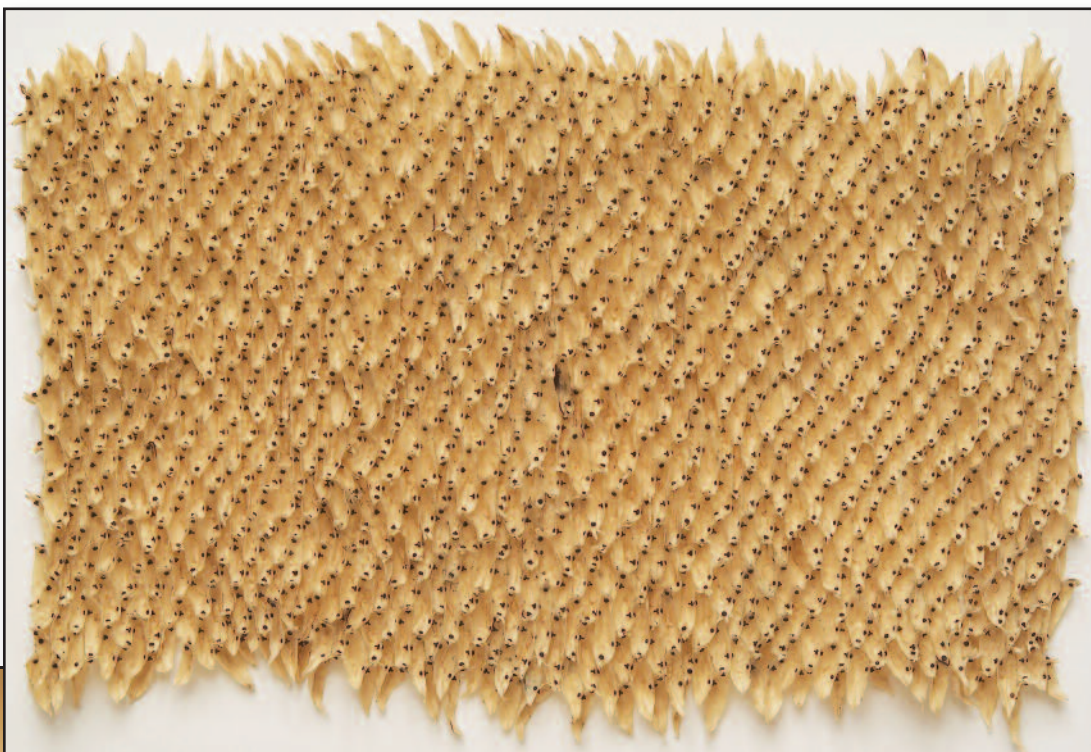
Intrigued by the medium's possibilities and the ways in which it dovetailed both with her social consciousness and aesthetic needs, Mallory continued working with it over the following decade, including after she sold GladRags in 2011. Her working method, she explains, "is really just like an encaustic painter's. The only difference is that I'm using it in a 3D way rather than painting. I use beeswax mixed with dammar resin, and every time I apply another layer, I burn it in with a torch."

In many compositions, Mallory fastens the dipped fabric with nuts and bolts, a process she likens to sewing, and holds the compositions together in frameworks of milled steel. These connective elements have a rough-hewn craftsmanship, which the artist traces to her childhood in northeastern Oklahoma. "A lot of my work—especially slapdash aesthetics of the hard connections of the nuts and bolts—is informed by growing up on a farm with a dad who threw everything together with baling wire. He had a

make-do-with-what-you-have attitude. My nephew once pointed out that every gate on our farm had a homemade latch, no two of which were the same, and none of which was pretty." The Oklahoma landscape—windswept, gold with wheat, brown and desolate in wintertime—has also seeped into Mallory's work. Pieces such as *Colonization* and *Undulations* evoke endless earth-toned plains and the patchwork of grasses and farmlands. Growing up in agriculture also instilled in her a cautionary attitude toward ethical quandaries surrounding agri-business. In *Demeter Does the Math*, she incorporates an unconventional material, bullet casings, into a polemical aesthetic response to the specter of genetically modified seeds propagated by the agri-business Monsanto Company.

The treacherous intersection of science and business is of particular interest to Mallory, as one who holds an abiding respect for the empiricism of the scientific method. She hungers to comprehend the origins of things, the way things work, and the methods by which we systematize knowledge. The systems that anchor linguistics, medicine, neuroscience, and biology fascinate her and infiltrate the architectonic structure of her sculptures. The book *Biology* (Neil A. Campbell, Benjamin-Cummings: 1996), given to her by a friend, has been a rich source of visual and thematic reference points. Like a scientist, Mallory is also dually interested in theory and field work; even in highly conceptual series, the presence of the hand never recedes into the background. There is an obsessiveness in what she calls the "manual-labor" element of her work, which she carries from her years of making utilitarian objects in ceramics.

In 2013, Mallory's interests in biology and technology came together in a striking installation at the Portland International Airport. A multi-piece meditation on international air travel, entitled *Mechanics of Hither and Yon*, it pointed to disturbing links between jet transportation and the dangers of pandemics transmitted through airborne disease. With their radiating spokes of fabric and metal, the installation's components simultaneously resembled flowers

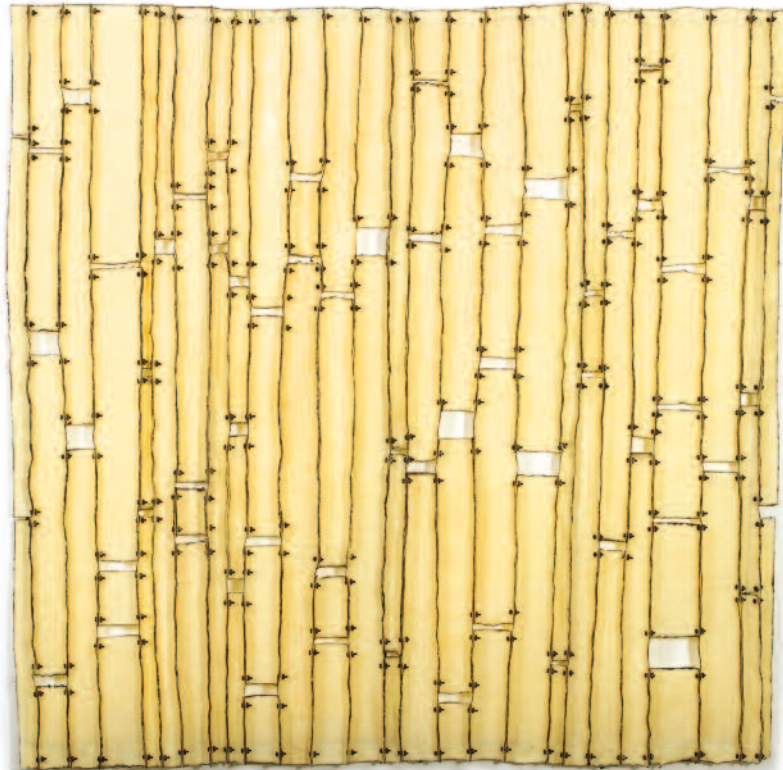


TOP: **BRENDA MALLORY** *Colonization* Waxed cloth, nuts, bolts, steel, 43" x 67" x 2.5", 2003.  
Detail BOTTOM. Photos: Bill Bachhuber.





TOP: **BRENDA MALLORY** *Mechanics of Hither and Yon* Waxed cloth, nuts, bolts, steel, 23' x 40' x 3', 2011-2012.  
Installation at Portland International Airport, Oregon, 2013. Detail BOTTOM. Photos: Christie Hazan.



BRENDA MALLORY *Variable Order* Waxed cloth, nuts, bolts, steel, 42" x 42" x 2", 2013. Photo: Crystal Van Wyk.

and viruses. By conflating the fetching and the fierce, the artist not only distilled the amorality of nature, she also betrayed a healthy ambivalence about her chosen medium. "Things can get too beautiful with this material. It can quickly become so luscious that it looks too decorative, too pretty and trophy-like. I want it to be a little deadly, too."

Becoming a prisoner to her medium—or even to overarching themes such as sustainability—is something Mallory works to avoid. Increasingly, she subverts medium and process to concept, leading to some surprising developments. For example, when she darkens the nuts, bolts, and steel that hold her compositions together, she does so with gun blue (black oxide), a caustic chemical normally used to darken handguns. It's an aesthetic choice that would seem to fly in the face of her ecological concerns. Further, in recent work she is departing from the organicism of ovular forms in favor of more rectilinear shapes and a formalist approach. In works such as *Variable Order* and *Articulated Verticals*, she uses long, segmented lines to evoke the rigorous geometries of Agnes Martin and UPC bar codes.

Prior to a ten-week artist residency at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village,

Colorado, in the autumn of 2013, Mallory made the radical decision to not take any wax or flannel strips with her, but rather to limit her media and thereby challenge herself to expand her material vocabulary in new directions. The decision mirrored the exciting, if intimidating, place where Mallory, like many mid-career artists, finds herself. She stands balanced on the fulcrum of success in a given style and the imperative to push creative boundaries—between materiality and concept, object and installation. Like the broad plains of her native Oklahoma, the artist's future stretches out with an expansiveness limited only by the long, hazy line of the horizon.

Brenda Mallory's website is [www.brendamallory.com](http://www.brendamallory.com). Her work will be included in *Salon* at Butters Gallery in Portland, OR (through February 1, 2014), [www.buttergallery.com](http://www.buttergallery.com); and at Julie Nester Gallery in Park City, UT (June 27 – July 29, 2014), [www.julienestergallery.com](http://www.julienestergallery.com).

—Richard Speer is a contributing critic for ARTnews, Art Ltd, and Visual Art Source. He is visual arts critic at Willamette Week (Portland, Oregon's Pulitzer Prize-winning alternative newspaper) and author of *Matt Lamb: The Art of Success* (Wiley, 2005, revised edition 2013). [www.richardspeer.com](http://www.richardspeer.com)