

# CHRISTI BIRCHFIELD

## FLAT LINES, ROUND BODIES

BY MEGAN LYKINS REICH

Our bodies are round, dimensional. As newborns, we understand them through touch, scent, and taste, seeking our mother's body for nourishment and warmth. As we grow, we begin to understand the body visually, recognizing familiar faces, mimicking gestures. Eventually, we come to know bodies through images, identifying our own reflection in a mirror, and later in photographs, videos, and other representations. During these early years of development, we learn about the human body as an exterior form. The inside, however, remains a flat out mystery.

In a recent interview about her newest series, on view for the first time in *How to Remain Human*, Christi Birchfield describes how she hopes the works reminds viewers of their bodies, specifically their internal make-up and materiality. Comprised of long thin sheets of canvas affixed to the ceiling, walls, and floor, *Reconfiguration* (2014), *Slab* (2015), and *What Shadows We Are* (2015) all contain interlacing lines and forms that resemble our nervous and skeletal systems. These ghostly evocations ebb and flow like tangled specters, suggesting life's interconnected and ephemeral nature.

A printmaker by training, Birchfield pushes the discipline's potential for compressing layers of material into new visual information. For several years, she has combined

organic matter, mostly flora, with ink, graphite, paint, and other mark-making devices like burning and cutting. When run through the press, these materials generate a web of graphic lines, geometric shapes, ethereal forms, and crumbling foliage. Often, Birchfield folds the paper in half before pressing it, which produces mirror images that recall Rorschach inkblots. The works have both illusive depth (caused by nuanced gradations of color, line, and form) as well as real dimension (from the crushed flowers and other materials).

In contrast, Birchfield's newest series involves a strictly reductive process. She begins by drawing improvisational lines using bleach paste on long pieces of black canvas. Next, the fabric is folded and run through a press. Compressed tightly, the bleach dissolves the pigment, fading the canvas and produced meandering lines and broad washes. Once printed, Birchfield excises lines and forms from the canvas using a utility knife, creating holes and gaps that emphasize the lattice effect. In *Reconfiguration*, Birchfield also added small amounts of color to the canvas.

Allusions abound in these abstract images, from charred vines to insect carapaces to ancient symbols. Yet, the most potent connotations are to the human body. In color and

form, the images recall common X-ray images of chest cavities and hip joints, with glowing curves of calcium-rich bones against the faint halo of soft tissue and organs. The first X-ray image was taken by German physicist, Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen, who discovered the technology in 1895. It was a picture of his wife's hand, showing only her metacarpals, phalanges, and wedding ring. Upon seeing the image, she said, "I have seen my death."<sup>1</sup>

Like X-rays, Birchfield's black lacelike sheets emphasize the strange, complex, and mysterious systems within us. Flat but double-sided, Birchfield maximizes their bilateral nature by conjoining, layering, and stretching them between the ceiling, wall, and floor, producing a spidery maze that viewers can see and walk around. Here, translated into three-dimensions, the prints gain body, becoming corporal, lifelike. They intersect and overlap, each slightly stained or imperfect. Sagging and taut, withdrawing and extending, they express various states of being, or moments in lived time.

Birchfield's titles support identifications with the body and its transience. *Reconfiguration* suggests ongoing changes in form, while *Slab* implies stasis, referring, among other things to the table on which a cadaver lies in a morgue. This work is wall-bound, a confluence of parts layered on top of one another in a flowering or piled effect. Because the staining creates shadows that are not cast but rather embedded in the material, the work appears strangely flat when viewed frontally. This effect is similar to that of Lee Bontecou's untitled relief sculptures from the early 1960s. Bontecou applied graphite shading that contradicted the actual spatial protrusions and cavities of the works. A perceptual shift occurs when one realizes the works are dimensional, not flat, one vaguely reminiscent of those childhood developmental insights about the body and its form.

*What Shadows We Are* exemplifies the metaphoric value of this oscillation between flat and round, two and three-dimensional. Numerous long canvas sheets stretch and weave through space and each other, appearing both like a single organism and individual forms crossing one other. The images oscillate between large and small, alluding to astronomical nebula as well as microscopic neurons. A series of composite parts, there is not a single vantage point; no fully fleshed form. As the viewer moves, the work re-adjusts, like a shadow responding to the light. Taking all its parts together, the installation evokes the body as complex, symmetrical, smart, but also fragile, unpredictable, unruly, and ultimately mortal.



1. Markel, Howard. "'I Have Seen My Death': How the World Discovered the X-Ray," *PBS NewsHour*. [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org). Retrieved June 7, 2015. Röntgen discovered the X-ray in early November, 1895. He took the first radiograph on December 22, 1895.



Christi Birchfield  
Installation view, MOCA Cleveland  
Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics



Christi Birchfield  
*Slab*, 2015  
Bleach paste, black canvas  
65 x 20 x 8 inches  
Photo: Timothy Safranek Photographics

# CHRISTI BIRCHFIELD

RECONFIGURATION/PAINTING FALLING  
APART

BY INDRA K. LĀCIS

A certain kind of gothic cadence rises and falls in Christi Birchfield's work. Her gestural sculptures elicit a guttural response originating somewhere deep in the heart chakra, edging carefully toward your lips, fingers, and knees. Sprawling, or maybe just hanging on for its last breath, *Reconfiguration* (2014) calls to mind sooty stained glass windows, the arc of something familiar, perhaps sleeping or lost. If this work has a scent, it might be incense burning or a cotton shirt dried crisp in hot sun.

Like a painting falling apart or turning out of its skin, Birchfield's work gauges the movement and curvature of human bodies. In turns reductive and additive, her process demands a tenuous, psychological kind of labor. It involves mirroring, the uneasy feeling of wanting to look over your shoulder but resisting the urge, or the futility of untying a knot that will not come undone.

Birchfield's most recent sculptures begin with yards of commercially dyed black canvas and bleach paste appliqué. As the solution sets, she folds the fabric to create a Rorschach effect, searing and tattooing these thinly drawn lines with the weight and warmth of an iron. The first part of this process happens on the floor, recalling the horizontality that freed easel painting from its position as a window on the world.<sup>1</sup> Then Birchfield moves the work to a table, where like a surgeon or seamstress she cuts the sinuous forms into new structures. The final

installation again reformulates the composition, this time a play between two and three-dimensions--the flatness of the cut-out canvas itself and the muscle of the work as a whole, with arms and legs that either collapse or elongate, depending on the view.

Like a cocoon unraveling, the effect of Birchfield's canvas sculptures reveals her nimble sense of line, her depth as a printer, and a dialogue with histories of both painting and sculpture. These wall-based works fall into a genealogy that might begin with Henri Matisse's mid-twentieth century cut-outs of flora and fauna, made when the artist was bedridden and nearly blind.<sup>2</sup> If these late career works by Matisse had a dark side, however delicate and oblique, Birchfield seems to have discovered it. Her canvas sculptures play purposefully on the instability of silhouettes and shadows, channeling not permanence, but the perpetual changeability of lines and mark making.<sup>3</sup>

Displaying a quiet concern with the natural world, Birchfield's work suggests a loose engagement with bio-mimicry, processes that adopt nature's innate organizational tactics as a model for problem solving at all levels. In her earlier work, Birchfield frequently incorporated dried flowers. In *Tear* (2010), for instance, she ran a bouquet of parched blooms, stems still in tact, through a printing press, a pressurized process that unintentionally tore the paper, revealing its fleshy, pulpy skin with a sort of flirty recklessness.

This “happy accident,” as Birchfield refers to it, now inadvertently summons Eva Hesse’s *Hang Up* of 1966, a work that both favored and questioned the concept of framing as central to painting and sculpture alike. Like Hesse’s *Hang Up* (whose title also bears double meaning), *Tear* begins ordering our view of the work’s form and subject via one slender strip of folded aluminum foil, draped delicately along the edges, and sagging, just so, at the bottom; as if the work’s content had been stolen or spilled, the gash on the left side remains despite the shiny frame’s modest effort to bandage or contain it. This defiantly wounded work, with its pure physicality and the abject absurdity of its brittleness, confounds our processing of its shape and contour with a dose of sly, sad humor, the kind of irony Hesse might have admired.<sup>4</sup>

Like the wilting frame in *Tear*, the tug and pull of gravity--our inability to avoid it--guides the syntax of Birchfield’s wider vernacular. The artist’s most expansive canvas sculptures conjure the simple motion of something strung up, suspended, or caged: a creature or a carcass whose exposed rib cage appears at once disjointed and intact. Elsewhere in the work, innocuous and more purely decorative referents take hold: we see tangled vines, scarab shells, rusted pulleys and belts, or Victorian-era wallpaper. A multi-tiered layering effect deploys again and again with constancy, here and there winking coyly or taking as its distant touchstone classic post-minimal obsessions with supple materiality--the tumbling effect so pronounced in Robert Morris’s 1970s felt wall sculptures or the fragile density of Faith Wilding’s immersive *Crocheted Environment* (1972/95).

In Birchfield’s largest pieces, the body becomes the frame in greater or lesser ways, requiring that we “see” and understand not with our eyes, but with our whole physical selves. Nearly impossible to understand from

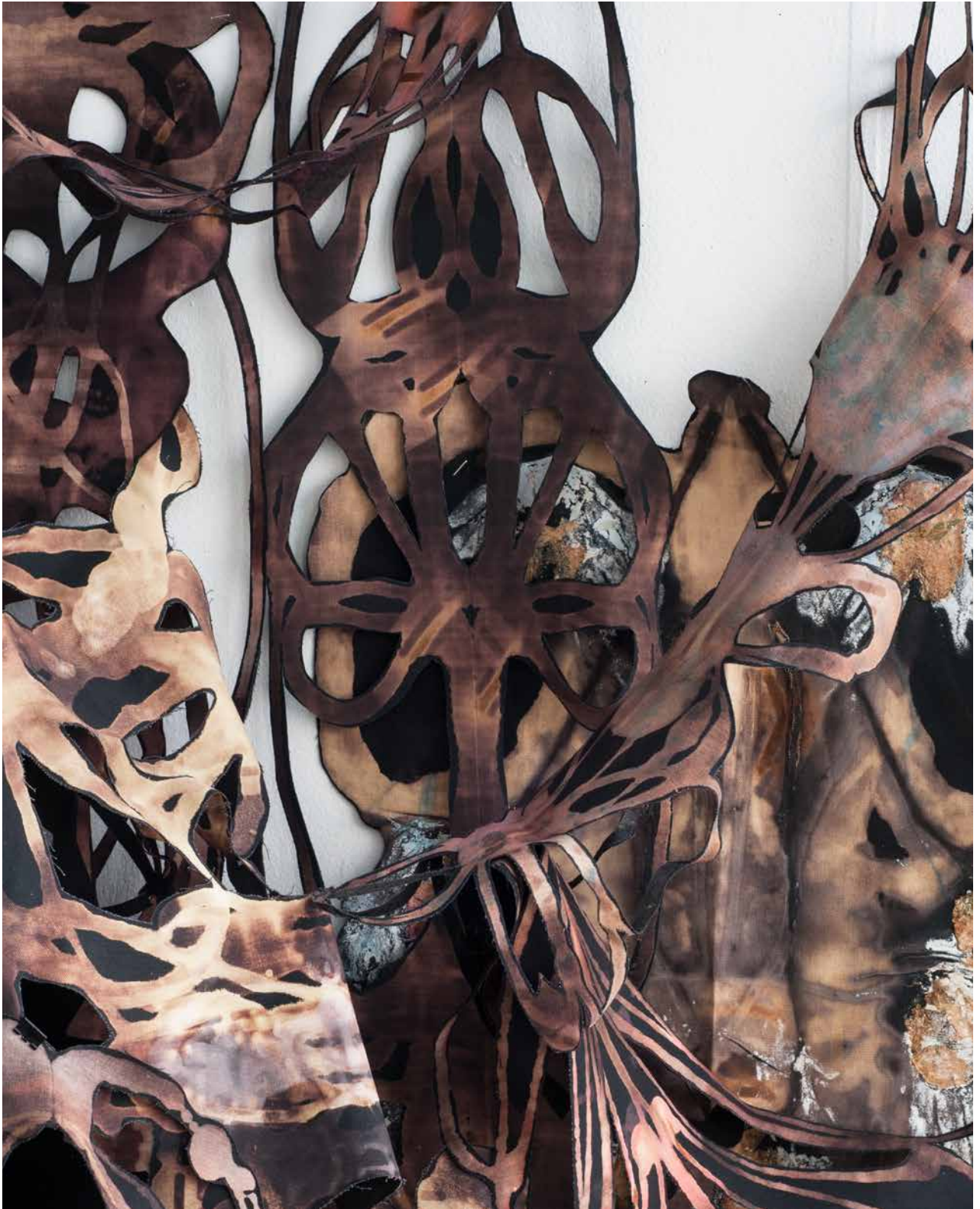
only one point of view, the work’s intricacy demands circumambulation, as if it were a shrine protecting something unspecified but revered. Although a slightly sinister sensation occasionally creeps up in Birchfield’s work, the feeling is elusive, fleeting; it forces looking closely at the work itself, at these tightly woven ellipses, turning over and sliding past one another seamlessly, like water molecules might. Birchfield makes order from structures that at first feel congested and chaotic. This work both accepts and relies on the stability of variability, its echoes and the unpredictability of how it might all sound together. In this sense, Birchfield’s canvas sculptures are nuanced with a bold, repetitive tempo that reads like a perpetual cleaning of the slate.



1. In his late teens, Walter Benjamin outlined the idea that the horizontal orientation is an axis at odds with the verticality of the body. In her analysis of Jackson Pollock’s paintings, Rosalind Krauss takes up the implications of this issue, writing: “The floor, Pollock’s work seemed to propose, in being below culture, was out of the axis of the body, and thus also below form.” See Krauss’s musings on the matter in her entry about “Horizontality,” in R. Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 93-103.
2. See the recent catalog *Henri Matisse, The Cut-Outs*, Karl Buchberg, Nicholas Cullinan, Jodi Hauptman, and Nicholas Serota, eds. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014).
3. In Birchfield’s work, painterly effects haunt and deceive, evoking also a distant camaraderie with the cardboard and burlap cut-outs Claes Oldenburg used in performances of *The Street* (1960), which celebrated the crude grit and complexity of Manhattan’s lower east side. Far more eloquently crafted than Oldenburg’s tattered *Street* pieces, Birchfield’s work nonetheless shares a kinship with these brutally honest, flat, theatrical forms.
4. For more on this see Cindy Nemser’s “Interview with Eva Hesse,” originally published in *Artforum* in May 1970 and reprinted in Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), 196-199.



Christi Birchfield  
*Reconfiguration*, 2014  
Bleach paste, black canvas  
80 x 57 x 60 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



Christi Birchfield  
*Reconfiguration*, 2014 (detail)  
Bleach paste, black canvas  
80 x 57 x 60 inches  
Courtesy of the artist