
Alison Elizabeth Taylor Brings It to the Table by Melissa Messina

Since earning an M.F.A. from Columbia University in 2005, New York-based artist Alison Elizabeth Taylor has developed an idiosyncratic and subversive employment of a long out-dated hobbyist's technique called marquetry, or the inlay of wood veneer. Taylor has become an important artistic voice of her generation and a lightning rod of acclaim. Her skilled manipulation of an all-but-lost Renaissance technique, once the mark of luxury, excess, and status, is a topical metaphor for today's blighted economy. She appropriates the inherent characteristics of this practice—historically befitting of an ornate palace—in scenes that instead portray the remains of derelict homes pillaged during the housing crisis, misfits on the fringe, and other dystopic aspects of our financially downtrodden society. Her works often suggest danger, violence, and a general dis-ease, and yet their surfaces and execution are decidedly seductive. Take, for example, the epic painting *Security House* (2008–10), its enormity all-encompassing, its seemingly infinite detail calling for deeper investigation. Its barbed-wire cactus, weighty fence, and dilapidated structure, however, make for an ominous invitation.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *Security House*, 2008-10, Wood veneer, shellac, 93 X 122 inches
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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Taylor is interested in “harnessing the power of beauty and tethering it to difficult subjects either to contrast or draw the viewer in.”[1] Her poignant use of marquetry to depict the dichotomies of our current gilded age has drawn the attention of critics, curators, and collectors alike. Her work has been celebrated with solo exhibitions and numerous grants to support her practice, as well as reception into important private and public collections, including the recent acquisition of *Room* (2007–08), her most ambitious and accomplished piece to-date, by the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.[2] This working artist and mother of two has certainly found her place at the table. Given the widespread discrepancies that still exist in museum collection holdings, solo exhibitions, market values, and other opportunities for women artists in connection to their economic and critical equality in the field, it is encouraging that an artist of Alison Elizabeth Taylor’s ability has gained such swift and deserved success.[3] Many women artists of the past century have not fared so well.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *Room*, 2007–08, Wood veneer, pyrography, shellac, 96 X 120 X 96 inches. Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

Recall the iconic Feminist artist and activist Faith Ringgold’s diagrammatic piece *Traits for Success as an Artist*, regularly presented in her lectures to this day. This work charts attributes that mark an artist’s potential rise—education, passion, vision, dedication, and place, among others. Ringgold includes a numerically level playing field for all categories except gender—for which both white and black women artists consistently fall behind by 20 points.[4] While humorous, this piece addresses the continued biases against women in the visual arts. And while Taylor’s work is not specifically feminist in content, she recognizes that she is in “this free position because of the past battles of feminist artists.”[5]

Taylor has recently been championed by the Brooklyn Museum, an institution drawing attention to gender inequities in the field, most significantly with the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center

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for Feminist Art in 2006. Additionally, the Museum's exhibition series "Raw/Cooked" has heavily emphasized women artists working in Brooklyn, and it recently mounted impressive solo exhibitions for Brooklyn-based artists Lorna Simpson and Mickalene Thomas. Likewise, Taylor's work is currently being added to the Museum's permanent collection, and she was among the artists selected by committee to create centerpiece works of art for the third annual Brooklyn Artists Ball.[6] The Brooklyn Artists Ball is intended to highlight the borough as "the heart of the arts in New York." [7] For this incarnation, held in April 2013, 17 Brooklyn-based artists were commissioned to design centerpieces for the event. Eugenie Tsai, the John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art, was on the selection committee and noted the high caliber of collectors and art word leaders that attend, acknowledging the event as "a great opportunity for Brooklyn artists to feature their work to an influential audience." [8] Artists invited included such rising stars as Jules de Balincourt, Jacob Hashimoto, Steven and William Ladd, Emily Noelle Lambert and Jose Parlá, among others.

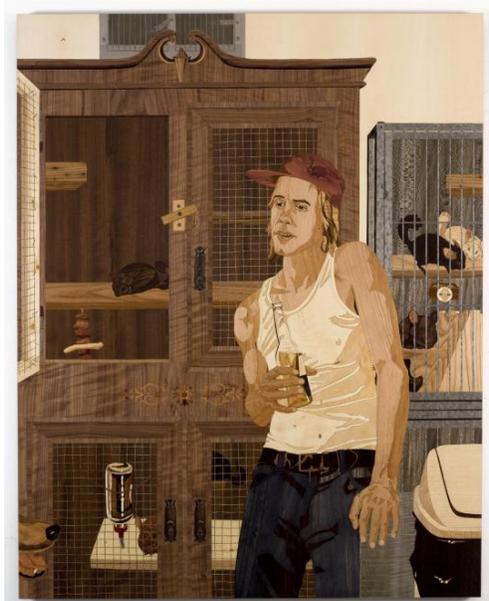
With characteristic zeal, Taylor spent time mining the Museum's near encyclopedic collection to locate inspiration for her tabletop pieces, and for this reason hers were among the most anticipated pieces at the ball. Taylor made reference to 20 objects in the collection, most of which were surprisingly not contemporary and only a few from the Renaissance period. Taylor explained her choices as stemming from her interest in "how aesthetics can cross cultures" and a desire to find the universal in the works' structures. [9] Referencing two- and three-dimensional pieces as far reaching as Europe, ancient Assyria and Egypt, the Pacific Islands, and back again, Taylor distilled her imagery into graphic shapes and essential forms. The results were 19 small-scale but commanding wooden sculptures in a series titled *Wunderkammer*. [10]



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, Works in progress
<http://annstreetstudio.com/2013/04/17/alison-elizabeth-taylor/>
Courtesy of Jamie Beck, New York

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While exemplifying her signature marquetry techniques, these pieces are far less detailed than Taylor's past works, and yet are still remarkably refined. Unlike the precise expressions in the faces of her figures as in *The Breeder* (2009–10), or the faceted specificity of objects as in *Thermostat* (2009), the grain and tonal contrasts of five types of veneer are all that were used to depict her strikingly abstracted subjects.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *The Breeder*, 2009-10, Wood veneer, shellac, 56 X 45 inches. Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *Thermostat*, 2009, Wood veneer, shellac, 14 1/2 X 22 1/2 inches. Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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Gone are the incredibly intricate and minute slices of inlay that read from afar as realistic. They are replaced by dramatic contours of form as in her depiction of *Saint Joseph with the Flowering Rod* (originally an oil on panel by Jusepe de Ribera, c. 1630s). There are no expressions, only physical action frozen in perpetual pause as with her adaption of William Bouguereau's *The Elder Sister* (1864). These pieces instead portray iconic, symbolic, and minimalist images that evoke the sculpture's ceremonial and ornamental nature.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *After Ribera*, 2013, Wood veneer, shellac, oil paint.
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *After Bouguereau*, 2013, Wood veneer, shellac, oil paint
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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William Bouguereau (French, 1825-1905). The Elder Sister, reduction (La soeur aînée, réduction), ca. 1864. Oil on panel, 21 7/8 x 17 15/16 in.

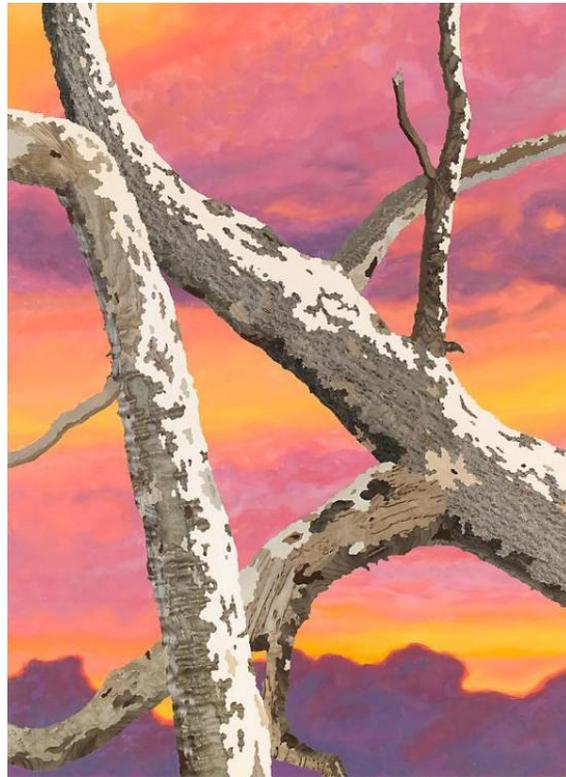
Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of William H. Herriman. Brooklyn Museum photograph, 2010. However removed from its source, each work maintains an astonishing essence of its origin. One can easily recognize the rigid stances and angular shapes of Egyptian statues or the graceful and organic style of Japanese woodblocks. Taylor sought “the simplest contours and gestures reconstructed amid graphic compositions to see what’s there, and why they still connect.”^[11]



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, After Hiroshige, 2013, Wood veneer, shellac, oil paint
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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Interestingly, her version of Utagawa Hiroshige's 1875 woodblock bears a striking similarity to her recent series of trees portrayed against dramatic skies, such as *Sebastian* or *Cloud 10* (both 2012). In these recent two-dimensional panels, however, she incorporates significant portions of oil paint in contrast to the inlaid details of the tree's flaking bark and sinewy branches. The effect is an otherworldly feeling—a more personal response to her surroundings and the subjects from which she draws inspiration. Perhaps the universality Taylor evidences in the *Wunderkammer* series is not solely found in the structure of the object but also originates in what transfixes and inspires an artist to create.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *Cloud 10*, 2012, wood veneer, oil paint, shellac, 41 7/8 x 30 5/8 in.
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

The *Wunderkammer* works are more directly decorative and tied to the domestic than Taylor's past series'.^[12] Placed incrementally aloft banquet tables in the palatial setting of the Brooklyn Museum's rotunda, the pieces suit, and in fact enhance, their ceremonial setting. The imagery is formal, as seen in *After Copley* depicting a proper early American portrait presented on an oval form atop a scrolling wooden base modeled after antique furniture. Other works intimate tradition and authority, as with the Assyrian eagle-headed winged figure centered on its panel with strong graphic contrast or the Era River Figure from Papua New Guinea starkly outlined in light wood against a dramatically dark background.

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Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *After Copley*, 2013, Wood veneer, shellac, oil paint.
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *Eagle-Headed Winged Diety*, 2013, wood veneer, shellac, oil paint.
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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This paring down of materiality and form offers an economy of aesthetics that does not diminish but rather elevates the work's striking presence. Tribal, religious, domestic, and figurative motifs are synthesized as a compelling and cohesive collection via Taylor's ability to manipulate the veneer's texture in provocative ways. For example, in another of her renderings of Hiroshige's woodblocks, a cloaked figure moves through a swirling nebulous atmosphere poetically created by the wood's natural grain.



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *After Hiroshige*, 2013, wood veneer, shellac, oil paint.
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

Three-dimensional forms, flattened in their picture plane, remain dynamic because of the inlaid sheets attentively selected for their strong directional angles. Among the most effective is a depiction of a 19th-nineteenth century Hunzinger chair and the Egyptian statue of Queen Ankhnes-meryre II.

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Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *After Hunzinger*, 2013, wood veneer, shellac, oil paint.
Courtesy of The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai



Alison Elizabeth Taylor, *Queen Ankhnes-meryre II and Her Son Pepy II*, 2013, wood veneer, shellac, oil paint. Courtesy of The Artist
/ Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

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Presented collectively, the works celebrate a crossing of time, geography, and culture. They honor themes carried throughout art history: the relationship human's have to their world as interpreted through symbols and iconography, the human form and nature. Fortunate for Taylor, and because of institutions like the Brooklyn Museum, the world in images and objects both past and present is at our proverbial fingertips.

With Taylor's *Wunderkammer* series presentation in the Brooklyn Museum—its ceremonial display, conceptual-cum-decorative aesthetic, and historic breadth—one cannot help but be reminded of *The Dinner Party* (1974–79). Judy Chicago's monolithic banquet honoring historic women across generations and cultures is housed just steps away from the Artists Ball in the Center for Feminist Art.[13] Chicago and her contemporaries championed the importance of the female voice in the art historical canon as well as the contemporary dialog of the time. Among the movement's tenets was the reclamation of craft, calling for the legitimization of the decorative arts as credible forms of artistic expression. Not without controversy, *The Dinner Party* was, and still remains, a beacon of the feminist cause. And while Taylor correctly asserts the Feminist artists of the 1970s were “primarily concerned with the anonymous expressions of women limited to a decorative domestic sphere,” she understands that without their efforts she might have had a harder time convincing the contemporary art world that the decorative craft of marquetry, traditionally fabricated in artisanal Renaissance workshops and more recently relegated to hobbyism, was an art form worthy of conceptual pursuit.

Taylor describes her practice as “influenced by decorative arts and crafts because these are adept at creating visual and material interest.”[14] It is clear she is an artist with a deeply felt understanding of her chosen material's history, and a unique vision for its formal and metaphoric use in the contemporary conversation. With the unfettered ambition that frequently marks third-wave feminists, she embodies a remarkable ease with her successes, and deftly handles the affects of motherhood on her art-making, explaining that because of it she spends more time in the natural world, allows the saturated colors of childhood toys to play a more overt role in her palette, and removes doubt and indecision from her practice as studio time becomes ever-more precious.[15] Topics like these, though still considered less-than-serious subjects around which to address process and practice, are encouraging toward and essential to women's progress, and a future of equality in the art world as more women like Taylor find their way to the table.

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Taylor in her studio

<http://annstreetstudio.com/2013/04/17/alison-elizabeth-taylor/>

Courtesy of Jamie Beck, New York

Melissa Messina is the Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the Savannah College of Art and Design and the curator of "Alison Elizabeth Taylor: Un/Inhabited" exhibited at SCAD Savannah and Atlanta galleries in 2010.

[1] Email exchange with the artist May 2013

[2] This piece was modeled after the 15th-century ducal studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/120013532>

[3] Much has been written on this topic, particularly around 2006 including <http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-09-19/art/where-the-girls-aren-t/>; more recent posts include: <http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/8971>; <http://www.nmwa.org/advocate/get-facts>; especially from Europe <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the-parent-trap/>; http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/10/23/sexism-art-world_n_2005498.html; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2012/mar/05/women-in-the-arts-introduction>.

[4] More information on Faith Ringgold can be found on [facebook.com/faithringgold](https://www.facebook.com/faithringgold)

[5] Email exchange with the artist, May 2013

[6] Email exchange with Brooklyn Museum curator Eugenie Tsai, May 2013

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[7] <http://www.artlog.com/2013/872-see-brooklyn-artists-ball>

[8] Email exchange with Eugenie Tsai, May 2013. It is also important to note that unlike most fundraisers in which artists are asked to donate work these artists were paid for their efforts and the objects returned to them. In Taylor's case, they are being sold through James Cohan Gallery, most recently at the Frieze Art Fair in New York.

[9] Email exchange with the artists, June 2013.

[10] Wunderkammer is defined as "a place where a collection of curiosities and rarities is exhibited," http://oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/Wunderkammer.

[11] Email exchange with the artist, June 2013.

[12] Ibid.

[13] A comprehensive overview of *The Dinner Party* can be found at: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/5167/The_Dinner_Party/set/269ad2d712376bbb2c2f51c4a23e4af0?referring-q=the+dinner+party

[14] Email exchange with the artist, May 2013.

[15] Ibid

[15] Ibid