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ART REVIEW

## At MIT, Alicja Kwade keeps the cosmic order with algorithms and art

By Murray Whyte Globe Staff, Updated December 11, 2019, 12:26 p.m.



Alicja Kwade's "A Light Touch of Totality." COURTESY MIT LIST CENTER FOR VISUAL ARTS

At the MIT List Visual Arts Center, a cluster of unremarkable objects — a vase, a chair, a bowl, an urn — sit ceremoniously under glass, most on leggy golden stands. Their titles make you look, then look again: The chair is called “Bicycle,” the bowl “Lamp.” One appears to transcend the apparent semantic silliness for some levity about belief, 21st-century style: A small, dark chalice — like an offering cup, the kind you might use to burn incense — is called “iPhone.” In 2019, there’s no more ceremonial an object than that.

It all has a vaguely Duchampian air — everyday stuff, arbitrarily assigned significance as art — but that’s just Alicja Kwade building an expectation to deflate. The Berlin-based, Polish-born artist’s reputation has been booming lately on the strength of her playfully puzzling double-take pieces. And this cluster — collectively (and literally) called “Reconstituted Objects” — falls right in line. They’re exactly what they say they are, ground down to fine dust and rebuilt from a resin compound into something new. You have to reach to make connections, former to latter (bicycle to chair, dynamic to static?) though that seems the least of Kwade’s concerns. Helpful

wall text explains that each of these objects is an exact match, volumetrically, to its progenitor — with matter neither created nor destroyed, the cosmic order maintained. For Kwade, an iPhone is not just an iPhone. It's an unending continuum of things.

If that feels like a lot to wrap your mind around, then Kwade has you right where she wants you. For her, instability is key, and even the most solid-seeming of things has no right to claim the privilege of permanence. The universe is vast, and time unending. Re-situating her viewer in that vastness, buried as we are in our mountains of the throwaway and everyday, is a big part of Kwade's project. At first glance, her work can have an antiseptic-feeling, a formal agnosticism. But that's a setup for her to subvert. (["Tunnel Teller," her big public sculpture at the Crane Estate in Ipswich](#), is as playful a bunker of stone, concrete, and steel as you'll ever find).

Kwade was awarded the commission for the Metropolitan Museum's rooftop garden this year (it closed Oct. 27). Her piece, "ParaPivot," towered with impenetrable, icy-cool formalism: Rigid steel armatures, perfect spheres of marble positioned just so. Look a little closer, though, and you found that Kwade isn't as agnostic as she might appear. Each of the work's nine spheres were sourced at quarries in Europe, Asia, and South America, a sliding scale of first-versus-third world resource economies; her right-angled supports framed views of the city's most coveted residential towers.

In an interview this month with The New York Times, Kwade remarked on how, when viewed from certain angles, it could look as though her stone spheres were teetering atop the towers, creating "a fantastic and somewhat anxious illusion of instability, echoing the ways in which these buildings, and the vast sums of money they represent, precariously uphold the global economy." Link that to "Linienland II" on the wall at MIT, an abacus — the ancient world's key tool for accounting trade and wealth — with all but ten of its lapis beads scattered on the floor, and Kwade suddenly seems more political than not.



Alicja Kwade's "Trans-For-Men 11 (Fibonacci)" at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. COURTESY MIT LIST CENTER FOR VISUAL ARTS

Granted, this all demands a closer read than the work prompts on its own. That can give the sense of a great one-liner and not much more. I walked around and around “Trans-For-Men 11 (Fibonacci),” a collection of 11 slowly morphing boulders lined up single-file with mirrors in-between, and marveled at my mind’s inability to make sense of what the eyes were picking up. It’s irreverent and cheeky, like a conceptual funhouse: At the center, a granite boulder evolves through shimmering alloy and smooth synthetic stone to become a perfect sphere on the right and a cube on the left. The mirrors make the transformation appear to dead-end in an infinite procession of sameness. Look past it, and the boulder is plodding, step by step, to its conclusion.

Kwade’s visual friskiness only hints at the deep thinking behind it. She made a 3-D scan of the original boulder and used an algorithm based on the “golden ratio” of the Fibonacci sequence, in which each number is the sum of the two preceding it. She used the results to produce new forms incrementally different from the original while matching its exact volume.

Need to read that again? Go ahead. It took me a few times, too. Truly, you don’t need to know the mechanics to enjoy looking at the piece. And as much as I love Kwade’s demand for rigorous process, the algorithmic sequences can be a little over the top. But Kwade’s work is about nothing so much as the futile joy of trying to make sense of forces beyond our understanding, forces that govern reality at cosmic scale. The basic enterprise of human civilization has always been to make the unknown a little more knowable. The limits of that enterprise — which are severe, in the face of the unfathomably vast — is the meat of Kwade’s work.

Speaking of unknowable, that brings us to the exhibition’s natural conclusion: Kwade’s installation “Light Touch of Totality.” (The title itself is a paradox — get it?) Five huge steel rings link and overlap in a cascading rhythm of elemental purity. It feels mathematically primal, a dance with the infinite. But it’s also a reference to latitude and longitude, the globe-encircling meridians we carved into the planet’s virtual skin.

This should feel familiar by now: Order from chaos, a desire to control. From the steely curves dangle curtains of beads, white and wooden, occasionally punctuated with bursts of blue lapis. They are, quite literally, hangers-on; the wooden beads have faded letters or numbers, like lost crumbs of data clinging desperately to the incalculable. They muddy up the slickly primal surface to which nothing, ultimately, sticks. There’s no bringing down to earth the mysteries of the universe. Kwade offers a glimpse, and then releases us to the cosmos.

### **ALICJA KWADE: In Between Glances**

*At the MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, through Jan. 5. 617-253-4680, [listart.mit.edu](http://listart.mit.edu)*