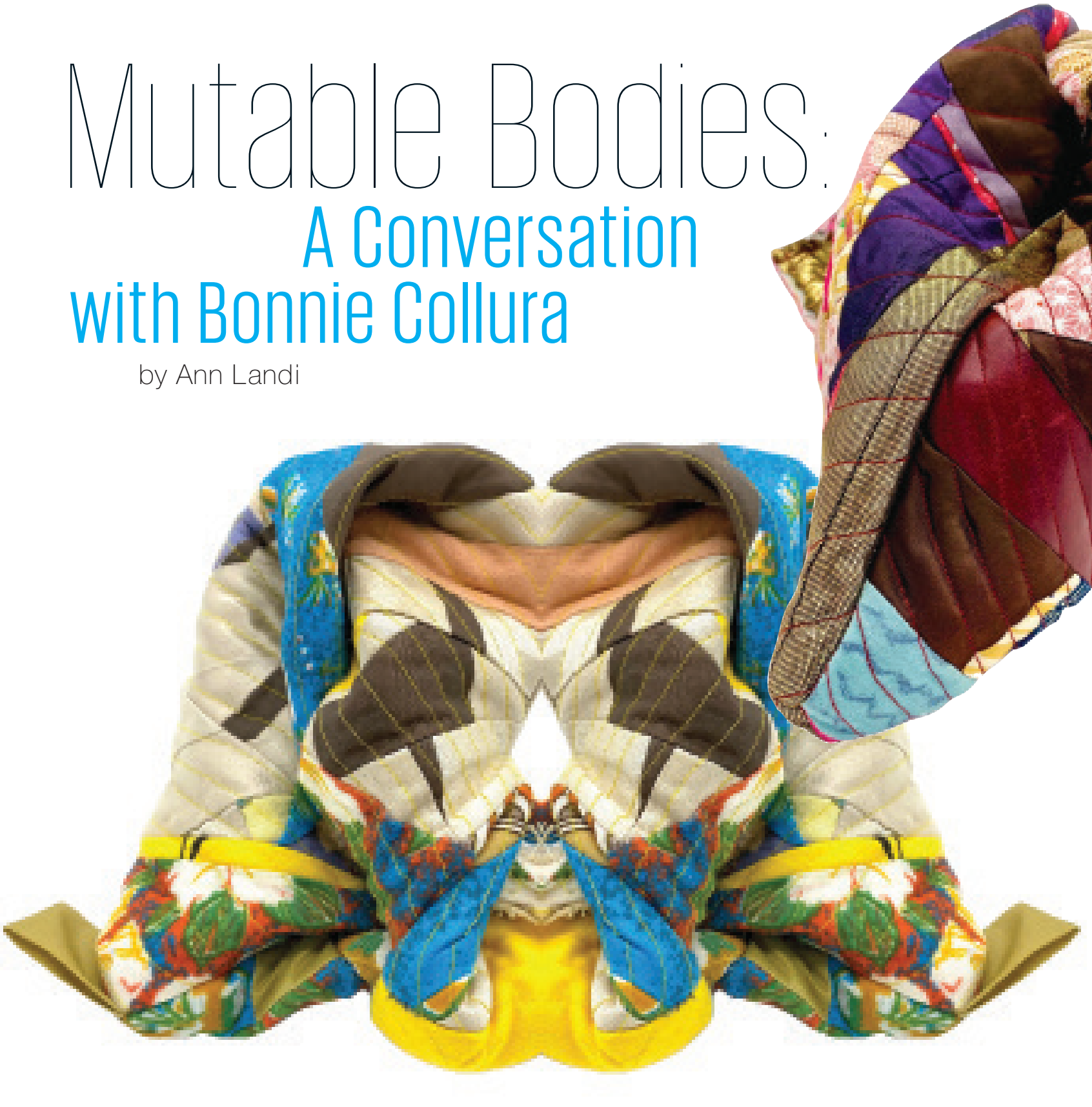
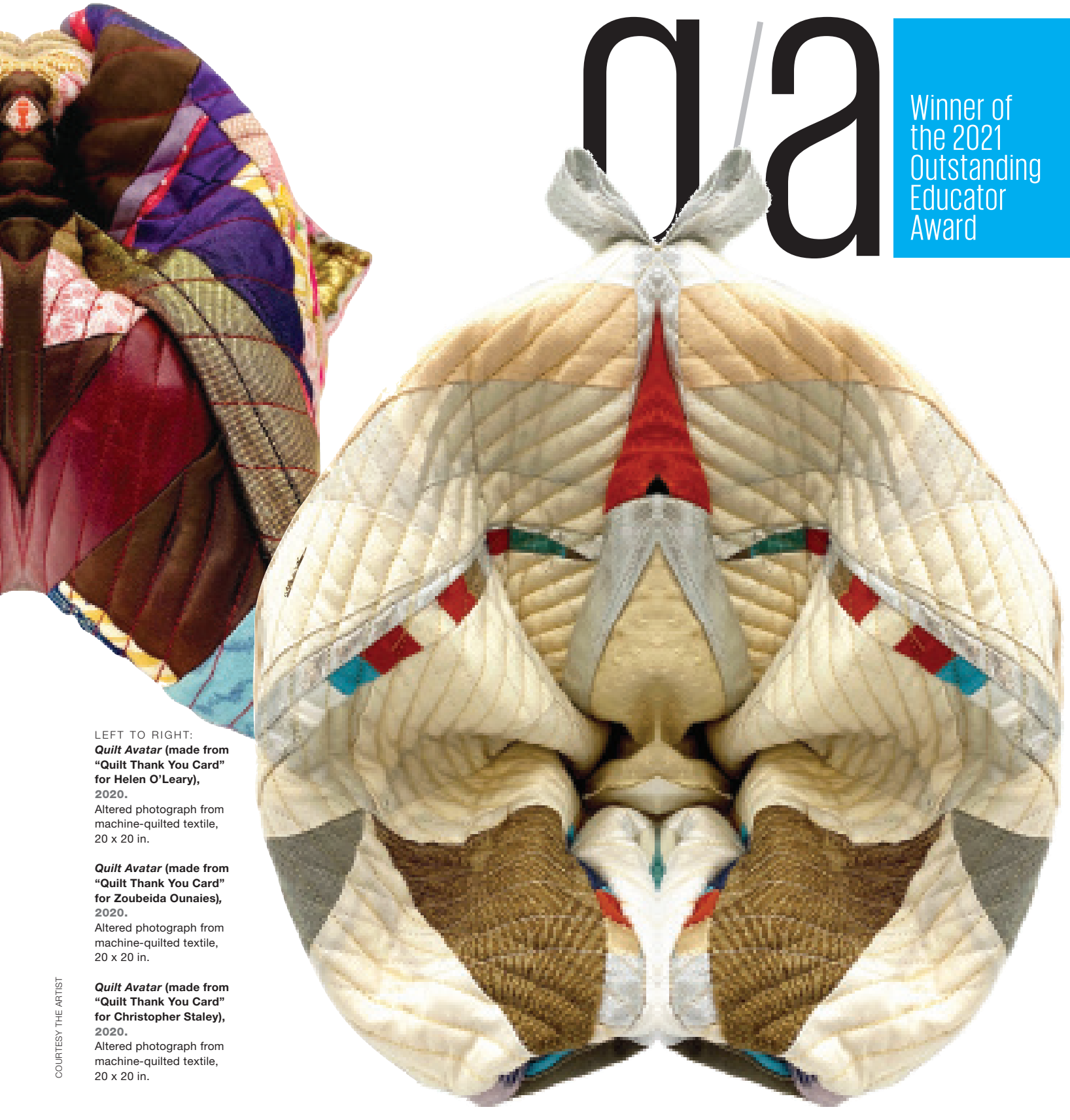
Mutable Bodies: A Conversation with Bonnie Collura

by Ann Landi



q/a

Winner of the 2021 Outstanding Educator Award



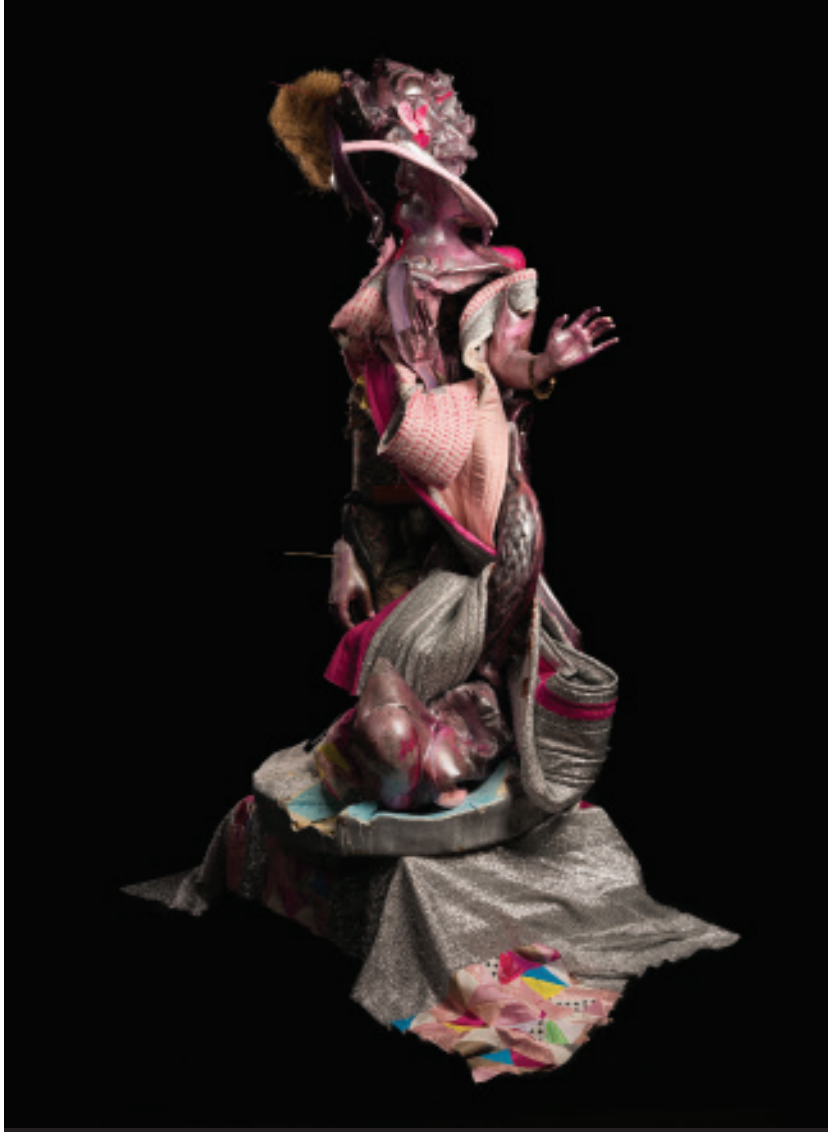
LEFT TO RIGHT:
***Quilt Avatar* (made from "Quilt Thank You Card" for Helen O'Leary), 2020.**
Altered photograph from machine-quilted textile, 20 x 20 in.

***Quilt Avatar* (made from "Quilt Thank You Card" for Zoubeida Ounaies), 2020.**
Altered photograph from machine-quilted textile, 20 x 20 in.

***Quilt Avatar* (made from "Quilt Thank You Card" for Christopher Staley), 2020.**
Altered photograph from machine-quilted textile, 20 x 20 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

bonnie collura



For more than 20 years, Bonnie Collura has pursued a sculptural agenda that incorporates wildly diverse materials and processes while also drawing on a wide array of references—everything from the pop cultural worlds of cartoons and movies like *Star Wars* to highbrow texts such as Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Her ongoing series of sculptures, performances, and installations known as *The Prince Project* critiques the notion of the hero through figures pieced together from parts of Jesus, St. Sebastian, C-3PO, and Abraham Lincoln—four archetypal male figures, each exhibiting a hole in his body associated with martyrdom and fragility. Collura describes herself as "part director, part fabricator, and part weird scientist." She somehow manages to orchestrate these disparate parts—both conceptual and physical (carved and cast pieces)—fitting and stitching them together into complete wholes. It's an ambitious undertaking. Diffuse and open-ended, appealing to storytelling and world-making, her work continues to evolve, carrying on a feminist tradition in its materials and mythologies.

Ann Landi: How did you first decide to become an artist?

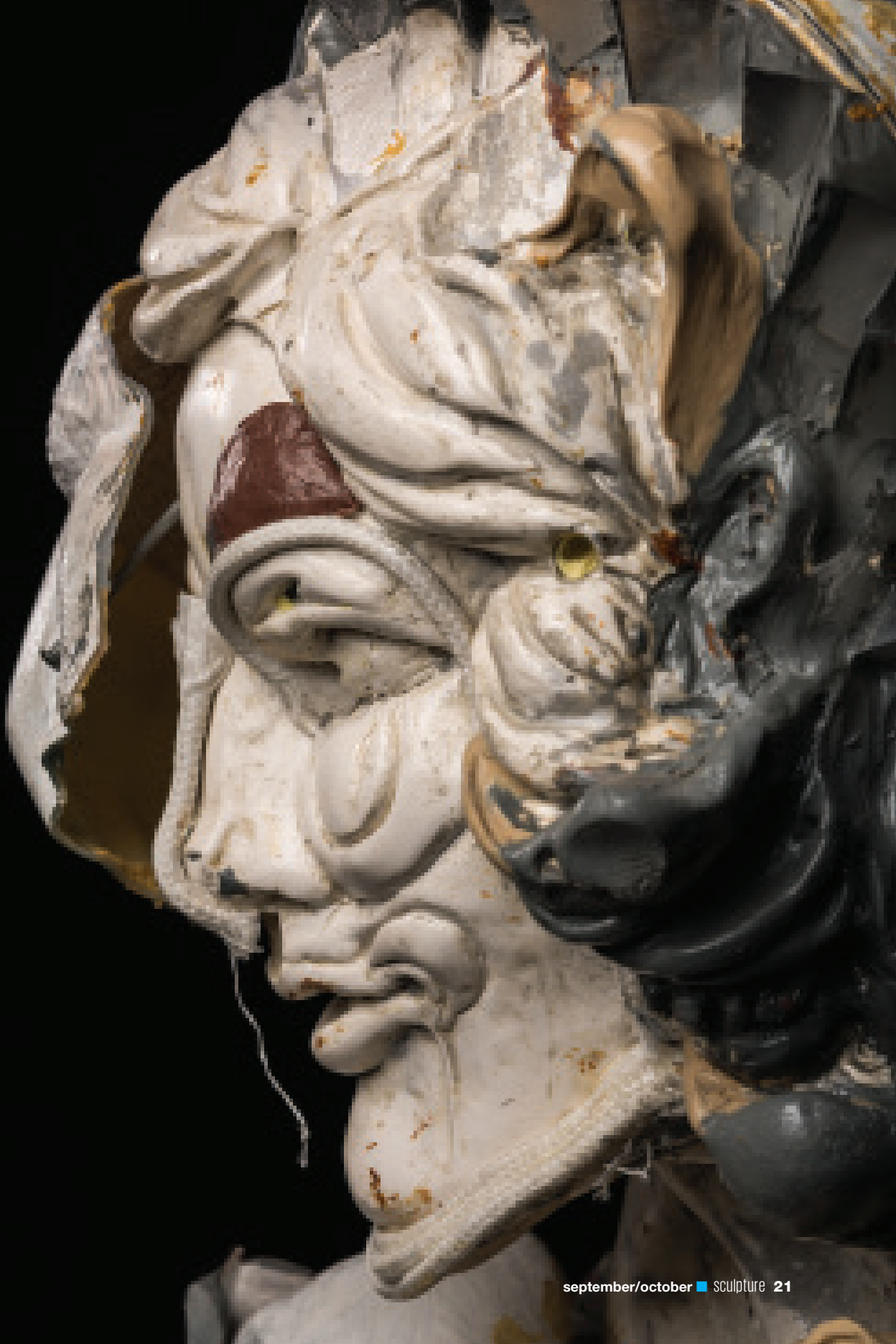
Bonnie Collura: I've always been interested in art, but it wasn't like I thought I'd be an artist when I was younger. As a freshman at Virginia Commonwealth University, I took a foundations class with Elizabeth King. She was an amazing teacher, and even though I didn't understand a lot of what she said, I wanted to be around her. Her sculpture course was unlike anything I had taken before. It was very difficult, but it always presented a problem that could be worked out. I loved it. I was lucky to have faculty invested in teaching. I loved the community, and I fell in love with sculpture. My family moved around a lot, so to find that kind of certainty was very grounding to me as a young artist. I'll always be grateful.

Many years later, one of those VCU teachers, Myron Helfgott, hired me when Liz King went on sabbatical. I wanted to do a good job for the place that had taught me so well. I think this was when I began to see teaching sculpture as a social practice with the potential to give shape to value. This is still critical to my teaching today in the School of Visual Arts at Penn State. Many students have been suffering lately, which only increases how accountable I feel as a well-paid cog in the academic machine. I try to give everything I can—to somehow balance a scale that I'm not even sure how to define.

THIS PAGE:
***Crash Test/Dubble Bubble/Sebastian,* 2018.**
Steel, wood, urethane plastic, hemp fiber, expandable foam, chair section, fabric, inner tube, bracelet, paint, and zip ties,
70 x 47 x 37 in.

OPPOSITE:
***Fortúna (Woman)* (detail), 2018.**
Wood, steel, cast Hydrostone, oil-based clay, aluminum shim, expandable foam, and cut and twisted Santa lawn ornament,
54 x 22 x 28 in.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: AMIR AGHAREBPARAST

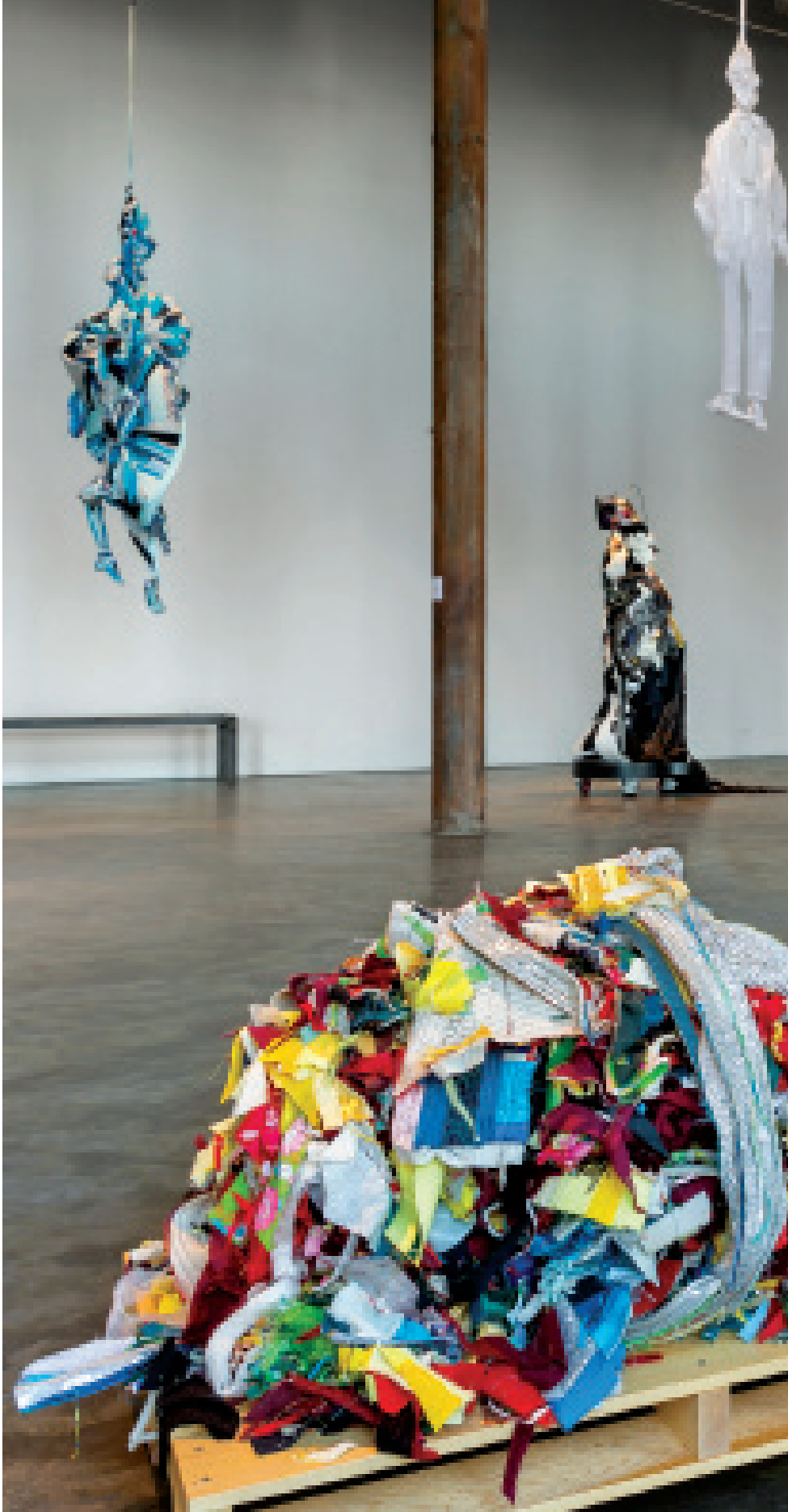


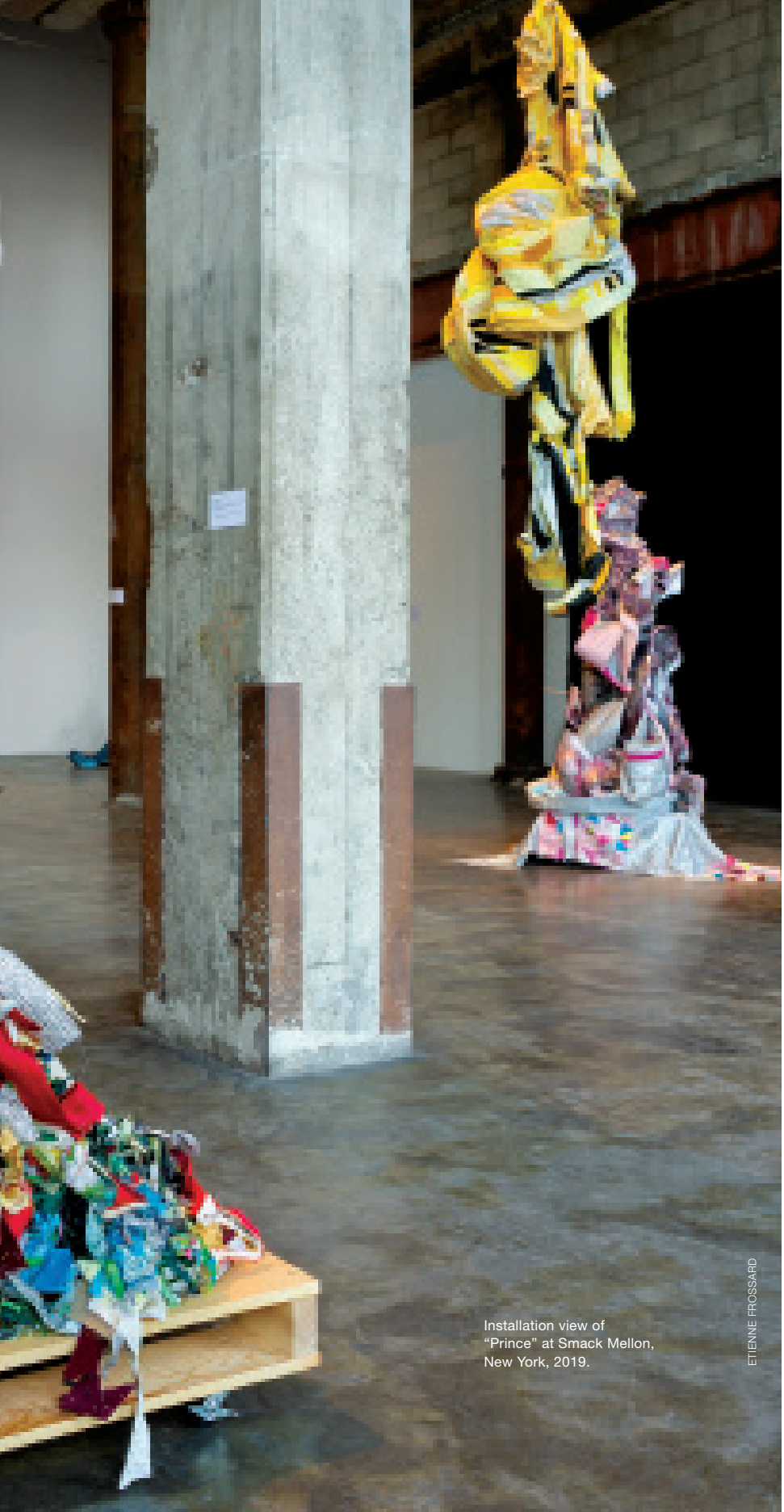
I find assuredness in the alchemical nature of process and wonder how students can get their money's worth from the three hours they are in my class on any given day. Could an engagement with process create an unexpected, magical sliver of space for students who may feel lost? Could they find confidence in doing, within their agency to make this strange thing before their eyes with their hands? It may sound foolish to place so much faith in the forming of "stuff," but I do. When you find a place in making, you sculpt an inalienable investment in your own voice and value.

AL: How did you go from traditional welding to working with so many diverse materials?
BC: That was also a result of good teaching. I was a real metal head. I learned how to weld at VCU. When I was a junior, one of my teachers said, "You're getting pretty close to graduating, you need to learn how to build in other ways because you might not have the money to work with metals." I thought I should follow that advice, so I ventured into the hardware store and bought what I could afford—sheets of polystyrene foam. I cut it thin with a bandsaw and tried to bend it just as one would heat-form steel. Instead of welding, I used duct tape to hold it all together. That helped me become more autonomous because I could build within my means, which has been a godsend when I've been low on funds, and it helps when I have to teach students how to build something ambitious without spending a lot of money.

AL: What sort of themes did you explore as a student?
BC: I was looking at advertising for products like Little Debbie snack cakes. There was a point when I thought that all of my work was garbage, so I sewed lawn-size trash bags from muslin and stuffed them with everything I had made before tossing them in the dumpster. After that, I made an installation based on a system of characters, which became the foundation for later work.

AL: When did the fascination with cartoons and fairy tales begin?
BC: In graduate school at Yale, I was looking at how characters were constructed images, looking at the





Installation view of "Prince" at Smack Mellon, New York, 2019.

ETIENNE FROSSARD

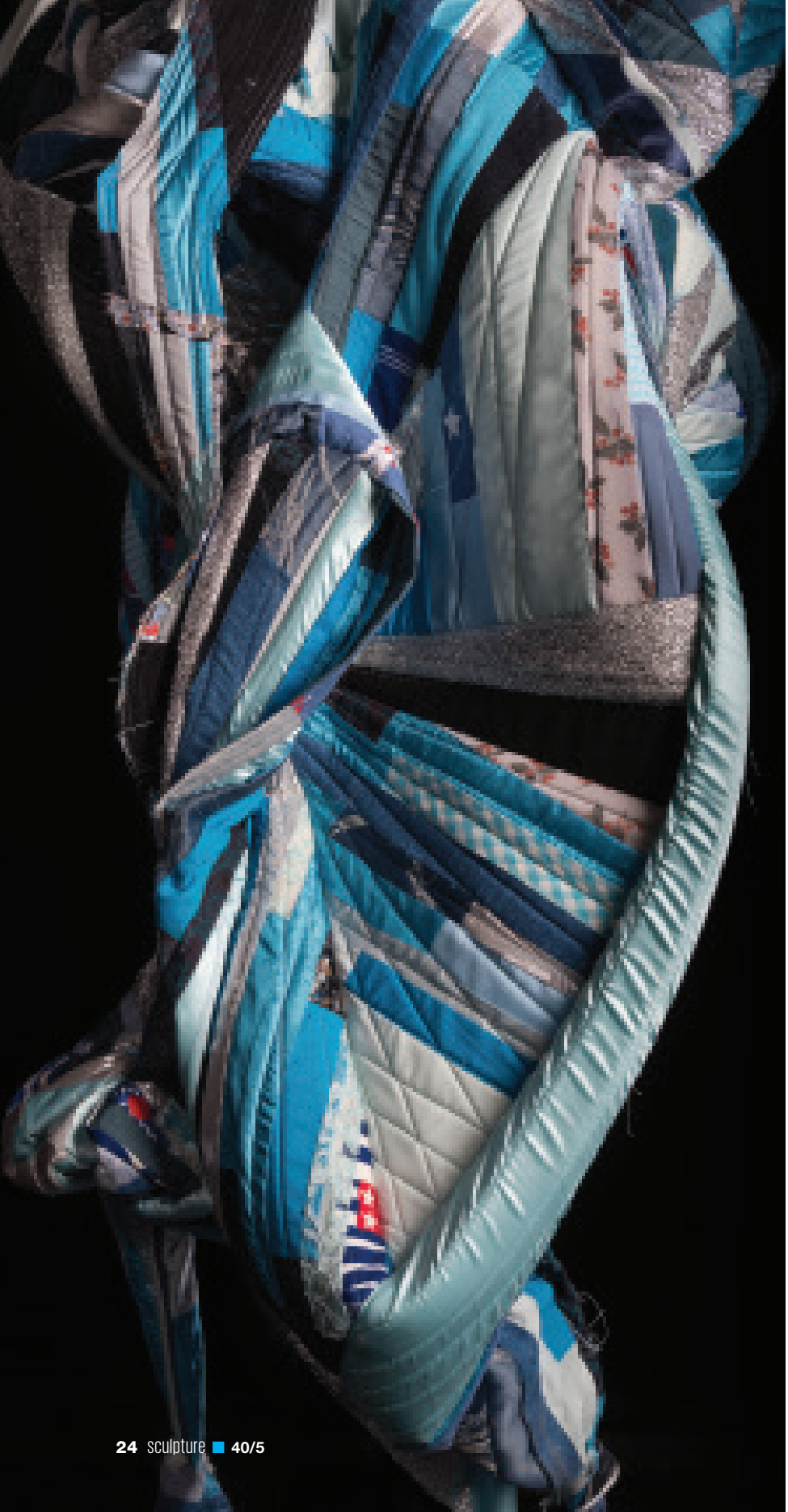
Disney studios in a critical way. *Snow White*, their first feature-length film, was supposed to be very naturalistic and humanized, but they hybridized the character from the Grimm brothers' fairy tale with Persephone, the goddess of spring, and Betty Boop. I was looking at how animation sexualized the female body. I've always been interested in how the body twists in a cartoon, implying a lapse in time and space, but if you were to do that in a static sculpture, it would seem grotesque. I was examining how personas are constructed in pop culture, how we accept contortions in a cartoon body—twisting and stretching the body shows a kind of emotion for the character. There are distortions of human bodies and animal bodies. I think people give a lot more leeway to an abstracted version of a body; it can become more plastic than when it's representational.

AL: When did you first start to find your voice as a sculptor?

BC: When I got out of graduate school, I was fortunate to start exhibiting pretty quickly. My work was based on a system, and until 2000, I was always compared to Matthew Barney and Matthew Ritchie—never to another female artist, and that was disappointing. Because my work involved a large cosmology, dealers and gallerists wanted me to write out the entire story, explaining how everything linked together. I wasn't going to do that though, because then it would be linear. People wouldn't look at the sculpture, they'd read the written word. I didn't want people looking at the whole cosmology, the system, via the word. I was afraid it would box me in. I knew that I worked best via my hand understanding how to build. That's when I knew I'd really found my voice because I felt compelled to hold my ground.

AL: How did *The Prince Project* come about?

BC: In the early aughts, I was working a number of jobs because I had a lot of debt, and I was always trying to get back to my studio. I was interested in the construction of a persona, a character who becomes your other half. I was looking at the idea of making another human being as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Pygmalion legend—the sculptor who decides no human woman is good enough, so he fashions a



concept of ideal beauty and asks the gods to make her live—but I was trying to reverse the role, looking at it in a sarcastic way. How empowering is it to have a counterpart who can't talk back? I started to think about what I would fuse together in the spirit of the Frankenstein model. I was looking at archetypes of male martyrs left with holes in their bodies at the end of their stories. Abraham Lincoln, C-3PO, Jesus, and St. Sebastian are the four characters that make up the Prince figure. The holes in their bodies, openings popularized through martyrdom or identity, form the unifying thread. In a sculptural sense, a hole is often a passage for another material to pass through a surface. So, I see the holes in their bodies as portals, where the stale male heroism baked into their narratives can expel, leaving room for a new kind of regeneration.

AL: You've described *The Prince Project*, which began in 2005, as multi-genre and episodic. What does that mean?
BC: There are several parts to it: sculptures, videos, and textiles. That's why it was important to me not to write everything out, so I would have flexibility as I developed it through time. While I could see parallels to those male artists working with systems, the cosmology in my work needs process and openness to thrive. My interest in finding connections between varied references is not to stake a flag on a theorem. My system comes forth in a humble way. I am simply expanding a body of work through very different kinds of processes, keeping things open-ended so I can revisit a point in a story. Having this loose, but very broad set of references gives me a game board that I can go back into intermittently. Much of my headspace is involved in my classes. When I am able to shift gears, I want to be able to dive straight into my work, and *The Prince Project*'s cosmology offers me an immediate springboard.

AL: What do you mean by dismantling the "tropes of the heroic male sculptor?"
BC: I wrote that for my 2019 exhibition at Smack Mellon, responding to Machiavelli. In *The Prince*, he posited that a prince should be in command of two things: *virtù* and *fortuna*. *Virtù* is about strength and power, being able to impose your will on reality. For instance, you use an irrational fear about immigrants

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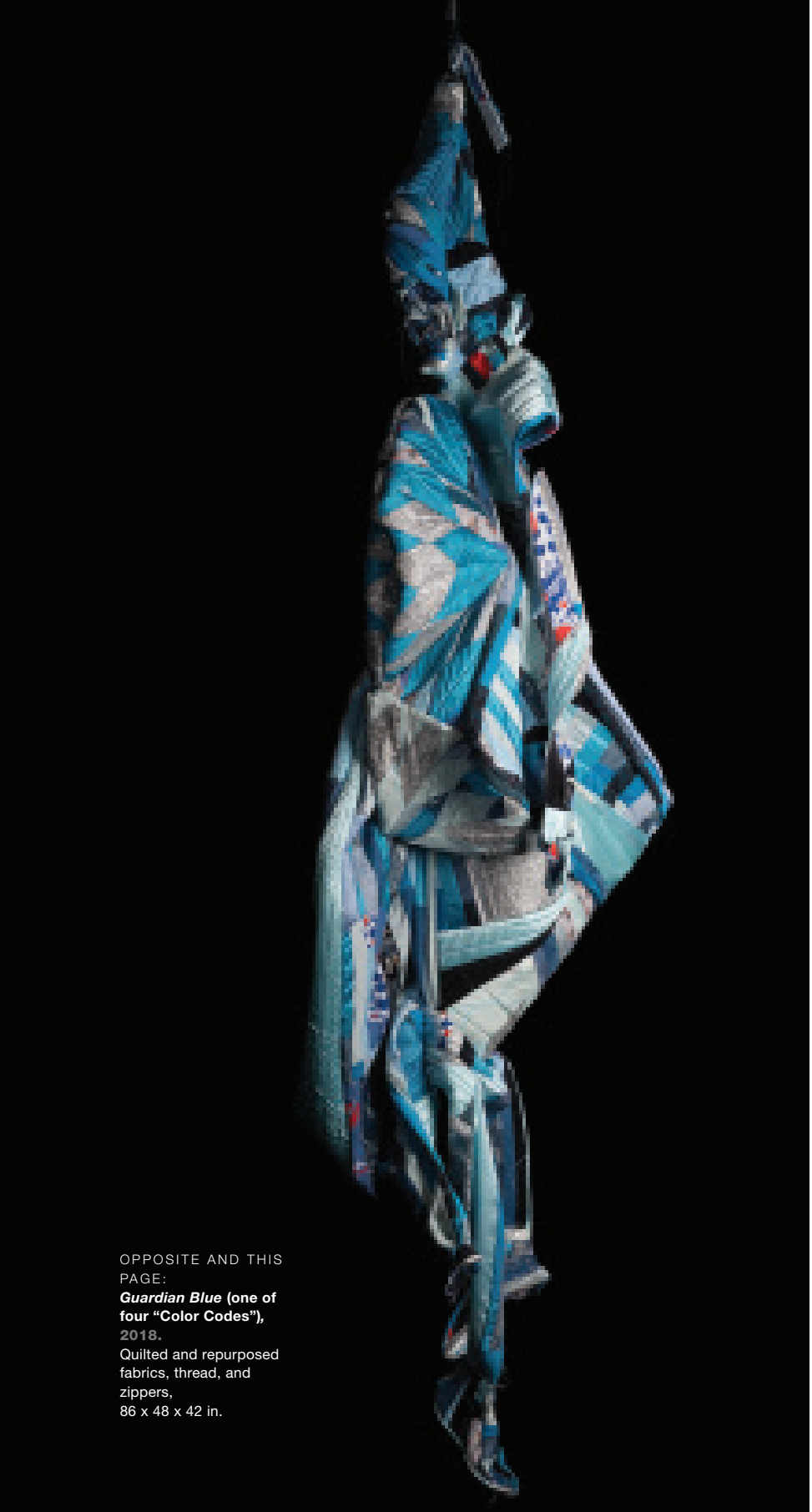
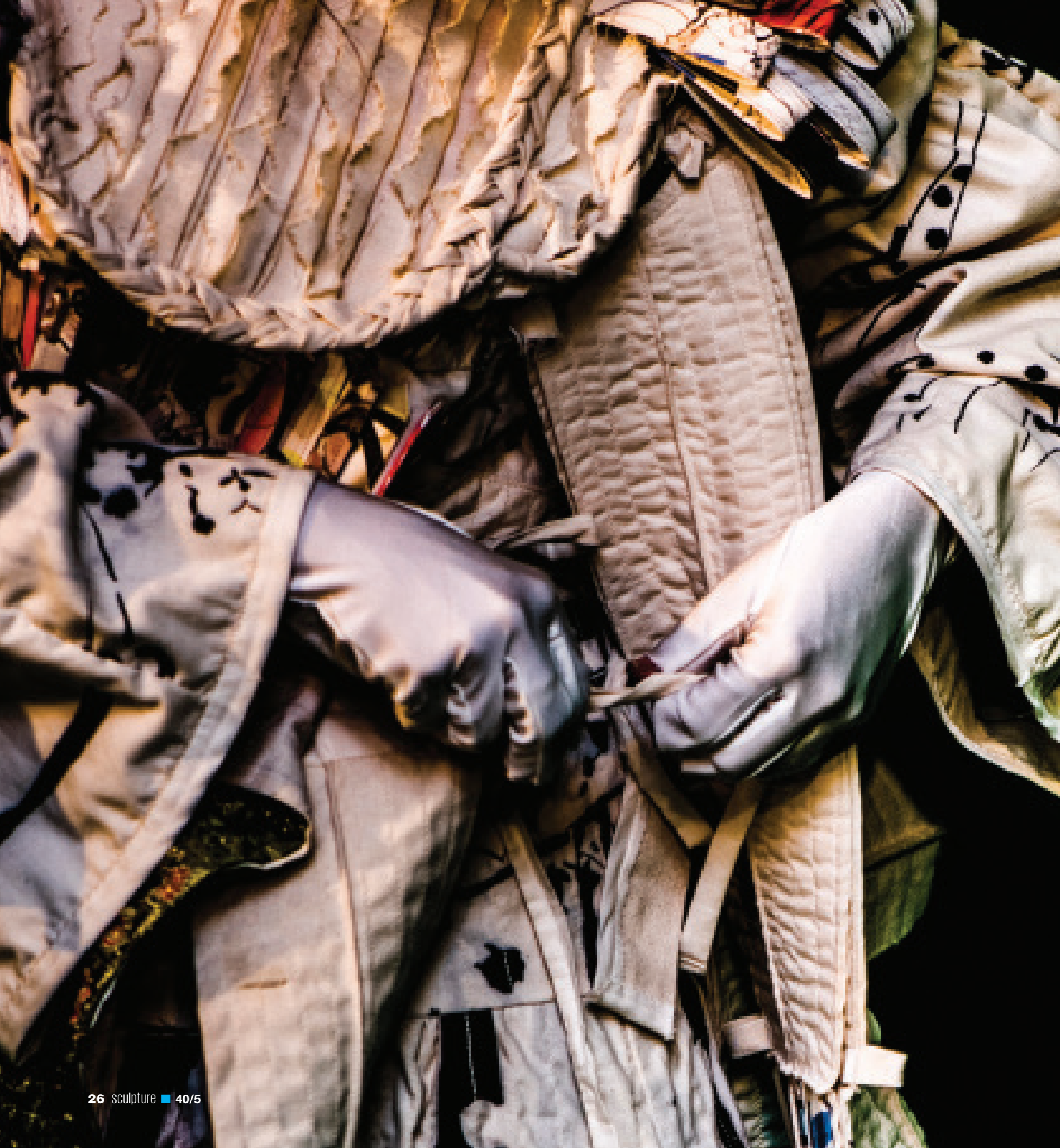


OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE:
***Guardian Blue* (one of four "Color Codes"), 2018.**
Quilted and repurposed fabrics, thread, and zippers,
86 x 48 x 42 in.

> **"Because my work involved a large cosmology,** dealers and gallerists wanted me to write out the entire story…I wasn't going to do that though, because then it would be linear. People wouldn't look at the sculpture, they'd read the written word."

to build a wall. *Fortuna*, on the other hand, is a wild card, completely unforeseen and out of your control. Machiavelli often compares it to weather; he also equates it with a woman. A good prince is able to master these forces. When I was given the opportunity to fill the massive space at Smack Mellon, I was sewing a lot. I thought that it would be interesting to draw a parallel between *fortuna* (the woman) and how fabric is unwilling to conform. It's very subtle. In this work, thin-shelled cast pieces are fitted together and "fused" in a similar way to how panels of cloth are sewn to make a structural seam. Because I am interested in mashing up references, my recent work pairs figuration with quilt-making in a referential way. I literally mash fabric into the hard-shell sculptures to challenge the relevance of a stable figurative form. Unlike rigid sculpture, a three-dimensional fabric form is flexible and resists being repositioned exactly the same way twice. It is disruptive. These works pair the soft-form construction

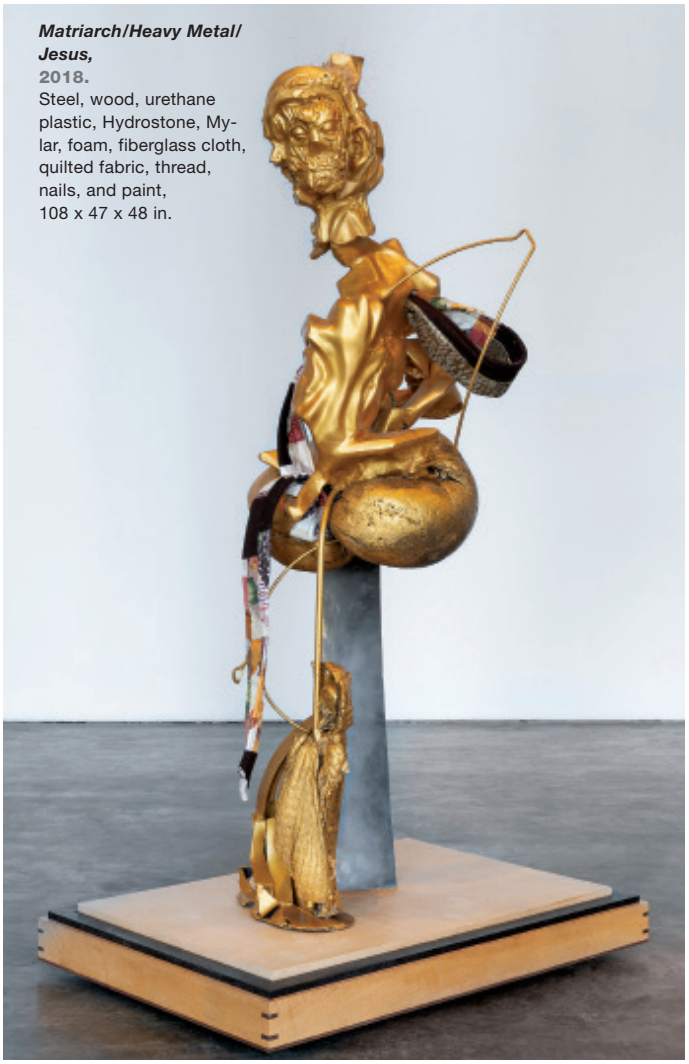


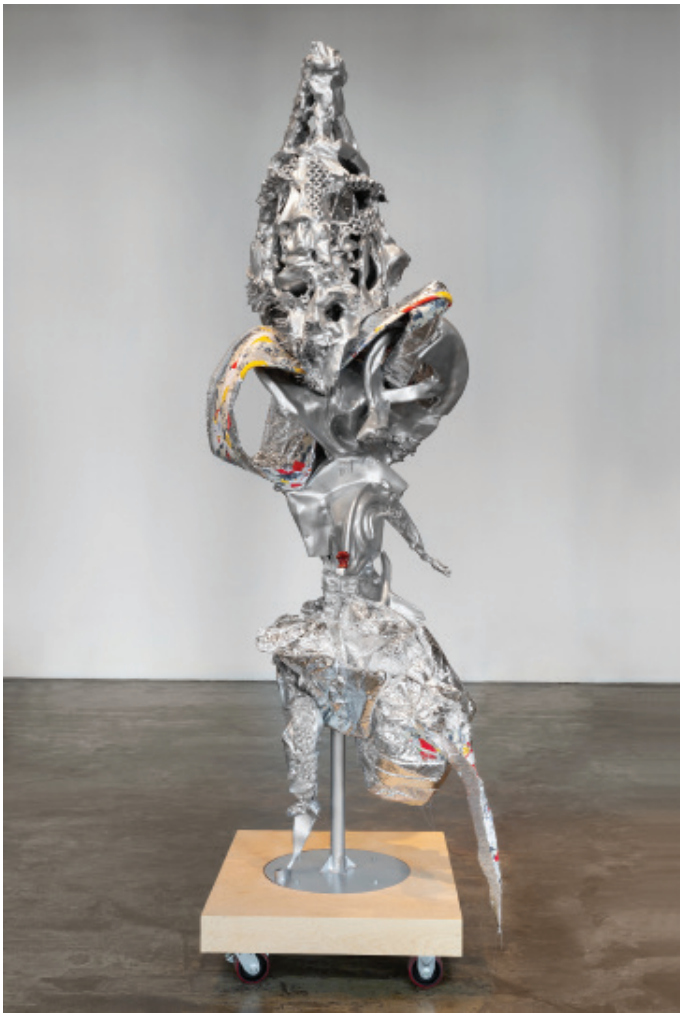
OPPOSITE: ERIC MARGUSITY / THIS PAGE: ETIENNE FROSSARD

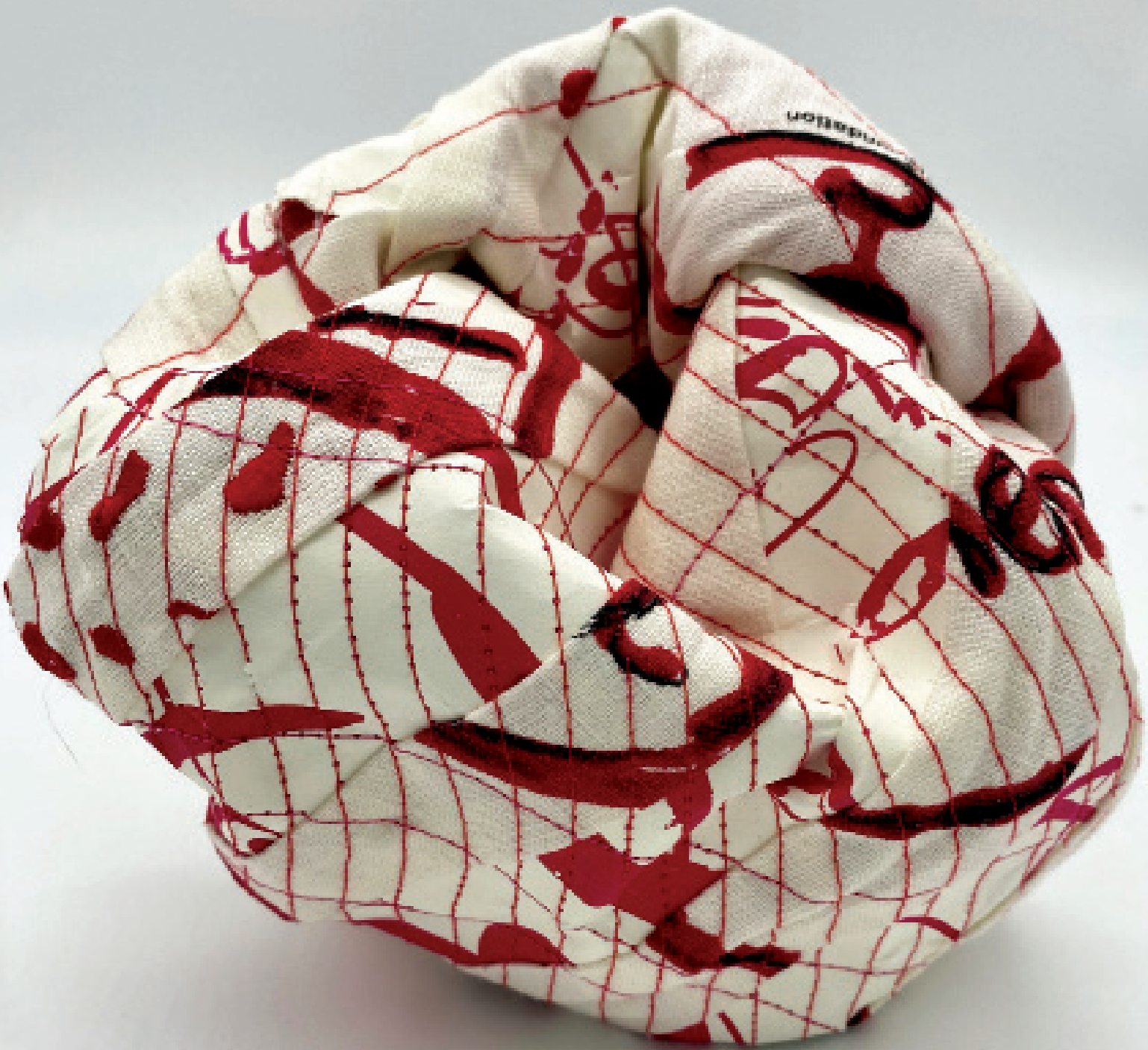
OPPOSITE:
***Armor for White Light (To Tie)* (detail),**
2012–14.
10-layer garment with muslin, ink, white thread, and cut and sewn drawings from 2002–12, dimensions variable.

THIS PAGE
FROM LEFT:
Golden Droid/Scout/ C3PO,
2018.
Steel, wood, foam, Hydrostone, fiberglass cloth, machine plastic, fabric, bracelet, paint, and casters,
60 x 34 x 48 in.

Matriarch/Heavy Metal/ Jesus,
2018.
Steel, wood, urethane plastic, Hydrostone, Mylar, foam, fiberglass cloth, quilted fabric, thread, nails, and paint,
108 x 47 x 48 in.







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with *fortuna* and the lineage of quilting and needlecraft, often historically synonymous with women.

AL: Do you see yourself in a feminist tradition of using traditional female skills?

BC: I see myself as a maker who tries to look at material skill in relation to autonomy. Sewing allows you to create a very strong union through supple surfaces that can bend and fold. A sewn seam is a pretty fierce hinge that can be made nomadically without ties to complex infrastructure. The skills I learn go into one big snowball. I have a very old photo of me sitting in an undergraduate studio at VCU with my grandmother's sewing machine. I didn't make a lot of sewn work when I was younger, because women's work didn't seem to have the same prestige as all the other things I was learning. Until I found this photo, I had forgotten how long sewing has been in the periphery of my practice. I think becoming older has a lot to do with the upswing in sewing. The lack of recognition for female artists in the canon has become more pointed, and I want to give honor subversively to the history of quilting and how this is often gendered in relation to women.

AL: How does *Frankenstein* play into all this?

BC: In an English class, my teacher related it as a feminist text. Mary Shelley, in late-night conversations with Byron and Shelley, created this novel about a monstrous being fabricated by an egocentric individual. The men were the ones toying with notions of identity, with ethics, with the ego. They were the ones who were packaged to be active in the script. *Frankenstein* is a great metaphor for collage and how the human body never seems to be at rest. This is especially relevant in an image-making, product-selling society. As a young sculptor and feminist, I got into the story, which was created by a woman during a time when that was unusual; it inspired me to keep making my work, despite not knowing where it would lead.

AL: What is *Open Sky* (2019–ongoing) about?

BC: It's called *Open Sky* in memory of my paternal grandmother who immigrated from Calabria, Italy, to Brooklyn when she was a small child. She didn't have a lot of money and didn't return to Italy until she went on a tour for her 50th wedding anniversary with my grandfather. When she died, I received her journal from the trip. She wrote as if she were just learning about her heritage and was astounded by what she saw. When they went to St. Peter's Square, she wrote: "Rome is like a museum in an Open Sky, for the people." I don't know if this was her thought or if she was quoting a tour director, but it made me think of how that place resonated with her—not so much because of its beauty, but because she felt she had access to it in a tangible way. *Open Sky* honors her life and the idea of interconnectedness, where all kinds of people can feel they are built into a space.

Open Sky continues my interest in quilting and figuration but without referencing the figure. I've been sewing with a lot of secondhand materials, and it's hard not to think about former owners. There were fabrics that reminded me of the 1970s or other eras. They become personalized. I wondered if there was a way to give ownership back to a real person while approaching an abstracted, soft, Frankenstein-like body through composite cloth.

AL: What are you working on now?

BC: Like most people during the pandemic, I wanted to find ways to connect to others. Last March, I began a series of 10-by-10-inch reversible quilts called "Quilt Thank You Cards" for people who have shown me kindness. Each little quilt can lay flat, hang on the wall, or the owner can shape it into a soft sculpture. I see each "Quilt Thank You Card" as an alternative way to sculpt a portrait, a mutable body made from many bodies through the use of repurposed cloth. "Quilt Avatars" are symmetrical, altered images of "Thank You Card" sections and are gifted with them. They represent a force of healing energy whose collective intent is to guide and protect within a troublesome world.

OPPOSITE:
Study for ***An Impossible Collaboration (Quilt Thank You Card for Louise Bourgeois),*** **2021.**
Paper print made in 2019 and Louise Bourgeois's "Virtues Theologales" tea towel, approx. 10 x 10 x 10 in.

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