

# INTRODUCING JESSICA JACKSON HUTCHINS

Using papier-mâché, clay, and glitter, this Portland-based artist makes visceral forms from everyday objects  
By Camela Raymond / Portrait by Justine Kurland

In Jessica Jackson Hutchins's sculpture *Conversation/Conversion* (1999), two empty wine bottles, connected by a fragile arc of paper stars, rest atop a flimsy painted-wood end table. When she made it, Hutchins says, she was thinking of Brancusi's stacked pedestals—sculptures that, prodigiously, foreground the apparatus of display. "I want[ed] a recognition of the difficulty of presenting something," she explains. But besides the intentional precariousness of the setup, what's notable about *Conversation/Conversion* is the "something" it presents: a couple of discarded containers, arranged in a crude image of figures trading erotic

the Art Institute of Chicago, in 1997. Her artworks speak the self-conscious vernacular of punk rock: they are intentionally unskillful and emotionally raw, scrapped together from cheap cardboard, newspaper, and glitter. Hutchins calls them "guttural upchucks." But in their awkward materiality, they betray an awareness of the gaze that brings them into being—following not just Oppen, but also punk icon Richard Hell, whose onetime slogan "You make me" Hutchins borrowed for the title of her most recent show at Derek Eller Gallery in New York.

In the past decade, Hutchins has investigated all manner of ways in which people and things make, and unmake, each other. For instance, identity becomes a matter of fragile codependency in *Keith and Anita* (1998), a portrait of a rock 'n' roll celebrity couple as two cardboard six-pack beer cartons wrapped side-by-side in papier-mâché and glitter. Media spectacle focuses collective emotion in *Darryl's Tears* (2001), an installation of pinned-up newspaper clippings chronicling the public's sympathetic fascination with baseball player Darryl Strawberry and his bout with drug addiction (cut-out pictures of butterflies stud the pages like a crowd's encouraging cheers). About three years ago, Hutchins uprooted herself from New York, where she had lived for six years, moved to Portland, Oregon, started a family, and took up clay sculpture, turning the high-ceilinged garage a few yards from her house into a studio. With this more hands-on approach to the process of making, Hutchins's accustomed tone of fragility and tentativeness butted against more certain tendencies. She had begun making large, commanding sculptures in 2004 that connoted crashing waves and ponderous mountains. Her newer works were also contemplative objects, but they invoked even more overtly spiritual themes. Several were based on the pillar of St. Simeon Stylite, a first-century AD Arab Christian ascetic saint known for living on a platform atop a pillar. Hutchins's "stylites" are rough cylinders stacked precariously on lumpy bases, poignantly reaching for the sky. Other sculptures of the same year referenced ancient Chinese scholars' rocks, which Hutchins reinterpreted as simple glazed-ceramic cups perched on rugged, painted papier-mâché stands.

Lately though, the visceral facts of home and motherhood have come to the fore. Some recent curatorial efforts have positioned Hutchins's work within histories of feminism and craft, associations Hutchins doesn't shy away from, despite averring that she hasn't "intentionally addressed" feminist issues in her work—and despite what would seem more obvious links to the work of such figures as Claes Oldenburg, Franz West, and Rachel Harrison, artists who've broadly (and sometimes hilariously) explored how visual forms regulate identity and desire. "My art deals with the experience of being me," Hutchins remarks. "Motherhood and being an artist are the experiences that have mattered to me more than anything." A video from 2004 consists of a diaristic tour of Hutchins's garden, and more recent furniture-based sculpture has sprung from an awareness of "women's bodies, bodies as food, bodies as domestic furniture, as support," Hutchins explains. The base of *Loveseat and Bowls* (2008), for instance, is a tattered floral-print sofa, which



**ABOVE:** *Convivium*, 2008. Table, linen, papier-mâché, and ceramic, 52¾ x 56¾ x 53¾ in.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Jessica Jackson Hutchins in her studio, Portland, Oregon, November 2008.

sparks. This is sculpture devoid of Brancusi's ideal forms—insistent on the messy otherness of reality, and on the leap of faith required for understanding. "There are things we live among / And to know them is to know ourselves," Hutchins wrote in an email, quoting the Objectivist poet George Oppen.

Exposing the artifice of display, searching for authentic encounters with the "real": these enigmas have occupied Hutchins, 37, since she began her MFA at the School of

