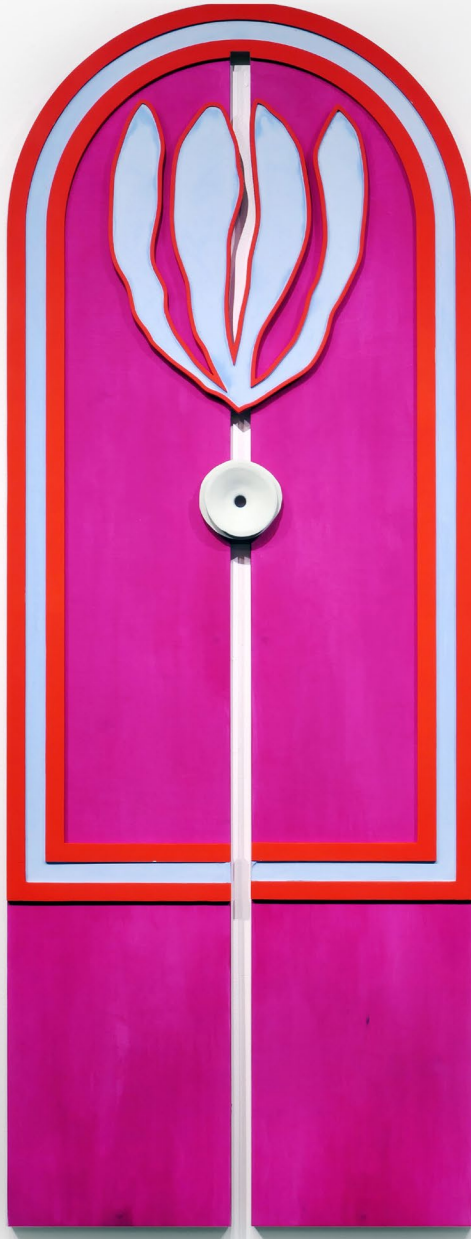


# A Romance Of...

January 5 - February 12, 2023



ABIGAIL  
OGILVY

Boston, MA



# A Romance Of...

January 5 - February 12, 2023

Cathy Della Lucia & Elspeth Schulze

*Curated by*

Leah Triplett Harrington & Mallory Ruymann

Abigail Ogilvy Gallery, Boston, MA

*Left*

CATHY DELLA LUCIA

*Gatekeeper, 2022*

Plywood, wood, concrete, milk paint

53 x 24 x 22 in.

*Front*

ELSPETH SCHULZE

*Tall Split Arch (graine à voler), 2022*

Birch plywood, Flashe vinyl paint,

stoneware with underglaze, gypsum

cement, mason stain

63 x 23.5 x 2 in.

Photo courtesy of Shane Darwent

**Romance** implies an object of affection through and alongside which we transform ourselves. Artmaking always involves an element of change: paint, ceramics, ink, ideas—the materials of art shift in process, becoming something greater than what they were. Perhaps more so than other materials, wood possesses an untouchable formal agency in both its natural and human-altered states. Of nature and with potential to appear artificial; seemingly still and static yet constantly swelling and dispelling moisture; living, even after its death. Brimming with contradictory qualities, wood as a medium is anything but generic. The ineffability of wood offers a seductive proposition to artists concerned with materiality.

*A Romance Of...* explores the allure of wood in the practices of Cathy Della Lucia (Boston, Massachusetts) and Elspeth Schulze (Tulsa, Oklahoma). Approaching the material with care, Della Lucia and Schulze perform a love affair in their studios. In their tender hands, aided by chisels, saws, and progressive carving technologies, wood undergoes a metamorphosis. Suggesting artificial and biological forms, Della Lucia and Schulze's works appear porous and fibrous, allowing expansion and contraction; breathing, as if a body. Wood is romanced into mimetic forms, coming alive to possibility of fleshy feeling, both hard and soft.

CATHY DELLA LUCIA  
*Life Saving Device*, 2022  
Plywood, hardwood, porcelain,  
Wilson overgrip, milk paint  
33 x 24 x 20 in.



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## What Would You Become? Materiality, The Uncanny, & Transformation

By Leah Triplett Harrington and Mallory Ruymann

Reality and fantasy collide in romance, where two beings meet as idealized vestiges, always in flux, balancing between possibility and tangibility. Cathy Della Lucia and Elspeth Schulze work within the space between idea and reality, identifying those little moments where the edges of artifice collide with nature. At first glance, Della Lucia and Schulze's artworks imitate an idea or place—the curve of an arched window, the posture of a crutch. As a shadow on a wall, the objects the artists generate could indeed pass as that which they pantomime. Outside in the light, matter and form compound into something stranger—reality. Della Lucia and Schulze celebrate the qualities of flux begot by conditions of being wherein concepts become entangled in and complicated by shifting ecologies of relationships, politics, and histories.

Cathy Della Lucia works with forms inspired by moments of failure: irrational units of measurement, shoddily constructed car parts on the brink of collapse, modular tools that vary across manufacturers—those little cracks in the hairline where things reveal themselves to be imperfect, mostly due to human intervention. Della Lucia's intentionally poor imitation of mechanized production makes evident the artist's labor in *contrapposto* to the seamless 'hand' of the machine. Rather than highlighting the cynical aspects of human-forward labor, Della Lucia extracts the precious from the imperfect. Modular and accretive, and often inviting intimate scenes of intervention/handling in order to reveal their (mal)function, Della Lucia's sculptures build out a version of the world, memorializing rather than suppressing the impractical, the anti-aesthetic, and the decidedly uncool.

Elspeth Schulze makes uncanny imitations of decorative architectural elements. Sometimes executed with the assistance of a CNC router, Schulze's practice intentionally layers mediation into process—color as mediator, machine as mediator, time as mediator, artist as mediator—so that the ultimate thing produced can only ever aspire towards precise expression. Rather than a facsimile, the artist's formal language evokes a myriad of familiar references and sensations too nebulous to locate in exact source

material. Through their nomadic qualities, Schulze's artworks disrupt any expectations of polemic and content, offering the ambiguity of their pastiche instead as meaning and function.

Wood is an apt material in which to contemplate the seam between idea and reality. Many writers have expounded upon the history of wood as a fine art material, most recently in the hands of women-identified and gender non-conforming artists (Visser, Deidre. *Joinery, Joists and Gender: A History of Woodworking for the 21st Century* (2022)). In the mid-twentieth-century and through to today, artists like Elizabeth Catlett, Marisol, Louise Nevelson, Louise Bourgeois, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and many more used wood to maximize creative expression, bringing the craft and techniques of a whole history of woodworkers to bear onto the postmodern condition. In a Marxist sense, wood denotes sets of power relations undergirding industrial production cycles. Because much of wood's history is devoid of art history, but at the same time, so entrenched in it, when an artist works with wood, they simultaneously (and easily) reveal and destabilize contemporary processes of resource consumption.

In addition to the interconnectivity of its material condition, in a more straightforward sense, wood necessitates a way of making reflective of the stuff of the world. Both Della Lucia and Schulze utilize wood in the context of other materials so that every surface grain communicates.

"Wood plays games with time. It is both fast and slow, dead but still moving, and can rewind and fast forward in time," says Della Lucia.

'Fast' materials like ceramics and plastics impart flows of energy onto their work that generate spaces intended to amplify wood's difference. Wood possesses qualities of 'slowness'; its integrity and specificity require a considered approach, technical know-how, and a willingness to engage in process as the material takes its shape. Della Lucia and Schulze approach wood as a material that can be transformed by their treatment.

“I came to see wood as a material that could create space: both sacred and intimate,” says Schulze.

Not necessarily trained in woodworking, these two artists nevertheless demonstrate a deep sensitivity towards this mutable material, a respect for its essential qualities, and a desire for it to continue to become as it melds with other materials. They both use wood as well as clay and other natural or artificial materials, but wood is a vital source of their uncanny abstraction.

“I work with color in an intuitive way—I try to pair colors that create some kind of new, strange energy together...I continue to discover ways of working through exploration and testing new processes and combinations of materials. There is something so satisfying in a simple thing well done—a sanded edge, a smooth surface. I like that wood is hard and structural but soft and responsive simultaneously. It holds its own but replies to my efforts to shape it into something new,” says Schulze.

As a site of uncertain production, woodworking requires a degree of hyper-focus that only the deepest admiration can support. As the worker integrates wood’s variability into process, wood’s ineffable qualities beguile, absorb, and seduce its worker. Wood is sensual skin-like with its grainy, veiny surfaces; wood feels and is feeling. It beckons to be caressed and remembers touch. It recalls hard handling, responding with dents and divots; it requires care, regular polishing, or coating. It’s from living, literally breathing trees, and when manipulated into lumber, boards, planks, or sheets, it still respire—expanding and contracting in heat or cold, humidity or drought. Wood seeks to be loved, to be maneuvered, as the stuff of habitation—housing, furniture, ornamentation, the stuff we live with. Wood is completed by another.

“The expectation for change and acceptance of failure is something that I try to embrace in my own practice,” says Della Lucia, continuing, “I spend a painfully abnormal amount of time





ELSPETH SCHULZE

*Split Circle (graine à voler)*, 2022

Birch plywood, Flashe vinyl paint, stoneware with  
underglaze, gypsum cement, mason stain

36 x 36 x 1.25 in.

Photo courtesy of Shane Darwent

holding, measuring, drawing on, and arranging wood before I use it...Because the small parts will always be in relation modularly to others, I choose pieces based on their potential relationship with another form or material."

## Cathy Della Lucia

Touch is a method for Cathy Della Lucia, though her hand is often imperceptible in her wood and clay-based works. Her sinewy, elongated forms, or more curving, thickset shapes, are crafted by gently fashioning these familiar materials into the abstract. Clay and wood are dynamic, remembering how they are touched, but also affected by their intrinsic and extrinsic conditions. Touch—of one element to another—also characterizes her use of modularity; all of her works join at multiple points that follow their own logic. This joinery is pointedly not permanent, with each connection following a pattern of uncertainty and precarity, but nevertheless achieving a delicate and determined settling. The individual elements of the whole, therefore, come together as one through touch, affecting each other for as long as the work remains.

Della Lucia received an MFA in sculpture from Boston University. She has recently exhibited at Piano Craft Gallery (Boston, Massachusetts), Able Baker Gallery (Portland, Maine), and internationally at Ara Art Center (Seoul, Korea) and Art Copenhagen (Copenhagen, Denmark).



CATHY DELLA LUCIA  
*Give Me Gravy Tonight*, 2022  
Plywood, hardwood, stoneware, earthenware,  
stain, underglaze, hydrocal  
34 x 43 x 18 in.

*Leah and Mallory: Why wood? What drew you to the material, and what about the material keeps you in love with it?*

Cathy Della Lucia: Wood plays games with time. It is both fast and slow, dead but still moving, and can rewind and fast forward through time. Its relative impermanence means I can always fix it, cut it, strip it back, or sand it down, so certainty holds less weight. It is fast in the way it takes a mark and holds form, so you can be brutal and impulsive with it. Wood has a physical record of time built into itself. As you carve back into it and through the layers and rings, you are revealing time and creating time. I lose myself and all sense of time in that space of dust, splinters, flying chips, the rhythm of the mallet, or the muffled sounds of the grinder through ear muffs. And usually, somewhere in that mess, I can actually find some type of order.

*What is your relationship to color? How do you use color in your practice?*

Color is a way to create hierarchy or bring a sense of instruction to the work. I think about color and how it is coded into the surface of our lives to make us act or feel on impulse- like yellow stop lights, red and green lines on a stock chart, a primal warning like electric blue poison dart frogs, or a red 'MAGA' hat. I want color to create a sense of recognition or familiar impulse, but only on the surface and as a disguise. I use stains and transparent layers of paint that are airbrushed so that the character of the wood is always present. In this way, color is a mask but not skin, like a pair of nude pantyhose over cellulite.

*What woodworking traditions do you engage with? How did you discover them?*

I am deeply inspired by Japanese joinery, which did not use metal hardware or glue, but rather physics and tension. I cannot pretend to compare my joinery to the craftsmanship of these masters, because I am an amateur learning as I go. However, I do connect with that tradition of exposing joints to show off their artistry, ultimately giving them value above utility. By not using nails, parts could be replaced if they were damaged or decayed.

The expectation for change and acceptance of failure is something that I try to embrace in my practice.

There is also something called *Mottanai*, a spirit of repurposing material and avoiding waste. Within the realms of woodworking, people take apart furniture they no longer have any use for and use the wood to recreate a new piece for the home. In this way, the material is permanent, but the form and function are not. There are many instances where pieces of one sculpture end up as part of another or serve as an assist or a jig for creating something else.

I started learning about Japanese woodworking on a very basic level while living in Korea, because my birth father was a carpenter and portrait painter, and he would show me things because we could not speak to each other. When I moved into my current studio, it was inside a cabinet shop owned by a Japanese-American carpenter. He was so generous with his knowledge and taught me so much about wood. He passed away suddenly from cancer and left me his workbench and chisels. That was when I decided to commit to learning and stop dancing around it.

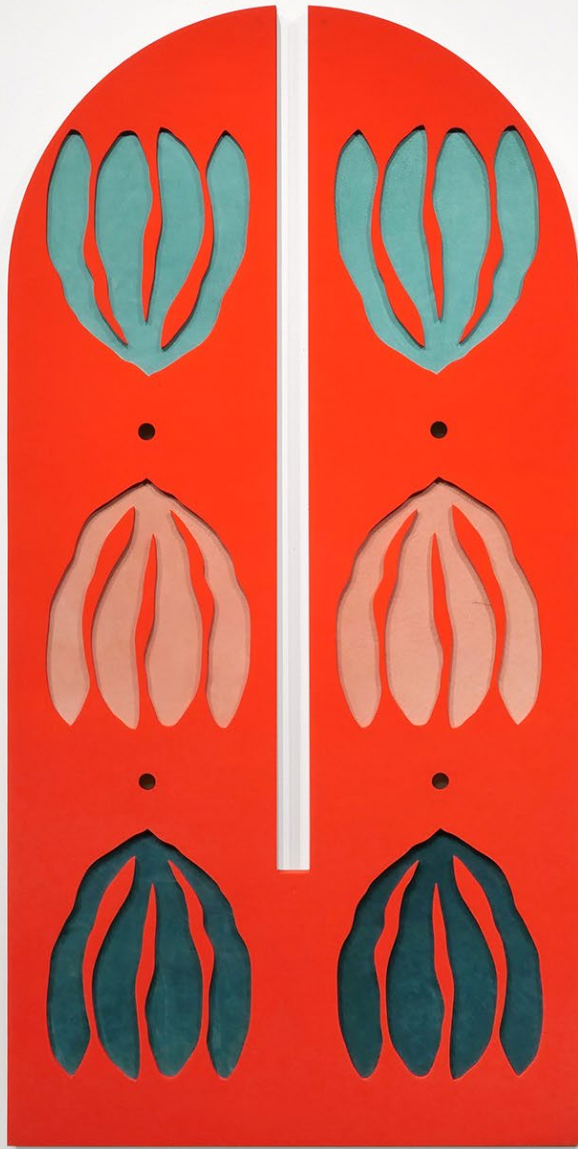
*Where do you start with a piece of wood? What draws you to a particular piece?*

I spend a painfully abnormal amount of time holding, measuring, squinting at, drawing on, and arranging wood before I use it. I don't really work with big fresh boards from the lumber yard because most of the wood I use are cast-offs, unwanted scraps, and excess from carpenters or used furniture. This can make it tedious to prepare and square up small pieces to be uniform and ready to work with. Because the small parts will always be in relation modularly to others, I choose pieces based on their potential relationship with another form or material. I consider things like strength or density of the wood species, contrast of color, the direction of laminated plywood layers, growth rings, and wood movement to determine types of joinery, function within the larger form, and in combination with ceramic (which doesn't move).

## Elspeth Schulze

Elspeth Schulze's process is one of porosity, hybridity, remembering, and mixing of form, material, and color. Schulze's dimensional work is seemingly purely abstract, but deep looking reveals its dialogue with natural and architectural motifs. Schulze carefully controls the natural propensities of her chosen materials: clay, paper, mesh, fabric, and baltic birch plywood, working to manipulate its natural propensities. Often using a literal as well as a metaphorical frame, Schulze nevertheless accedes to her materials, blending her hand with their essential qualities.

Schulze has an MFA in ceramics from the University of Colorado, Boulder, and is currently artist-in-residence at the Tulsa Artist Fellowship in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her work has most recently been exhibited at the University of Colorado Art Museum (Boulder, Colorado), Oklahoma Contemporary (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), RedLine Art Center (Denver, Colorado), and Spring/Break NY.



ELSPETH SCHULZE  
*Paired Split Arch (graine à voler)*, 2022  
Birch plywood, Flashe vinyl paint, leather  
47 x 23.5 x 1 in.  
Photo courtesy of Shane Darwent

*Leah and Mallory: Why wood? What drew you to the material, and what about the material keeps you in love with it?*

**Elsbeth Schulze:** I grew up in a family that cherished trees as living things and wood as a material. My grandparents lived at the edge of a cypress and tupelo swamp, and my family treated the swamp like a chapel. We gathered there for celebrations, paddling between the trees during the wet season and walking on the loamy, cypress-needled soil in the dry season. My parents were married under the cypress trees, and my sister and I both were, as well.

My grandparents' house was lined with cypress boards, each board carefully picked for the pattern of its grain. My parents both worked with wood—my father built much of the house we lived in, and my mother made our kitchen table and other furniture. My mother is an artist, and she made layered masonite wall works that hung throughout our house—these pieces are direct ancestors of my current work.

Though my family was not religious, our region of southern Louisiana is culturally Catholic, and my sisters and I went to an all-girls Catholic school. During school, we went weekly to mass at a chapel from the 1800s. The interior of this chapel was covered with spare, dark wood and plain plaster walls. I loved being in this space, loved the way the wood resonated with our voices in song. The wood itself felt like it held something holy. I came to see wood as a material that could create space, both sacred and intimate.

I now work specifically with sheets of birch plywood, which I cut in layers and puzzle together. Lately, I've been making architectural outer frames filled with materials like plaster, ceramics, and textiles. The process feels almost like building a house and filling the interior with things that brighten the space and soften the edges.



*What is your relationship to color? How do you use color in your practice?*

I've come to see color as joy, as pleasure. I started to use vibrant colors during the onset of the pandemic when my studio was closed and I was seeking ways of working at home. I began to paint paper with textile dyes, which resulted in incredibly rich swaths of color. The act of spreading shockingly bright, wet color across a thirsty surface was so pleasurable and was enough for me at the time. Color became a way to manufacture joy.

I work with color in an intuitive way—I try to pair colors that create some kind of new, strange energy together. I hope for the colors in a piece to almost vibrate next to one another. I love Mathew Ronay's use of color on wood—the color feels like it is coming from within. I seek the same, trying to find colors that feel alive and transfer some kind of energy to the viewer.

*What woodworking traditions do you engage with? How did you discover them?*

I pair digital fabrication with traditional, manual ways of working with wood. After sketching, I bring my designs into a vector-based computer program and design them to scale. I then cut these forms out of plywood using a CNC milling machine or laser cutter, machines run by computers, and cut the forms precisely, following my designs and encoded instructions. I do this work at a not-for-profit Digital Fabrication Lab, which has become an extension of my studio. Once the layers are cut, I take them back to my studio, where I bring them through manual processes, gluing layers together, sanding the edges, and preparing for paint and other elements.

I've learned this range of processes from generous teachers, both in the makerspace and in the traditional woodshop. My husband Shane is also an artist, and our studios are next to one another. Shane has extensive experience working with wood, and he's always willing to teach me a new trick. We share our tools and pair our skills. One morning, he'll borrow my orbital sander, and the next, I'll ask his advice on gluing up a new piece. Having a partner in this undertaking is an immeasurable wealth. Working with materials is a shared language we are always growing, separately and together.

I continue to discover ways of working through exploration and testing new processes and combinations of materials. There is something so satisfying in a simple thing well done—a sanded edge, a smooth surface. I like that wood is hard and structural but soft and responsive simultaneously. It holds its own but replies to my efforts to shape it into something new.

*Where do you start with a piece of wood? What draws you to a particular piece?*

I think of wood as an extension of paper. I used to feel intimidated by the first page of a new sketchbook until I realized that paper is generally a value-added product. The first page would remain a blank piece of paper, just like any other, unless I added something to it. Because I work with sheets of plywood, it's easy for me to think of them as large sheets of paper. When I start a new project, I design forms, and laser cut them at a small scale from thick paper or thin plywood. This allows me to test and combine forms in a way that feels agile and playful. I'm then able to move easily from a form that is a few inches tall to the same form at several feet tall.

My work often deals with flatness, and sheets of plywood are well suited to this way of exploring a planar surface. I once watched a video of plywood in the making, where the layers of a tree were unrolled into flat sheets and laminated together. Though sheets of plywood are manufactured, they still hold some original material integrity from the trees they were a part of—each has its own structure of fibers and pattern of wood grain. I'm drawn to the fact that a sheet of plywood feels full of potential but carries its own power.



ELSPETH SCHULZE  
*Paired Split Arch (graine à voler)*, 2022  
Birch plywood, Flashe vinyl paint, leather  
47 x 23.5 x 1 in.  
Photo courtesy of Shane Darwent

## Q&A Michelle Millar Fisher

*Like craft and like romance, curatorial practice is relational, dependent on the exchange of ideas and subjectivities. Exhibitions are assemblies of objects and scholarship, presentations of true love of the artwork or subject. With that in mind, we asked curator and craft scholar Michelle Millar Fisher a few questions on romance, scholarship, and wood.*

*Leah and Mallory: What is romance?*

**Michelle Millar Fisher:** Fifty-fifty on all the chores. Inside jokes. Taking me to every blood draw and describing a beautiful beach so that I don't think about the needle. Romance is what I have with my husband. And what I have with my homeland. Nothing makes my heart swell like touching down in Scotland.

*Is scholarship an act of romance?*

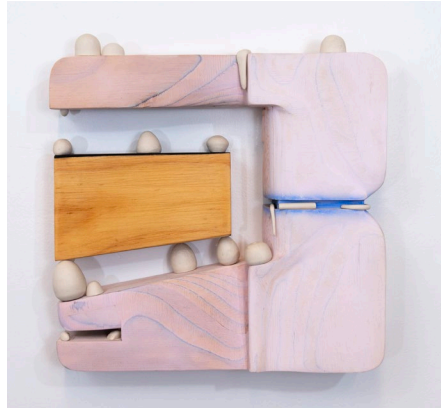
It can be. For me, it is a political act, especially because I now live in a country where to engage in scholarship, people are often pressured to accept a paradigm of debilitating debt. I got my own university education in Scotland for free—everyone did. Even when I have been passionately involved in researching a subject, it is driven less by its mystery or remoteness from everyday life; it is always resolutely the opposite. In her speech to accept her Nobel Prize for literature this year, French author Annie Ernaux put it best when she said she writes “to avenge her people” and to gain “access to other worlds and other ways of being, including that of rebelling against and wanting to change it, in order to inscribe my voice as a woman and a social defector in what still presents itself as a space of emancipation, literature.” That is a model of scholarship I can get with.

*How do you consider surface when looking at an object?*

Carefully, since I may well be handling it in the museum and I want to make sure I don't leave my fingerprints on it to spoil it for the next person, or scratch or loosen any part of it. So I usually consider surface while wearing gloves.



CATHY DELLA LUCIA  
*Plus a Pocketful of Purple Rice*, 2019  
Plywood, porcelain, casein paint, mineral and plant fiber dough  
15 x 15 x 3 in.



CATHY DELLA LUCIA  
*Raw and Fleshy Shrine with Blue Stripe*, 2019  
Plywood, porcelain, casein paint  
16 x 15 x 4 in.

*What comes to mind when you think of wood and art making?*

Among other things, I am currently researching the work that came out of the Program in Artisanry when it was at Boston University between 1975-85. So, I am thinking about the woodworking and art-making of amazing women like Wendy Maruyama, Alice Turkel, and the current Bostonian who takes up their mantle in the contemporary moment, Alison Croney Moses.

**Michelle Millar Fisher** is currently the Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts within the Contemporary Art Department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Her work focuses on the intersections of people, power, and the material world. At the MFA, she is working on her next book and exhibition, tentatively titled *Craft Schools: Where We Make What We Inherit*, which is taking her across forty-eight contiguous US states via train over the course of a year.



## Acknowledgments

Mallory and Leah would like to thank the entire Abigail Ogilvy Gallery team. We so appreciate the gallery's willingness to engage in this particular form of experimental exhibition-making. Kaylee Hennessey, it is a pleasure to work with you. A special thank you to Abigail Ogilvy for fostering such a dynamic space for contemporary art to live in Boston and beyond. We deeply admire your insistence on collaboration, community, and connection! Lots of gratitude to all of the people in our community who supported us along the way, including Abby Ouellette, Zoë Gadegbeku, Sabine Gilbert, Matt Murphy, Alison Croney Moses, Michelle Millar Fisher, Jess Shearer, and so many more people who helped make this exhibition possible. Finally, a huge thank you to Cathy Della Lucia and Elspeth Schulze; we are grateful for the opportunity to know your work.



ELSPETH SCHULZE  
*Mirrored Split Meander (Palmetto)*, 2022  
Birch plywood, Flashe vinyl paint, linen, gypsum cement  
22 x 95 x 2 in.  
Photo courtesy of Shane Darwent

## About Abigail Ogilvy Gallery

Abigail Ogilvy Gallery exhibits contemporary art with a heavy emphasis on concept-driven artwork by emerging to mid-career artists located across the country and internationally. The gallery primarily focuses on paintings but also exhibits a range of other media including photography, sculpture, mixed media, digital prints, drawings, and much more. AOG aims to expand the Boston art scene by seeking out strong artists who have yet to be recognized or shown in the area. Owner Abigail Ogilvy Ryan founded the Boston gallery in 2015, and in 2022 the gallery program expanded to Geneva, Switzerland. The gallery is committed to exhibiting the strongest work from both local and international artists. We are interested in a wide range of artistic ideas and in showing all media.



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CATHY DELLA LUCIA  
*Zero Days to Expiration*, 2020  
Plywood, various hardwoods,  
porcelain, hydrocal, milk paint  
31 x 21 x 16 in.  
(with base: 31 x 21 x 40 in.)