

The Odyssey: A Retelling

Lisa Bachman Jones

A Parthenon Exhibition

Lisa Bachman Jones is a Nashville-based artist interested in entropy and interconnectivity.

In preparation for *A Retelling* Jones read Emily Wilson's 2017 translation of Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*. Jones examines the conditions that make Odysseus' journey possible. The body of work incorporates a wide range of media and techniques, which echoing the number of communities, locations, actions and objects that paved the way for the classic homecoming.

Jones notes the significance of the gallery's location within Nashville's Parthenon, which prompted the concept for *A Retelling*. The Parthenon in Athens, Greece was a place for both offering thanks to and soliciting help from Athena. The goddess is a constant in the poem, orchestrating events and guiding encounters.

Hospitality is another source of support for Odysseus, yet much of the generosity extended by the host relies on the labor of enslaved people. There is tension between celebrating the admirable virtue depicted in the poem and contending with the means by which the virtue was maintained.

This body of work presents an opportunity to reflect upon our own complex histories, support structures, and those for whom we extend our support.

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Material Significance

Paper is the conduit for our knowing the *Odyssey* Today. It is also the vehicle that took it from fluid story to fixed text. The *Odyssey* was originally recited orally for its Greek audiences. It was not written down until sometime between 725-675 BCE. Since any copy of Homer's poem is a shadow of the original, the works include tracings, shadows, prints, and molds. Gravity is enlisted as a key binding agent of the assemblages to again gesture towards the fluid rather than the fixed. Fabric hangs over rods, a tree trunk leans against the wall, and coins rest in a vessel.

In addition to selecting materials for metaphorical and affectual reasons, Jones also employs their literal functions. The assemblages are comprised of everyday objects that parallel descriptions within the poem. Additionally, the mechanisms for mounting and adhering the forms are not hidden. Literalism within the body of work is a means of echoing the revelatory styles of both Homer and Emily Wilson. Homer reveals all of his character's internal thoughts for the audience while Wilson exposes the literary artifice of translation for her readers. Just as we are allowed access to Homer's characters and Wilson's processes, Jones allows access to hers.

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Considering Translation

Often introduced as the first woman to translate the *Odyssey*, Emily Wilson is quick to correct this statement reminding us that many women before her have translated the text into other languages. When giving lectures she shares her anticipation of a time when it is not a point of note that she is a woman. Wilson remarks that there are “just as many mediocre translations by women as there are by men.” Although the audience chuckles after this statement, it is a cultural critique couched in humor. Why is the male translator not asked if he preferred the male characters, or if his male perspective guided his word choices? Through her comment we are invited to wonder why the male voice is considered neutral and unbiased whereas the female voice is not.

Wilson breaks with the Anglo-American tendency to gauge the quality of a translation on its ability to hide the very process of translating; to make it seem like we are reading an exact copy of the original. She hopes readers recognize that any translation, including her own, is not “natural.” Wilson writes “my translation is, like all translations, an entirely different text from the original ... Translation always, necessarily, involves interpretation; there is no such thing as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which a reader can see the original.”

A parallel can be drawn between translating one language to another and the translation of the world into visual artwork. One intention of Western artwork before Modernism was to hide the qualities of paint or stone; to provide the viewer with a sense that they were looking through a window to a landscape or into a room at a figure. Modern artists began exposing the qualities of paint by leaving brush strokes visible and colors unblended.

Rosy-Fingered Dawn

34 x 46 in.

Watercolor, wax, graphite, acrylic paint, colored pencil, and spray paint on paper.

Mentioned about 20 times throughout the poem, Dawn is consistently identified by her hands and the flowers they hold. With every appearance of Dawn comes the rhythm of chores and routines that facilitate the epic homecoming of Odysseus.

The composition mirrors the format of a wall calendar. The month depicted is from the same year that the Nashville Parthenon opened to the public, 1931. The hands are all pointing east, each silhouette saturated with the colors of sunrise. The hand shapes derive from different individuals forming a collection of times, ages, and identities.



Dishes

18 x 20 x 9 in.

Paper pulp, dish rag, rose petals, wheat paste, shelf from under the sink, dirty utensils, tape, dish sponge, ashes, spray paint, plaster, matte medium.

Unlike other chores, cleaning dishes is not directly mentioned in the *Odyssey*. However, it is implied with every banquet. Each host insists on feeding and boarding their guests before they depart. Hospitality was not reserved for the elite traveler but extended to any free person.

Frequently Athena disguises Odysseus as a beggar, yet he is offered these gifts.

A mold of a dish tub rests on a raised shelf with a drying dish rag. The sponge used to paint *House Slaves* clings to the edge of the shelf. Rose petals fill a missing portion of the tub suggesting the daily rhythm of the chore. Soiled utensils push the shelf away from the wall, peeking out along the edges.





Where the Earth Hides Him

87 x 72 x 3 in.

Wood dowel, braided yarn, curtain with horse graphic, paper, wax, latex paint.

Searching for the whereabouts of his father, Athena assures Telemachus that Nestor, king of Pylos, can reveal, "where the earth hides him." After feasting and sharing stories, Nestor directs him to visit Menelaus, king of Sparta, for more guidance. Before boarding the king's majestic horse-drawn carriage, Telemachus is bathed, oiled, and dressed by Nestor's eldest daughter.

A shower curtain is suspended from a wooden dowel and secured by wax rings. The curtain depicting horses running through a stream is a reference to Telemachus' host, the horse-lord, and the hospitality he receives. The triangle shape made by the yarn references the pediment of the Parthenon.

Helen's Storeroom

67 x 36 x 9 in.

Cardboard, marble contact paper, unfinished needlepoint (artist unknown), yarn, spray paint, paper, ink, tape, foam form.

Athena prompts Telemachus to head home after days of hospitality from Menelaus and Helen, king and queen of Sparta. Helen insists on sending him back to Ithaca with gifts from her storeroom: a cup, a bowl, and a hand-stitched wedding robe.

The garment is draped over a marble-printed dowel suspended by braided yarn. The yarn cascades to the ground revealing a change in color from white to black. The partial painting of the piece suggests the polychromy of Greek sculptures that washed off over time. The folds in the fabric and the marble print suggest the life-like sculptural techniques that are indicative of the Parthenon pediment figures.





The Suitors' Mouths

30 x 9 x 6 in.

Cardboard, plastic, pages from a book about rams, silicone cup, oxidized coins, fabric with raw meat graphic, regrind, gold spray paint, glue, aluminum can.

The suitors are an unruly gang of men who move into Odysseus' home hoping to marry his presumed widow, Penelope. They occupy his banquet hall every night, eating his food and drinking his wine. Whenever their son, Telemachus, musters up the courage to tell the suitors to leave they bully, jeer, and mock the young man before returning to their arrogant loitering.

The wall sculpture distills the suitors down to the location of their indulgent feasting and drinking. The materials, representing fur and flesh of a slaughtered goat from Odysseus' flock, cover the base form. A can rests on the top edge of the sculpture as if abandoned during a night of drinking.

Penelope's Room

75 x 18 x 12

Cardboard, plastic bags, unfinished needlepoint (artist unknown), glue, watercolor paper, acrylic paint, tape, young tree trunk.

Penelope hides away from the perpetual feasting of the suitors choosing to weave in the solitude of her room. Their bed, built by Odysseus from a living olive tree, is “always stained with tears.” The knowledge of this unique bed serves as a means of proving Odysseus’ identity when he returns home after the 20-year absence.

The needlepoint is unfinished just as the weaving she used as a means of holding the suitors at bay. The yarn needed to complete the project is nestled above, poised to be activated.





Sacrifice for Athena

72 x 13 x 12 in.

Regrind, wooden dowel, yarn, latex paint, stuffing.

In honor of Athena, Nestor calls for a special sacrifice. In preparation for the event, a goldsmith is summoned to apply the precious metal to the cow's horns. The blood is let into the blood-bowl held by his son and the meat is roasted in thanks to the goddess.

A fibrous form is bound around an exaggerated roasting spit. Two gnarly handles resembling igneous rock hold the offering away from the wall. The audience must look up to view the piece just as they must look up to see the statue of Athena in the naos above this gallery.

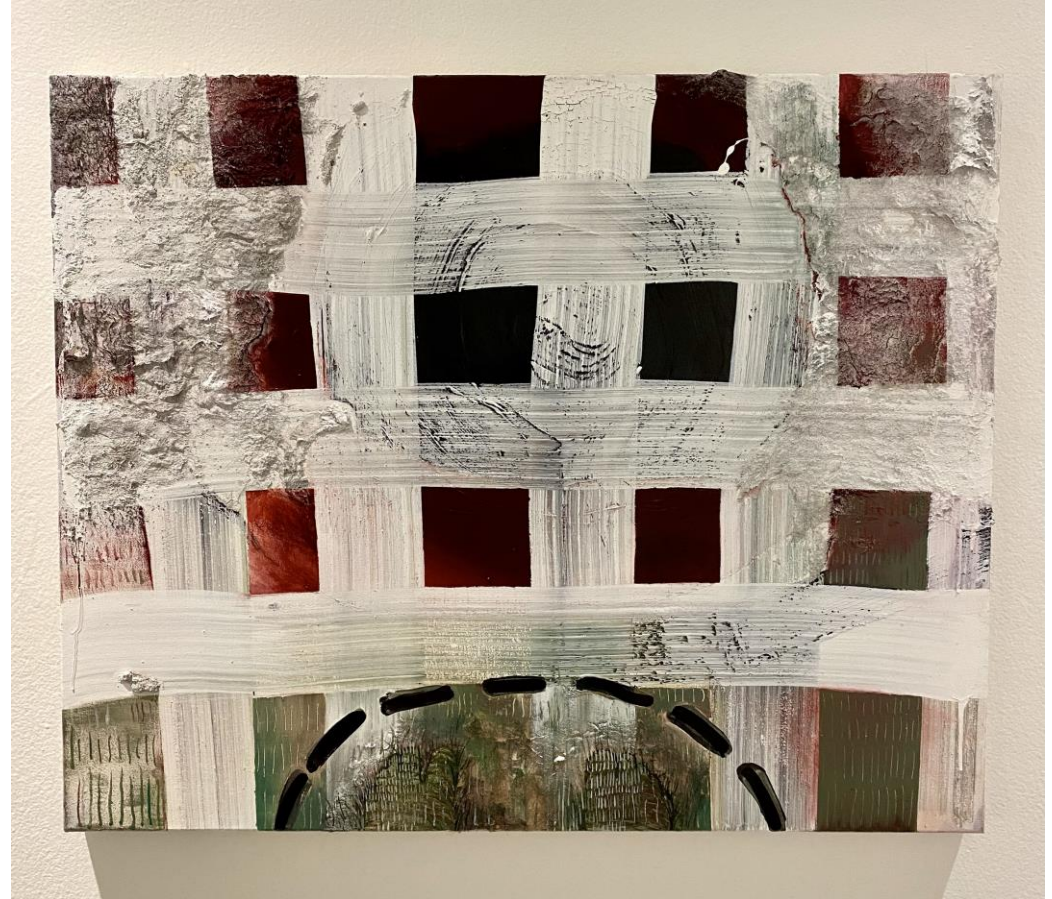
Hades' Pool

32 x 38 x 2 in.

Acrylic paint, graphite, hair, lint on canvas.

After hosting Odysseus and his men for a full year, Circe instructs Odysseus to travel to Hades where he may receive guidance from the dead. She explains that upon arrival he must fill a ditch with sacrificial blood to access the spirits.

The canvas references the sails of the ship that carry the men to the underworld. The grid is a traditional apparatus for earthly plans and serves as a screen between the physical and spiritual realm. Hair and lint are matted around the edges of the canvas to suggest the physical preparation and construction of the pool of blood from which the dead will drink. Two feet are located at the bottom of the picture plane, awaiting the arrival of the first spirit.





Moly

18 x 8 x 6 in.

Regrind, milk carton, soil, spray paint, wood, tape, marble contact paper.

Odysseus approaches Circe's home determined to rescue his men who have been trapped in pig form. On his way, he is offered advice by Hermes on what to do when he arrives. The mercurial god also provides Odysseus with a plant to protect him from being turned into a pig as well. Moly is described as a flower with white petals and black roots, difficult for mortals to dig up, but easily accessible for any god.

This sculpture takes the description of the antidote and translates it into a milky elixir being poured from a black carton onto a marbled container filled with soil. Part of the marble print is peeled away exposing the materials below.

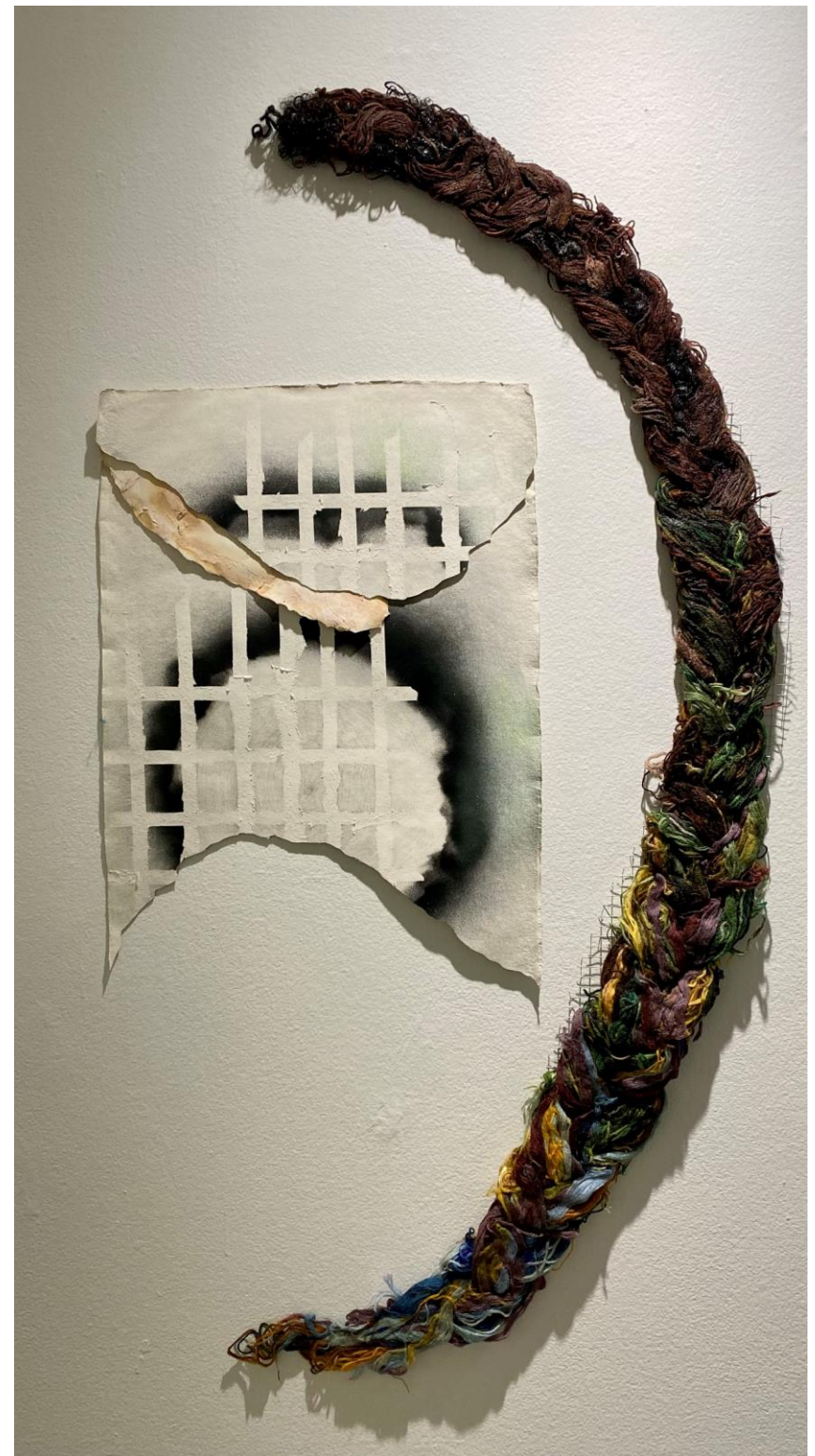
Beautiful, Dreadful

50 x 36 x 2 in.

Spray paint, graphite, yarn, paste, hair, colored pencil, tape, wire mesh, paper.

Odysseus travels to Aeaëa where the goddess Circe lives. The men find her singing and weaving. Circe invites the men in and serves them drugged refreshments which turn them into pigs. With the help of Hermes, Odysseus is protected from Circe's concoction. Once released, they all stay with the goddess for a year enjoying her hospitality.

The painting depicts a fractured outline of the island. A fence-like shape is ripped away from the paper exposing the layer below. A multicolored braid just beyond the edges of the paper curves around the piece. The shapes and forms are not closed off, they remain open just as Circe's willingness to release and tend to her uninvited guests.



The Space Between Scylla and Charybdis

50 x 24 x 10 in.

Canvas, matte medium, acrylic paint, yarn, dog hair, styrofoam, textured latex.

Upon returning from Hades, Circe prepares Odysseus and his men for unavoidable challenges ahead. Awaiting the travelers are Charybdis, a female whirlpool that swallows ships whole, and Scylla, a female monster with six heads and the voice of howling puppies. These two are considered impossible to pass; to avoid one is to be demolished by the other. Following Circe's guidance, Odysseus makes it through yet violently loses six men to Scylla.

On either side of a slender form are canvases, suggesting the sails of the ship. The canvas shapes are tracings of the central form: one side marked by ripples and the other matted with fur. Together the styrofoam and latex represent the space between two impossible things.



Ogygia Filled With Wings

21 x 18 x 7 in.

Pedal board, velcro, pages from a book about birds, plastic cave, tape, yarn, notecard, acrylic paint.

Calypso hosts Odysseus for seven years after he arrives on her island as the sole survivor of Zeus' wrath. Ogygia is described as a luscious cavern smelling of citrus, filled with music, birds, and weaving. Odysseus, missing Penelope and his estate, eventually becomes a resistant lover. Hermes is sent to instruct Calypso to let Odysseus leave, yet she makes her dissent known, "You cruel, jealous gods! You bear a grudge / whenever any goddess takes a man to sleep with as a lover in her bed."

The base of the wall sculpture is a guitar pedal board referencing the songs in the air. Yet the pedals have been ripped off suggesting the removal of Calypso's lover. Bird wings reveal themselves above and below the board. A labeled notecard securing a gradient of weaving yarn drapes over the entrance of the cavern form attached to the board.





Nausicaa's Laundry

33 x 15 x 24 in.

Rounded wood panel, cardboard, tape, textured latex paint, hardware, assortment of folded fabrics, wax, yarn, spray paint.

Athena instructs Nausicaa to travel with her enslaved girls to the riverbank to wash the clothes. As a result of Athena's guidance, Odysseus sees the young woman and supplicates himself to her. In return Nausicaa brings him home to receive full hospitality from her family.

The wall sculpture is painted a solid color that appears to absorb the soot and dirt from the soiled fabrics. The drying rack and laundry basket are combined and reoriented. Wax molds of hands tucked within the folds of fabric suggest the labor of the enslaved girls who execute the domestic labor.

House Slaves

84 x 44 x 3 in.

Paper, hand and knee imprints, wash cloths, wax, ashes, matte medium, cleaning motions.

Slaves ceaselessly tend to the guests and the household by bathing, clothing, feeding, and waiting them. In her Translator's Note, Emily Wilson addresses her decision to use the word slaves rather than servants as other translators have in the past. To disguise the fact that ancient Greeks were enslavers only serves to shine a favorable light on them and the text.

The shape of the painting suggests the floorplan of a banquet hall. The ashes were applied with sponges in the motions of cleaning to reflect the gruesome ending of Odysseus' enslaved girls. Before meeting their own death, the girls are forced to clean up the gore of the slaughtered suitors that covered the great hall.





Odysseus' Scar

8 x 3 x 2 in.

Paper pulp, ashes, wheat paste, wax, cotton fabric.

Odysseus' identity is finally discovered by his childhood nanny, Eurycleia, after returning home disguised as a beggar. As she cleans his feet and legs, her fingers come into contact with an unforgettable scar he received on Mount Parnassus as a youth.

The small wall sculpture captures the scar tissue as a daisy chain, a knot often used to prevent excess rope from becoming tangled on boat docks. The ash, pulp, and wax create the skin-like textures of the seafaring veteran's revealing mark.

Athena's Potions

6 x 7 x 9 in.

Paper pulp, test tubes, acrylic paint, matte medium, rose petals.



The goddess Athena guides every aspect of Odysseus' return home. Many of her interventions come in the form of physical or cognitive alterations such as confidence, sweet sleep, protection from rude remarks, ugliness, unearthly grace, and attractiveness. These gifts are described as being either poured over the person or as mist that descends upon them.

The base of the hand-sized, paper sculpture is overflowing with test tubes. Supporting the form is a puddle of bright yellow ointment and a dollop of crushed rose petals. Often described as bright-eyed, Athena provides guidance with every new day that rosy-fingered Dawn rises.

Telemachus' Youth

8 x 12 x 12 in.

Construction paper, glue, regrind, silicone, cotton ball, wax, trinket, dried fruit peel, broken ceramic, acrylic paint, foam, twig, plaster, lint, part of an ornament.

Telemachus is described as stunted in maturity due to his father Odysseus' 20 year absence. Athena visits Telemachus, encouraging him to find his father and kill the suitors that seek to marry his mother. The goddess tells the young man, "You must not stick to childhood; / you are no longer just a little boy." Throughout the poem, Telemachus struggles with his confidence.

The handmade bowl and contents are reminiscent of a child's collection of treasures. Each object's value is lost on anyone except the young collector. A black, melted form supports the bowl resembling a shadow or old skin being shed.





Penelope's Tears

2 x 4 x 5 in.

Braided yarn, thread, years of contact lenses, crushed rose petals, tissue.

Homer describes Penelope as ceaselessly crying over the absence of Odysseus. Her son, Telemachus, regularly encourages her to stop or else she will “spoil her pretty skin.” But Penelope does not stop as suitors occupy the halls of her home while her husband fails to return year after year. Secluded in her bedroom, she weeps and weaves. As rosy-fingered Dawn rises each day, Penelope’s weeping begins again.

The hand-sized sculpture presents a small sample of the tears Penelope would have wept. They overflow from the braided cup onto the petal encrusted tissue.

Blood Bowl

10 x 12 x 10 in.

Paper pulp, acrylic paint, regrind, dog hair, ashes.

Nestor, the famed king of Pylos, calls for a special sacrifice to honor Athena after she appears to him and Odysseus' son, Telemachus. In preparation for the sacrifices, Nestor charges his son Perseus with bringing the blood-bowl to catch the black blood of the sacrificial cow.

The paper bowl appears to record the event with red paper pulp soaked through from interior to exterior. Lacking a foot, the bowl is supported by three forms; hair and ashes fitted around black regrind.



The Memory of Troy

26 x 38 x 2 in.

Latex paint, paper pulp, spray paint, graphite on wooden panels.



There would be no *Odyssey* without the Trojan War. The conflict begins when Paris abducts Helen from Sparta. She was his promised prize from Aphrodite during The Judgment of Paris. Menelaus, Helen's husband, rallies Odysseus and other kings to take up arms and bring her home. *The Memory of Troy* provides context for Penelope's and Telemachus' mourning as they have been without their family member for two decades.

The wood panels suggest the Trojan Horse, the apparatus that brought the Spartans victory after 10 years of battle. The maze-like shapes reference the complexities and elusiveness of war. Muted hues of red and green dwell on separate picture planes held close together by a small gray form.



A Daily Routine

38 x 60 in.

Watercolor, pages from a book about seals, graphite, acrylic paint on paper.

While staying with Menelaus, Telemachus learns that Odysseus was last seen by the old sea god Proteus, weeping on the shores of Calypso's island. Menelaus heard this from Proteus himself, after capturing the god during his daily routine of counting his beloved seals. Proteus walks among the animals, caring for them before lying down among them.

This painting consists of two triangular pieces of paper that drape from the wall to the floor overlapping one another at the top and bottom. The shapes are reminiscent of flippers. The artist sat on the floor in between the two pieces of paper as she painted the seal-like textures on the surfaces.

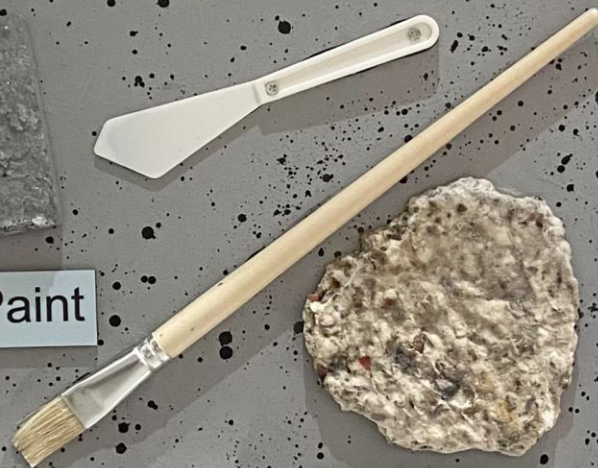
Don't touch the art. But DO touch these materials.

Artist Lisa Bachman Jones creates her work using many different materials. Some of them are things you might have in your own house!

Jones likes to imagine how she might re-use items like junk mail, ashes, pet hair, and even old contact lenses! As you explore the gallery, see if you can identify some of the materials below in her work.



Ash & Paint



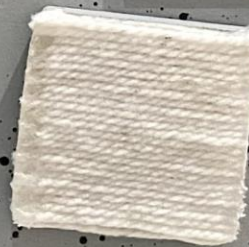
Paper Pulp



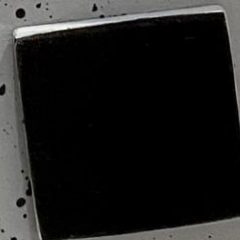
Hair & Resin



Tree Bark



Yarn



Velcro



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The Odyssey: A Retelling
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**For more information
about the artist and her work visit:**

Website: Labachman.com

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