



**Materials
for the Arts**

New York City
Department of
Cultural Affairs

**“The Useful Life of Objects”
Curated by Kendal Henry and Sara Reisman**

To wander the aisles of Materials for the Arts is to enter a space where creative possibility is shaped by contingency: what is available on a given day, how materials are encountered, and how they intersect with each visitor’s worldview. Collage, assemblage, reuse, and rediscovery unfold amid shelves and bins holding an astonishing volume of surplus objects, materials diverted from the waste stream and made available to artists, public schools, cultural organizations, and other nonprofits.

Here, in the Materials for the Arts gallery, four New York-based artists —Ronen Gamil, Baseera Khan, Armita Raafat, and Justin Sterling— take radically different approaches to creative reuse. Justin Sterling and Baseera Khan give new meaning to readymade and found objects as sites for political inquiry, whereas Ronen Gamil and Armita Raafat engage with the intricacies of traditional craft to reinvent techniques linked to their individual expressions of cultural heritage. Each of the four artists’ practices is attentive to the productive possibilities of found materials, challenging capitalist cycles of consumption through the lens of creative reuse. Invited to participate in short residencies at Materials for the Arts (MFTA) during the fall of 2025, these artists were selected by the two guest curators and the team at MFTA for their conceptual strategies of transforming surplus materials into everything from sculptural and installation-based works to performative projects that intervene into archives and the public realm.

From the conceptualization of the short-term residencies initiated by MFTA’s team, the exhibition’s premise continued to evolve through further dialogue between the two curators about their respective experiences commissioning permanent public art — which demands materials that endure for decades. Both Henry and Reisman have worked extensively in civic public art. Civic public art funded through New York City’s Percent for Art program requires that artworks endure the “useful life” of the capital projects of which they are a part —often for several decades— binding artistic decisions to architectural permanence. This means that an artwork commissioned for a public building or outdoor public space must last as long as the building or site. The artists in this exhibition begin from different, almost inverse proposition, that materials can be given another life, one that exceeds their intended

use and embraces transformation. Within the show, the artists literally extend the circulation and cycles of utility and a shared respect for the impacts of production, artistic and otherwise, on the environment. The process of reuse is not a fixed duration determined by an architect or a manufacturer; instead, it is an extensible cycle that goes as far as the imagination leads. By repurposing the mundane, these artists demonstrate that sustainability is more than an aesthetic gesture — it is a practice of attention, restraint, responsibility, and care.

Armita Raafat's practice might be best understood as one of care that engages with the quiet transformations of materials through layering and accumulation. Influenced by her upbringing in Iran, Raafat's three-dimensional works draw on the logic of *muqarnas*—the geometric structures of Islamic architecture— and reposition industrial surplus such as Styrofoam, mesh, and tile fragments as infrastructures of resilience. Her paper-based works, created between 2022 and 2024, are intimate collages made *within* the medium of paper, rather than on paper, embedded with pigmented pulp, and *khoos doozi* (embroidered textiles) sourced from women artisans from an island south of Iran, with Iranian, Afghan, and Arabic influences. These stunning kaleidoscopic geometric forms function as layered compositions of light and interruption, with reflective surfaces that heighten the viewer's bodily awareness. In her sculptural installations, Raafat gives discarded building materials a second (and in some cases, a third) life, framing sustainability as an ongoing engagement with cultural heritage and the cultivation of new architectural forms. She uses repetition of architectural details and applies them with dazzling, refractive color palettes, drawing the viewer in again and again to try to comprehend the complexity of form they contain.

Ronen Gamil utilizes traditional Yemeni techniques and discarded synthetics to create "monuments to the unknown." Their work bridges the gap between domestic spaces and global political interests. Like Armita Raafat's use of traditional techniques to generate contemporary results, Gamil contributed to the exhibition a large-scale map of displacement titled "The Best is Yet to Come," 2020. This textile installation serves as a schematic map of Crown Heights, where Gamil lives. Combining Yemeni garment patterns with the symbol of the cowrie shell, the artist critiques the notion of the "highest and best use" of land in real estate, highlighting how gentrification erodes the cultural fabric of New York neighborhoods. The work's title, borrowed from rhetoric used during the 2020 Republican National Convention by Kimberly Gilfoyle and Donald Trump, is redirected to question whose futures are prioritized. Gamil cynically appropriates this language to challenge whose interests are at the heart of political policy as systems of care and accountability unravel by the day. In response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Gamil sculpted "Wounded Child No Surviving Family," 2025-2026. Carved from a single block of found

Styrofoam, this sculpture stands as a monument for Palestinian children separated from their families. The jumbled letters evoke the rubble of Gaza, and the fragility of the synthetic foam symbolizes the precarity of life.

In these times of despair, the artistic process can lead us back to basics. Made from copper wire, using a jewelry-making technique originating in Yemen, Gamil's "Bee Miner," 2023, synthesizes craftsmanship, biology, and political expression. Building on a tradition familiar to Gamil's Sephardic Jewish background, the appropriated filigree process involves twisting wires and beads to create lace-like designs. The fragile sculpture depicts an oversized miner bee, a type of non-aggressive pollinator native to New York City that generally does not bite or sting, an apt metaphor for coexistence between cultures. Replicating the delicate art of Yemeni filigree to depict the ecologically vital miner bee, this sculpture is an expression of Gamil's solidarity with the Palestinian people and opposition to their continuous oppression, dispossession, and colonization.

Central to Justin Sterling's artworks are the concepts of rupture and repair. Begun in 2025, Sterling's "Riot Box" series compresses and contains the tensions of the cityscape into intimate, charged forms where identity, citizenship, and land converge. Each box functions as a compact site in which personal history and collective violence collide. In the process of repurposing discarded materials rich with symbolic weight, he reveals how systems of control and resistance are built from the ordinary, framing sustainability as both a material strategy and a political stance rooted in reuse. Objects within the work range from wampum to cowrie shells, an expired passport, a brick etched with ancient inscriptions, a folded keffiyeh packed with a set of cutlery. This array of found objects begins to form an archive of identity and its obsolescence in the face of heightened political constraints within the public realm. The "Riot Box" that Sterling has subtitled "Daily Bread" whispers the story of the famine experienced by Gazan Palestinians, emphasizing the causal relationship between hunger and oppression. Stenciled with these instructions, IN CASE OF RIOT, PUNCH GLASS, the "Riot Boxes" hold potent talismans; in other words, objects that contain power to transform the conditions of repression into possibility.

Alongside the "Riot Boxes," several of Sterling's broken and repaired windows are on view. For him, breaking a window marks an act of rupture and violence, while the improvised acts of taping, patching, boarding, or mending signal necessity, care, and unequal access to repair. These provisional solutions extend the window's usefulness while exposing the economic and social conditions that shape how this kind of damage is addressed.

If Sterling and Gamil's artworks are signals of crisis as well as change, Baseera Khan's "Law of Antiquities" (2021-2023) and "Water and Gas Bags" (2024) represent

the archive as a resource for transformation. Repurposing acrylic shelves from a 2017 project, Khan's three-dimensional installation is a display of the raw materials—water, pigment, and crude oil— fundamental to her work as a painter. Inspired by Senga Nengudi, this color-saturated installation deconstructs painting into sculptural objects that form an installation, linking abstract art to the global struggle over natural resources. Khan's work analyzes the history of colonialism and the "geopolitics of the present" by examining how objects are handled, hoarded, and hidden. "Law of Antiquities" (2021-2023) is presented here as a suite of three inkjet prints that document Khan performing gestures based on museum regulations for handling antiquities, which they researched in connection with their 2021 solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2021, which included research access to the museum's collection. Within the images, Khan is wearing custom nitrile gloves, turning the "rules of preservation" into a performance, questioning who is allowed to touch history and who shapes it. Khan writes, "In my opinion, material creates identity, not the other way around. The pressure of identity is too much and too constructed, so I try not to reinstate these colonial labels in my work. Instead I try to emancipate them by my use of form and color, performance... I abstract identity with multiple ways of working, keeping you guessing."

This guesswork is not random or arbitrary, but it is a process of rethinking received knowledge about the very objects that define us and our cultures. In the Materials for the Arts warehouse, the possibilities for honoring and reimagining culture are endless - these possibilities appear wherever you look. Throughout "The Useful Life of Objects," reuse operates not as nostalgia or efficiency, but as a method of rethinking value, power, and inheritance.

— Sara Reisman and Kendal Henry

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