

# Art of Resistance

by Matthew Piper

*“It is not the pots we are forming, but ourselves.”*

MC Richards

*“I [see] no dichotomy between art and science, as both [are] based on precise observation of inner and outer worlds.”*

Samuel R. Delany

Addie Langford is no idealist. Her experimental, materials-obsessed process is rooted in tension and discomfort. Her paintings and sculptures evoke an affect of entropy, of the dissolution and degradation of ideal forms over time/under duress. It’s not that she can’t make objects that you could describe as “perfect.” (She did that before, when she worked on a porcelain production line, and she describes it as a kind of suffering.) It’s that she finds her truth (her beauty) in the struggle.

Her work begins with an intimate, intricate understanding of material. When she speaks of porcelain, for instance, she’s all the way down, in its molecular structure. When she pulls back and describes its characteristic tendencies using the language of preference (“Porcelain doesn’t like to be large-scale.”), she sounds like Louis Kahn (“You say to brick, ‘What do you want, brick?’ And brick says to you, ‘I like an arch.’”). This is not a coincidence; Langford’s undergraduate studies in architecture are the deep-set foundation upon which her sculptural practice is built. (Twenty years later, she’s still talking about tuck pointing and mortaring, joinery and the post and lintel.) But Kahn, remember, was an idealist. He listened to brick, and made an arch; Langford understands that porcelain doesn’t want to be large-scale, but is making it relatively large-scale anyway, fashioning in her most recent body of work big, “stressed,” slumping, sack-like vessels that embody (and thereby reveal) their misuse.

This revelatory, adversarial way of working with porcelain arose in the “Soft Compression” series of 2010, smaller works whose construction involved a lively, active process of “mismanagement,” of “building too wet and too fast.” Here Langford first made the decision not to obscure the visual remnants (seams, joints) of her corrective processes—to let the objects, in other words, speak of their struggles.

In painting, too, she notably enacts resistances. She works exclusively in acrylic, a medium that she avows to once hating for its “soulless,” artificial quality, but that, over time, she has developed a comfortable working relationship with. Concomitant with her latest sculptural works, she is executing a body of paintings in acrylic on tapestry fabric, a material that doesn’t really want to be painted on. (“Hyper-synthetic,” it hungrily sucks up the paint in uncomfortable and ghostly ways.) One can glance back to “A Timeless Elsewhere,” a 2016 series of paintings executed on vinyl and composite hide (a material, Langford notes, that we “know from Pizza Hut booths and car interiors”), to see an opposed but related exploration. There, the paint was “rejected” by the material, so that it “fell off” the support, allowing the artist to create thin, precise, dripping lines whose presence on the hide seems tenuous, conditional.

Lines (created by both brush stroke and drip) are a key component of Langford’s painterly vocabulary. Works in the “Timeless Elsewhere” series are marked by grid-like, cellular structures of varying densities and orientations that seem to warp, drift, become overwhelmed. (Here Langford cites barn architecture, and the curving, fence-like forms of influential Cranbrook sculptor Michael Hall.) One thinks of a remnant of structure, of the lived-in grid, of an ideal system or scheme that is observably collapsing, decaying, eroding.



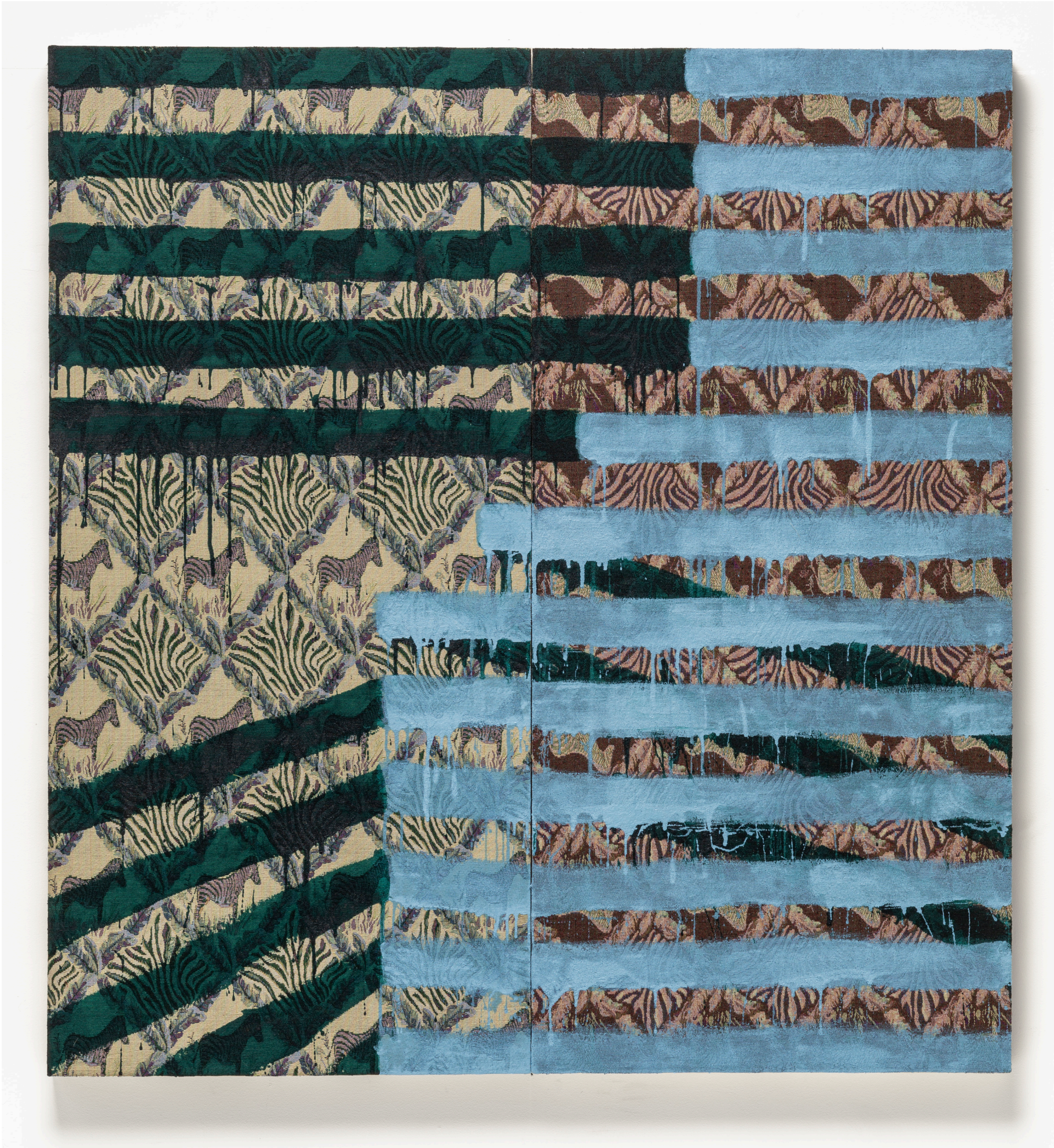
“Paper, clay, and now fabric,” Langford says, “function for me as a stand-in for the body.” Looked at this way, her work suggests the multitudinous forces against which we humans labor, bodily: stress, gravity, aging, illness, anxiety, obsolescence, loss of control (cf. potter and poet MC Richards: “to know ourselves by our resistances”). Therein lies the subterranean empathy and pathos of this abstract artist’s work: given the right frame, we might see these objects as ourselves, bearing tell-tale signs of our perpetual physical and psychic trials.

Her most recent works suggest something broader. In painting, Langford is guided first and foremost by her support surface, whether it be the synthetic hides of “A Timeless Elsewhere” or the paper that she stiffened and reinforced with repeated washes to make “The Gray Series.” It is from the idiosyncrasies of the surface, intimately understood, that the content of her work emerges. In her new paintings, which are physically larger than those that came before, the tapestry fabrics that she finds herself drawn to are curiously loaded with preexisting imagery: kitschy scenes of kittens and zebras, flower pots and watering cans. Langford herself downplays the significance of the imagery (which she at once obscures, highlights, responds to, and complicates with her bold, dripping brushstrokes); she is more interested in the fact that the pictures appear both on the front and (in reverse image, with different values) on the back of the fabric—thus proposing to her an appealing basis for working in the diptych form.

But the character of the imagery is not as easy for the viewer to dismiss. Its evocation of cliché textures of domestic American life interacts in startling ways with the artist’s unusually wide, horizontal brushwork, which is here redolent of the stripes of Old Glory. Perhaps the beset body of concern here is the body politic. If so, the haunting doubling of the already awkward imagery and the bleeding, curving brush strokes cohere into a national portrait of slow-motion ruination, a process that, the works suggest, begins in the home, with the family, and in the aging structures (historic, socio-political) that define the nation, and works outward, toward the civic sphere and the present moment of perpetual crisis.

If this shift toward the social seems surprising, consider that only recently, Langford created a body of sculptures with the “Me Too” movement in mind. The general shape of these compact, vividly colored, floor-bound objects was inspired by mid-century vacuum cleaner heads, and as installed at Detroit’s Scarab Club, they were intended, in part, to help start a conversation about that institution’s historic marginalization of women and people of color.

But if Langford is not an idealist, neither is she a polemicist, and it is a strength of her work that it will at once absorb and deflect any number of complementary or contradictory readings, as her surfaces do to the paint she applies to them. (Flags? Sure, maybe. But maybe not.) What persists is her approach: art making as resistance training, as clear-eyed experimentation and incremental learning process, as embracing that which makes her uncomfortable and living with it, working with it until it makes intuitive sense—until, as she puts it, “we can get somewhere together.” In this, the artist maps (wisely, subtly) a useful path for both the individual body and the collective.



*When Gravity Becomes Material: Phthalo / Cornflower/ Cebra*  
Acrylic and Domestic Fabric on Board  
55 h x 52 w x 2 1/4 d, inches  
2018