

Brecht Wright Gander, 'Studio Visit: Libby Rothfeld by Brecht Wright Gander,' *BOMB*, May 29 2023

# *BOMB*

## Studio Visit: Libby Rothfeld by Brecht Wright Gander

*Assemblages of the found, made, random, and intimate.*



When Libby Rothfeld was a child, she believed that God published *TV Guide*. Who else could know the future? Her parents were unusually indifferent to their material surroundings. "We lived with these bizarre curtains that the people before us already had. And at one point we ran out of water glasses, and we didn't buy more; we drank out of mugs. There was just no aesthetic decision-making." Does any of this help to explain what I see as I enter her storefront studio in Ridgewood, Queens?



The space is modest in scale and only modestly messy considering the variety of materials and the artist's fondness for found objects. On one shelf, a tub spills over with vintage toy airplanes. On the walls are several forms resembling awnings with blinds that are made, primarily, from plaid fabrics. Resting atop and teasing out from between and stuck improbably to the awnings are blond and brunette coiffed wigs, plastic cushion covers, and a restaurant menu. Only after several moments of looking do I register that the blinds are upholstered. Thick, like fingers. *Why?*

I don't know what Rothfeld's work means, and this seems to be an important part of what it does, which is to cultivate a state of engaging perplexity. Through an aura of intentionality, her sculptures suggest that there is something to understand, and yet through willful inscrutability they insist on their status as irreducible physical phenomena—uninterpretable specificities rather than discourse-friendly abstractions. In the work at hand, she begins with an established awning typology and ends with singular, plaid aberrations, which generates friction between the generic and the peculiar.



Rothfeld's fabrics are bold, hideous, and inviting. The proportions are satisfying. The apparent randomness of the arrangements has in it the orderliness of things moved by the wind, the way cows distribute across a field in a bucolic idyll. Atop one of the awnings is, for no apparent reason, a folded length of boucle. Lest you imagine this is merely for aesthetic effect, a strap has been sewn into the awning to secure it. *Why?*



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Maybe it's time to stop asking that question that particular way. Art, as I understand it, is defined relationally by the quality of attention it engages. Looking at Rothfeld's work involves appreciating the interplay between order and disorder, the countercurrents of found banalities and composed eccentricities. Rothfeld describes her assemblages as "nonhierarchical." That seems apt in that she disorients our sense of the meaningful and the insignificant. In one of the wall awnings a takeout menu might be one of a thousand anonymous reproductions, or it might suggest something personal, tied to a routine or an important dinner date. If the detail is sentimental, it is also repressed; she has closed it off behind a plastic sheath, the kind that protects furniture from touch. Push, pull, push. Reading her work is like looking at familiar street signs in an unfamiliar town: recognition and alienation converge.

*Libby Rothfeld's work is on view at Apparatus Projects in Chicago until June 4.*

*Brecht Wright Gander writes about art and makes sculpture in upstate New York.*