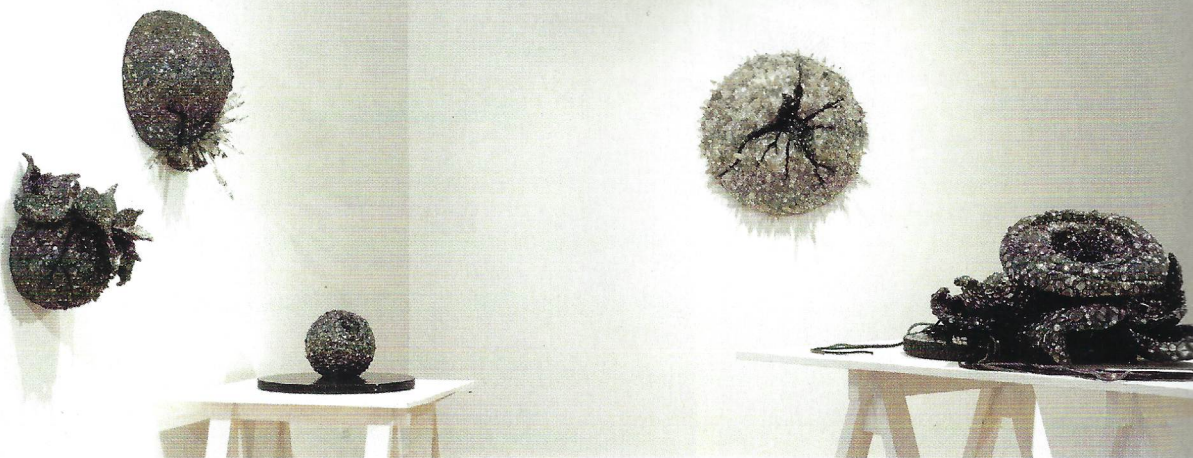


NEW YORK

Lauren Fensterstock

Claire Oliver Gallery



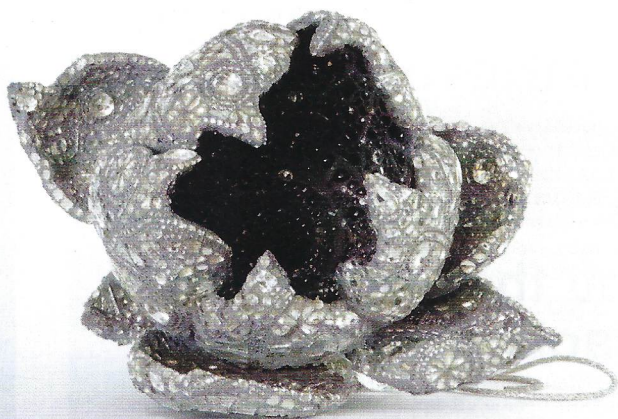
Scanning for the Claire Oliver Gallery from the corner of 135th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, I suddenly glimpse my old high school, a Collegiate Gothic behemoth rising from the crest of St. Nicholas Park. More than 40 years ago, the High School of Music and Art's aspirational student body called it the "Castle on the Hill." I remember how our teachers, including several practicing Buddhists, wore the internal struggle between ambition and integrity on their faces, and I still think of them fondly, even those whose erratic behavior never quite lived up to their ideals. While I'm caught in bittersweet reverie, a large jewel

squatting in a windowfront across the street catches a thin shaft of sunlight and tugs on my eyes.

I jaywalk as if drawn by a tractor beam and stand outside Lauren Fensterstock's "Some Lands Are Made of Light," marveling at the sparkling heft of *I Arrange the Stars* (2024). The title alone makes me smile, underscoring the old push-me-pull-you of ego and humility, and the form, oddly reminiscent of the insatiable carnivorous flower from *Little Shop of Horrors*, illustrates the relentless, undulating attractions and repulsions of desire.

Entering the gallery, I'm mesmerized by the light and what Fensterstock's seductive work does with

it. In this space, I become a guest god, surveying *The Intimate Vast* (2024), a glittering crashed mass set amid the debris field of a failed celestial system—broken orbits of spiky, twinkling planets so filled with tension that they've cracked from the pressure, spilled their molten guts, and fallen from the heavens. Reading about the inception of these sculptures and their ironic materiality is startling: Fensterstock's earnest religious narrative collides head-on with the guilty-pleasure bling of the objects themselves, resulting in a dissonance so strong it nearly hums, and the glamour of it all feels much wryer than the story she's telling. I'm



sure I'm not the first viewer to draw visual parallels between the emblems of her spiritual turmoil and Petah Coyne's decadent material fascination with polarities, but while Coyne's work often pointedly petrifies the supple, Fensterstock's does the opposite—her sincerity wrings blood from the brittle.

Fensterstock says that her work is a contemplative practice grounded in Buddhism, a belief system whose central tenet indicts desire as the root cause of all suffering. What a fitting testament these pieces are to that fraught Noble Truth. Each one is a wrecked world forged from aspirations to grandeur: ostentatious fragments of vintage crystal chandeliers, gaudy metallic facets plucked from baubles whose owners yearned for real jewels, glimmering globs of obsidian, razor-edged chunks and slivers of orphaned glass, mirrors busted from errant luck, and second-string gemstones, all coagulated by the merciless gravity of craving.

I'm struck by the similarity to the ubiquitous gilded ornament of the early Catholic Church: a glistening pageantry seething with friction, illuminating both grasping imperialism and ostensibly ascetic origins. The church was clever in maintaining this schism. Aesthetics have always served as a vector of ideological infection: the Divine must dazzle the uninitiated, and gold works *really* well. It's important to remember though, that the objects in question never emit their

own light and often eclipse the radiance they purport to reflect.

Fensterstock's drawings, titled *Amrita* (all 2024) and numbered one through seven, take a different tack. Spiky black bursts redolent of sea urchins, they are a much more low-key affair despite their peppered jewelery. The mingling shapes still suggest orbits, but where the sculptures evoke galactic mechanics, the drawings converge on the molecular—the fireworks of sparking neurons, or perhaps the quiet biological annihilation of apoptosis. Though somewhat colder, they feel

more intimate, if no less hazardous, than their shard-festooned counterparts. “Amrita” is Sanskrit for “immortality,” a double-edged sword, indeed, since every object in the gallery implies a threat: your grasp will be met with pain.

And herein perhaps lies the crux of Fensterstock's conundrum. On her Instagram, she self-identifies as a glutton. This charming confession makes me smile again as I picture her grappling with the absurd comic torment of having her dharma and eating it, too.

—SHASTI O'LEARY
SOUDANT



LAUREN FENSTERSTOCK
OPPOSITE,
FROM TOP:
Installation view of
“Some Lands Are
Made of Light,” 2024.

***I Arrange the Stars,*
2024.**

Vintage crystal,
glass, quartz,
obsidian, tourmaline,
and mixed media,
14 x 22 x 19 in.

**THIS PAGE:
Tenderly Willing,
2024.**

Vintage crystal,
glass, quartz, obsidian,
tourmaline, and
mixed media,
16 x 20 x 20 in.