



Sarah Wagner
Vegetable Lamb of America





Sarah Wagner, with husband and frequent collaborator Jon Brumit and son Otto, has established her studio and part-time residence on the former site of the Detroit Hardware Manufacturing Company located on the easterly side of Detroit. Situated in an historically rich industrial and residential district that reached its peak during the Golden Age of the twentieth century Industrial Revolution, the landscape is now dotted with unused properties and urban prairie. Like many enterprising artists, Wagner was drawn to the quiet arts revolution in Detroit. Her lifestyle is one of self-sufficiency, of scavenging, repurposing, and gleaning from the cumulative history of a city gone from riches to rags. In a city whose municipal resources are stretched too thin, Wagner relies on self-taught skills, bartering, and ingenuity in an environment of activity that moves frequently under the radar of the governing authorities. The lessons of this experience manifest themselves in her most recent installation piece, *Vegetable Lamb of America*.

Wagner's art practice and lifestyle are closely interwoven, an exploration of the ability of an individual to move within the all-encompassing systems in which capitalism defines American life. In the drive for speed and the maximization of capital and labor, something she sees as the core defining traits of capitalism, what is gained and what is lost? With so much of our lives tied into ever new technologies, and our very civilization defined by the "force, might, and wonder of industry," what is the nature of our culture, of a life shaped by powers beyond our control and often our understanding, where the skills of the artisan are lost, or subsumed, or beholden to larger systems? For Wagner, this questioning led to a feeling of hopelessness, of being continually forced back into a system that is as adept at destroying as it is in creating. But with the birth of her son, she found a need to understand as best she could the forces at work around her, to find purpose and hope for a future within their influence.



The Detroit site shared by Wagner and her family consists of two small homes set in front of a crumbling brick building that once housed the Detroit Hardware Manufacturing Company. Walls are missing entirely in the original factory structure, the surviving additions have large gaps in the walls, and what survives of the roof is crumbling and leaking. When they first moved onto the property, the couple spent nearly a year filling over 16 dumpsters with abandoned materials and trash dumped by neighbors over several decades, and has made significant inroads into establishing a livable home and working studio space. A testament to their innovative creativity, an entire side of one of the houses has been replaced with corrugated steel and plastic, establishing a greenhouse that interfaces directly with their living areas and provides heat to their home on sunny winter days. New cinderblock walls stabilize the entries into the former factory that houses their shared studio, and Wagner has become an expert plasterer and skilled mason, building on the construction background she and Brumit share. Despite the ongoing struggle of working within and against the byzantine, oppressive, and frequently dysfunctional bureaucracy of the City of Detroit, for the couple, it is a rich experience to shepherd the restoration of ruined buildings in a city ravaged by the ongoing toils of capitalism.



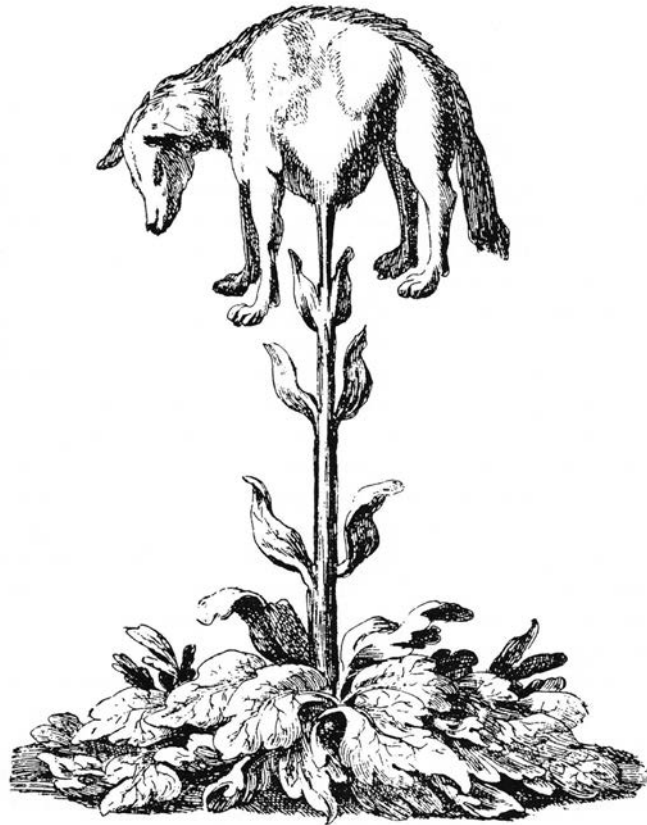
Trauma plays an active role in both Wagner's art and the reclamation of the property she lives on. In discussing her art, she posits that while we never return to what was when we heal from a physical or emotional trauma, the results of the recovery can still be beautiful. Her home and her sculpture are a call and response to this belief, of recovering what resources and skill allow, and making changes as new circumstances are revealed.



As she garnered the new skills needed to create her home, Wagner dove simultaneously into her academic research, consuming books on the complex history and social/political/economic landscape of the United States and the massive global impact capitalism has had on the development of humanity. She found the inspiration for *Vegetable Lamb of America* in Sven Beckert's book *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2014), a text that examines how the industrialization of cotton shaped global empires and led to war, international slavery, and the nature of contemporary manufacturing and capitalism. Cotton, over a short span of time, became a commodity that drove European colonization and empires, and spurred relentless developments in the technologies and practices of large scale manufacturing and trade. In reading Beckert's book, Wagner was profoundly impacted not only by the text, but by curious engravings of the "Vegetable Lamb of Tartary," a scientific myth that surrounded the first encounters with cotton by Europeans of the Middle Ages.



The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, or “barometz,” was a creation of the Middle Ages in Europe. Wool was common to 14th century Western Europeans, and they were familiar with flax from Egypt, but when cotton first appeared from Asia and Eastern Europe they had no mechanism for understanding its source. The myth of the barometz, long believed fact, was based on second hand accounts of a large plant that grew in India and the Tartar Region (roughly describing northern and central Asia) that bore pods from which tiny lambs burst forth. Alternate versions described a lamb that was held aloft from a central stock attached to its navel. The lamb could eat from the grass surrounding the plant, but would die when its fodder was exhausted. Wolves were the only carnivore that disturbed the barometz, and it was prized for its delicate flesh, bones, and fine wool. In 1887, the British naturalist Henry Lee authored the book *The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary*, in which he described the likely origins of the legend with tales spread by Sir John Mandeville in the 1300s, its subsequent history in the scientific halls of London over centuries, and its final debunking. Lee’s book also described the early history and economy of cotton, from India, Asia, and Egypt to the Americas.



Vegetable Lamb of America is comprised of a sculptural group of interconnected guard buildings, sheep and the plants they grow from, and a central industrial structure. The exterior of the sheep are made from sewn fabric panels. Their interior skeletons, visible beneath the translucent cotton, are made from steel. The skinned, fabricated skeleton is a recurring theme within Wagner’s works, the inner structures revealing changes wrought to the animal by the impact of humanity on the natural environment. *Vegetable Lamb* follows prior works such as *Wormwood Bones*; *Feral Fade*, which blended the aftermath of Chernobyl and urban decay in an examination of the impact of manmade disasters on local animal and plant species, and *Yard/Zone/Field*, which examined the rapidly changing urban landscape of Detroit and the newly re-formed relationships between neighborhoods, green spaces, and animal life. *Vegetable Lamb* directly tackles the industrialization of the natural world, and the new structures and ways of living that result. The use of the sheep fosters notions of shepherding, of guiding a damaged world into a new health.



Wormwood Bones: Feral Fade



Yard / Zone / Field



Most of Wagner's labor occurs in the patterning of her forms, of designing, cutting, and building the fabric shells. She learned from family to sew at an early age, and this skill, one of self-sufficiency, informs her artistic methods today. The choice of fabric was central to *Vegetable Lamb*. There was no question the material would be cotton, but texture, strength, and rigidity all had to be considered. Once the fabric was selected, patterns were cut from card stock, allowing her to plan the shapes and seams that form the outer skin. The cotton fabric was then patterned and assembled, and the completed skin was wrapped and closed around the steel framework of its skeleton. The sheep of *Vegetable Lamb* emerge from their cotton husks, or lay on their backs, with spindly, leafy growths sprouting from splayed legs. The inner skeletons then connect to spindly structures that reference the plant structures of the early engravings of the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary. These structures connect to small guard shacks, an organic outgrowth of buildings that characterize the industrial landscape.



All then flows into a central tower that resembles a coal firing plant, in Wagner's case, a plant inspired by Detroit's infamous Zug Island.

Zug Island, a man-made island in southern Detroit, is heavily industrialized, its sole occupant is United States Steel, which operates the blast furnaces that produce iron for the steel making process. The site was first developed for iron and steel in 1901, and has become one of the most polluted sites in the country. The island is also the suspected site of a low-frequency hum plaguing nearby residents. Despite the pollution, the undeveloped areas of the island are home to thriving colonies of native wildlife, including foxes, Peregrine falcons, and Lake Sturgeon, as well as invasive gulls, feral cats, and rats. Poor air quality plagues the area, and the site is cloaked in secrecy, with highly restricted access. Zug Island is the ultimate expression of the themes of Wagner's work, of the might and monumental presence of industry, the pollution and devastation that arise from its work, and the adaptation, and sometime transformation, of animals surviving within the changed environment.



Vegetable Lamb of America is an examination of a life lived in observation and struggle with the systems of the modern industrialized world, and an expression of the enduring craft of the artist. From the daily practices of her life, to her studies of manmade disasters, politics, and cultural and social structures around the world, Sarah Wagner shapes these influences into her quiet, challenging sculptures. In sharing these pieces, she hopes to find a way forward.



Zug Island



Sarah Wagner

Sarah Wagner resides throughout the year in Michigan, Tennessee, and California. She completed her BFA at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in 1994 and her MFA at the California College of the Arts in 2005, followed by a 2005 session at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She has exhibited in solo and collaborative exhibitions and performances in Michigan, Texas, Illinois, Tennessee, California, and Germany. She has also participated in group exhibitions across the United States. Wagner is the recipient of a 2009 Pollock/Krasner Grant and a 2014 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant. Her piece *Wormwood Bones; Feral Fade* was part of the Muskegon Museum of Art's traveling exhibition *Innovators and Legends: Generations in Textiles and Fiber*, and was added to its permanent collection in 2015.





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Exhibition organized by:
Art Martin, Director of
Collections and Exhibitions/
Senior Curator, Muskegon
Museum of Art

Project editor: Art Martin,
Director of Collections and
Exhibitions/Senior Curator,
Muskegon Museum of Art

Designed by:
Marguerite Curran,
Communications Manager,
Muskegon Museum of Art

Photography credits:
Brent Williams, Collections
Manager/Associate Preparator,
Muskegon Museum of Art

Additional photography by:
Sarah Wagner

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www.muskegonartmuseum.org

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