

Jane Benson (British, b.1973)

Known for a multidisciplinary, politically-immersive and research-based approach, the work of Jane Benson (British, b.1973) spans the mediums of sculpture, sound, digital media and prints. In layered, sensitive, contemplative and technical works, Benson splits, fractures and skews archetypal structures only to reassemble them through her investigative practice. Benson's conceptual work takes shape through complex, intricate and painstakingly physical processes which disrupt, distill and abstract familiar entities, imbuing them with new possibilities, perspectives and meanings. With delicacy and poignancy, Benson relies on seemingly destructive mechanisms "to re-invent and re-design classic forms of categorization and cultural stereotypes, all to regenerate the real, to re-engage new thoughts and ideas."¹

Benson's methodical and rigorous practice is repetitive, persistent and ritualistic, a "matter of pace and, thus, time and re-iteration"² in order to reveal, reinterpret and regenerate a rigid societal framework based on systems that have been cemented in place over the course of history, for example patriarchy, sexism and displacement. Curator Steven Matijcio describes the phenomena on which her work depends as simultaneously subject and object: as much a "reflection of the present" as a "contemplation of the future."³ Experienced through a plethora of sensory modes—audio, visual and tactile—Benson destabilizes and subverts classical forms of categorization to encourage new ways of looking and seeing, envisioning a rebirth from destruction; as she explains: "Destruction is not a means to an end but to a beginning, a reinvention or retranslation of form and meaning." Identifying as a dyslexic woman immigrant, Benson looks to an empowering and alternative translation of reality outside of accepted dialectical, social and cultural norms.

Jane Benson was born in Thornbury, England, a town in Gloucestershire county, north of Bristol, and raised in the village of Gawsorth in northwest England. Given the area's limited, rural surroundings, Benson spent much of her time outside exploring and getting lost in her imagination, "playing and inventing a new reality that suited [her] much better than the linear logic of surrounding minds and school." She explains how this would later inform her work: "Being dyslexic I had to find a different way of relating to the world from a very young age. Even then, I was questioning the nature of rules and the framework within which I was expected to function. I had to learn to be comfortable with being confused, or more accurately, I was comfortable questioning the relationship between things."

Benson attended the Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland, graduating with a BA in Painting in 1994. While she never felt a sense of belonging within the landscape of her upbringing, her studies in Edinburgh—where her father had been raised—helped dissipate this sense of displacement through a thorough engagement with art. Nevertheless, deeply-felt impressions of loss and longing permeate the work that would follow and continue throughout the entirety of her career thus far. She subsequently exhibited at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art as the recipient of the John Watson Award (1994), prompting her decision to apply for a Fulbright Scholarship, which she received in 1995, to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). During the course of her studies, Benson was influenced by lecturer and Milwaukee-based artist David Robbins, explaining that "he had a new

¹ Jane Benson, quoted in Yasi Alipour, "JANE BENSON with Yasi Alipour," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2019, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/05/art/JANE-BENSON-with-Yasi-Alipour>.

² Benson in Alipour, "JANE BENSON with Yasi Alipour."

³ Steven Matijcio, "Half-Truths," *Jane Benson: A Place for Infinite Tuning* (Milan: Skira, 2018), 7.

perspective on everything and wanted to reframe many arguments and ideas that are cast in stone in contemporary art.” She graduated from SAIC with her MFA in 1997.

In 1998, Benson received her first New York exhibition at the Elga Wimmer Gallery, acting as both curator and participant. *Headstand* received reviews in *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*; critic Roberta Smith wrote that the work of the five young artists included in the group exhibition—in addition to Benson, Kristin Mojsiewicz, Jennifer Cohen, Timothy Hutchings, Henry Steingieser—“involves various inversions or displacements that twist reality this way or that, usually introducing an element of capricious fantasy to the proceedings.”⁴

In 2000, Benson’s work was chosen to be part of the *Greater New York* exhibition at MoMA PS1 and following its success, her work was selected to represent British artists living and working in New York as part of the *UK in NY Festival* (2001), when she was commissioned to create a site-specific work for the Queens Museum. *Great Representations* (2001), a monumental three-dimensional relief collage designed for the 40-foot semi-circular wall of the museum’s second floor, represents Benson’s first large-scale site-specific work.

A formative experience in the shaping of Benson’s work and growth as an artist was the *New Views: World Financial Residency* (2001-02) organized by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC), and the World Financial Center Arts and Events immediately following the devastation of the September 11th attacks. For the project, LMCC invited nine artists to take up residence in the World Financial Center and create site-specific works that would respond to emerging political and cultural realities of the post-9/11 landscape. Benson’s contribution, *Happy Faux Flora* (2002), involved the casual introduction of modified artificial trees into the main lobby: every leaf was cut into an unnatural shape, such as a triangles or square, to create unabashedly fake flora. In this installation she “magnified the fake to draw attention to the shaken notion of the real.”⁵ Through its paradoxical and dissonant appropriation of natural forms by way of geometric construction and the resulting optical illusion (or disillusion), the series of “fake fake” plants—which is currently ongoing—relies on the abstraction and conceptual placelessness of ecology and nature.

In 2003, Benson was awarded the Emerging Artists Fellowship by Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, New York and produced her first outdoor, large-scale, semi-permanent work. *Waiting Room* was an interior waiting room, familiar to modern office spaces, sited outside within the landscape of the park. In 2005, she received a Pollock-Krasner Grant, followed by numerous projects and exhibitions, including her first major solo exhibition in New York, held at Roebing Hall Gallery in Manhattan. The critically-acclaimed exhibition featured *Underbush* (2004), a large-scale ceiling installation made up of hundreds of hand-cut hanging foil garlands painted in matte colors of camouflage that has since undergone various iterations at other venues. She was subsequently commissioned by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to create a permanent site-specific work for their newly-opened Siebel Center for Computer Science in 2005. Later that year, Benson was awarded a grant as part of the *In Practice* program at New York’s Sculpture Center to create a new site-specific work. *Occupied* (2005) involved the installation of a solid oak door, with a full-length camouflage colored and patterned stained glass window, into an existing doorway in the Center’s basement.

⁴ Roberta Smith, “Art in Review: ‘Headstand’,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/14/arts/art-in-review-headstand.html>.

⁵ Alipour, “JANE BENSON with Yasi Alipour.”

Other commissions have included an outdoor, public work for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia as part of the *Soft Sites* exhibition curated by Sara Reisman (2006) and a semi-permanent, outdoor work for Art Omi as part of the *Nature Not Nature* exhibition (2007). In 2007, she was awarded the Artists Alliance Inc., Studio Residency in New York. Two years later, Benson received a New York City Department of Cultural Affairs commission, through the Percent for Art program, to create a large-scale permanent public artwork in a new building in Queens. *Mirror Globe (Mapping the New World)* (2012), is a 14' x 60' mirrored mosaic depicting a world map of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres.

In 2011, Benson premiered a seminal body of collaborative performance work, *The Splits*, at her critically-acclaimed solo exhibition at Henry Street Settlement: Abrons Arts Center in New York. The ongoing series, for which Benson was awarded the Atlantic Center for the Arts residency to develop the work, features severed—yet still playable—string instruments that are metaphorically brought back together through activation and interaction of the altered objects by professional musicians. In this exploratory and improvisatory process, Benson calls attention to the crucial act of listening, wherein both musician and audience must relearn how to listen without preconceived notions and expectations. In 2012, she was commissioned to create a new work for the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut: a *split* cello duet performed between a “blue” state, represented by Connecticut, and a “red” state, Virginia. A year later, the Queens Museum also commissioned a new *Splits* work for the *Queens International 2013*, her first international *split* duet which engaged an online *split* guitar duet between Mexico City and New York City—foreshadowing a vital form of communication during periods of isolation and alienation brought on by the current pandemic. In 2015, Benson conceived *Finding Baghdad*, a video installation featuring two Iraqi brothers, Bassem Hawar and Saad Mahmood Jawad, separated by acts of war and immigration but bridged through their Skype-based, cross-continental performance of split Iraqi instruments that resulted in a “disjointed, but ultimately cathartic musical language that weaves distance into dialogue.”⁶

Parallel to *Finding Baghdad*, *Family Portraits* (2015) took the flags of the countries that represent the Iraqi family’s locations of displacement, shredding them and reassembling them to replace “the illusionistic emblems of wholeness with a more authentic manifestation” of those in states of transience and flux.⁷ In a recent—and ongoing—series, Benson creates flag rubbings on paper in a similarly destabilizing process, removing recognizable symbols to abstract and confound geopolitical conceptions.

In 2017, Benson’s first one-person survey exhibition took place at the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati. *Jane Benson: Half-Truths* examined fifteen years of work, including performance and video, sculpture, drawing and installations. Curated by Steven Matijcio, the exhibition was accompanied by her first monograph, *Jane Benson: A Place for Infinite Tuning* (Skira, 2018), with texts by Nico Israel and Sara Reisman. Her most recent solo exhibition, *The End of the Patriarchal System*, took place at LMAK Gallery in New York in 2019.

In *The End of the Patriarchal System*—“a timely, seductive, and urgent response”⁸ to the writings of British suffragette Mona Caird—Benson pondered notions of exile and marginalization, sexism and patriarchy. For this recent and ongoing body of work—first explored in 2015 with her installation *Song for Sebald*, based on W.G. Sebald’s novel *Rings of Saturn*—Benson employs textual reproductions and “excavates” a score by excising syllables of the musical scale—do, re mi, fa, so, la, ti—and thereby

⁶ Matijcio, “Half-Truths,” *Jane Benson: A Place for Infinite Tuning*, 8.

⁷ Matijcio, “Half-Truths,” *Jane Benson: A Place for Infinite Tuning*, 8.

⁸ Alipour, “JANE BENSON with Yasi Alipour.”

leaving gaps and creating absences in the text “to create a dialectical space.”⁹ Benson’s intervention and activation of the text “creates infinite possibilities for new compositions, leaving the reader to fill in the blanks, and setting a rhythm for reading and interpreting—and perhaps suggesting a revised history.”¹⁰ Benson quite literally makes space, allowing for a shift in thinking and, therefore, a shift in our own relationship to forms and ideas to make way for transformational possibilities.

Benson has used this practice in her most recent works, first begun at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic during the spring of 2020, working with excerpts from *The System of Nature* (1770) by Paul Henri Thiery, Baron d’Holbach (under the pseudonym Mirabaud), a haunting philosophical work that highlights humankind’s alienation from nature and that profoundly resonates in today’s world. Benson’s reading of the revolutionary text during a time in which the fragilities of nature were paramount has prompted her own personal search for a new landscape and relationship with nature. Through her found, text-derived score based on relevant passages, Benson then creates an interdisciplinary dialogue that manifests itself in a sound-based component and color field prints. In the lyrical and moving *Nature and her Laws* (2020), Benson used the punctured text to create a musical score that is reduced in scale, rolled into long scrolls and then played on a hand-crank piano on her New York rooftop during the dawn hours of the lockdown. The audio captures the sound of the score being played on the piano, accentuated by the city’s own dawn chorus—not just the hum of awakening birds but also a newly altered pandemic-induced urban rhythm, including the eerie, quiet absence of traffic punctuated by last spring’s ubiquitous and painfully familiar sirens of ambulances.

In her sculptural color field prints which hover in an illusory space between two- and three-dimensions, Benson then uses an algorithm to translate the found score into an abstraction created based on Isaac Newton’s color spectrum. In Benson’s own system, which later involves a complex, hands-on, multi-step printing process, each syllable is assigned a color and layers of dots in various hues are then created, their opacity dictated by their frequency in the score. The printed, shifting layers create an undulating moiré effect resembling reflections on water that evoke an ever-evolving visual embodiment of our collective plight; the work’s luminosity expresses a contemporary reawakening of the continued crisis addressed in Mirabaud’s groundbreaking texts. The color prints further the notion of displacement and dislocation derived from Benson’s own removal and repurposing of the original text from which the work draws its inspiration and livelihood.

Much like her collaboration with musicians, Benson sees her work with writers as a continuation of this collaborative spirit across artistic disciplines, geographical distances and historical spans of time. In 2019, she explained that collaboration “not only introduces the opportunity to gain critical distance, but also supports a philosophy of wanting to create places of renewed ideas, of plurality, and of a gathering. ...collaborating with other people enables me to stitch things together across time and material.”¹¹ Her methods bring together what Nico Israel describes as “a quiet Gesamtkunstwerk in which, instead of being unified into a totality or synthesis, music, literature and art are left apart to interrogate their very means of expression and connections to (and disconnections from) an audience.”¹²

⁹ Benson in Alipour, “JANE BENSON with Yasi Alipour.”

¹⁰ Barbara MacAdam, “Vasari Diary: On John Gibson (1933–2019), Rob Wynne, Jane Benson, Robert Murray, and Film Forum,” *ARTnews*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/vasari-diary-on-john-gibson-1933-2019-rob-wynne-jane-benson-robert-murray-and-film-forum-12147/>.

¹¹ Benson, quoted in Laura Hoffmann, “Interviews: Jane Benson,” *Artforum*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/jane-benson-on-displacement-and-collaboration-78785>.

¹² Nico Israel, “Re,” *Jane Benson: A Place for Infinite Tuning*, 68.

In May 2021, Benson will participate in *Sound and Silence - the sound of silence in contemporary art*, an exhibition organized in celebration of composer Ludwig van Beethoven's 250th birthday, at the Kunstmuseum Bonn in Germany. Although dates have yet to be announced, Benson will be having a solo show, titled *The System of Nature*, at Priska Pasquer in Cologne and she will also be included in an upcoming exhibition, focused on new acquisitions, at the Manchester Art Gallery in England, which added Benson's *Toothache* (2017) to its permanent collection in 2019.

A committed educator, Benson has focused on participating in the academic community as a lecturer and visiting artist throughout her career. She has taught art at Cornell University since 2011 and has been a visiting lecturer at Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In addition to her teaching positions, she has been a visiting artist at numerous institutions, including the College of Applied & Fine Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL (2005); Hunter College, City University of New York (CUNY), New York, NY (2007); Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University, New York, NY (2008); Corcoran School of the Arts & Design, Washington, DC (2008); Barnard College Graduate School, Columbia University, New York, NY (2009); Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL (2009); School of Visual Art, New York, NY (2010); Sarah Lawrence College, New York, NY (2011); Edinburgh College of Art (2011); and Rutgers University, Newark, NJ (2012).

Benson has also expressed a profound dedication to education through a collaboration with the RDJ Refugee Shelter in Harlem and members of the Pihcintu chorus—composed of refugees and immigrants— in Portland, Maine. Benson is currently working closely with the multicultural young adults in a project combining text and sound.

Benson lives and works in New York City.