

Living Fibers

This year at the Frieze New York art fair textiles featured front and center. The techniques and materials used in the contemporary textile works ranged from delicate hand-knit wool objects, to rough-hewn fabrics stretched over three-dimensional structures, to large-scale digital Jacquard-woven tapestries. Mexico City-based artist Pia Camil drew crowds at the fair with her *Wearing-watching* project, which highlighted the performative capacity of wearable textiles. Camil created eight hundred ponchos to give away at the fair, each piece assembled individually by the artist, her friends, and a group of seamstresses with whom she collaborates. The colorful garments constructed with discarded fabrics and remnant materials were inspired by Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica's *Parangole* series. Oiticica believed that wearing an unusual piece of clothing results in an instantaneous transformation leveling the playing field between subject and spectator.

Camil's gesture of generosity encouraged viewers to become part of the conversation in the highly curated and commercially charged context of the art fair, where each work of art occupies prime real estate. The direct audience participation in Camil's poncho performance was a unique art fair experience, reminiscent of Franz Erhard Walther's early conceptual props made from canvas, titled *Handlungsstücke*, or *Action Pieces* (1962–73). These over-dimensional canvas structures were intended to be unfolded, worn, and tested by multiple players in unison, provoking an active dialogue among the participants. At Frieze, Camil's gift exposed the motivations of collectors and tested their civility as they waited in line for their gift. Challenging the established dynamics of the art market, she returned the art-object to its functional form.

Warp and weft, chain stitch and pearl: Textiles in the Ahmanson Collection features thirty works of fiber art that demonstrate the continuity between the past and present, function, and form of the medium. These works reflect Roberta Green Ahmanson's ongoing journey of studying and collecting textiles and offer a glimpse of her diverse and rigorous art collection that includes twentieth-century British art informed by Biblical themes, Old Master paintings and sculpture, ceramic objects, folk art, international photography, and contemporary installation and painting. Her relationship to textiles began when she was a girl; her grandmother sewed dresses for her mother, herself and her favorite doll named Carole Ann. Her grandmother was also a prolific crocheter and taught her how to crochet. Green Ahmanson was introduced to embroidery by her mother and together with the help of her grandmother and a group ladies of ladies at a local nursing home in Iowa, created a beautiful embroidered quilt. These collaborative textile projects were formative experiences in her Midwestern upbringing, emphasizing the relationship of people's lives to the work of their hands. Green Ahmanson's embroidery and her grandmother's crochet work on display in the entrance of the exhibition, initiate the viewer into her passion for the richly layered legacy of fiber art.

Green Ahmanson's vision as a collector is in sync with the contemporary approach that frames textile-based work as a versatile artistic medium, confidently situated in an active discourse with painting and sculpture. The established divisions between craft and fine art, low and high art, are now porous membranes that allow artists to mine a multiplicity of ideological sources to discover fresh modes of expression. The recent emphasis on social engagement in contemporary art theory has contributed to the erosion of static art categories, including outmoded definitions of fiber art as domestic or "women's work." Textiles and fiber art, once viewed as a parallel universe to the mainstream art world and weighed down by the history of gender politics, are altogether liberated from the constraints of their histories. Pia Camil, for instance, bypasses the antiquated concepts of the craft traditions with her interest in broader social concerns surrounding global labor practices, the culture of consumption, and the systemic poverty of commercial fiber industries.

The most influential textile artist of the twentieth century was Anni Albers, who paved the way for generations of artists working in fiber art. Albers began weaving as a young student at the Bauhaus in 1923 and transformed traditional weaving, with its reliance on illustrative narratives, by applying to weaving the newly developed ideas of geometric and color abstraction in painting and sculpture. Like her Bauhaus peers who fashioned their industrial designs using avant-garde principles, Albers highlighted the inherent properties of thread and allowed it to dictate her creative process. The slow, methodical pace required by a manual loom allowed Albers to make complex and deliberate artistic choices. She began to incorporate unconventional materials, such as metal thread, cellophane, and jute into her textiles, which later became the foundation for her experimental pedagogies at the Black Mountain College.

Pioneers of the more recent fiber art movement of the 1960s and '70s have used the pliancy of fiber in both representational and abstract applications. The work of Elsi Giauque, Eva Hesse, Sheila Hicks, and Lenore Tawney intersected with significant art movements such as minimalism, conceptualism, performance, and feminist art. These artists, like those represented in the *Ahmanson Collection*, worked with a wide range of scales and materials, engaging architectural space on a grand scale. The timely and well-received exhibition *Fiber: Sculpture 1960 – Present*, curated by Jenelle Porter at the ICA Boston (2014), revisits the three-dimensional potency of the fiber-based work and its significance in reshaping the history and language of fiber art. The exhibition emphasized the complex and rich vocabulary fiber based artists developed over the last fifty years.

The seventeen artists on display in this exhibition tap into the spirit of Anni Albers' art-making and explore a wide range of techniques and themes in their work, using the diverse tools of the fiber art tradition that make it such a compelling medium: crochet, knitting, braiding, embroidery, needle point, felting, quilting, and multiple forms of hand and machine weaving, including those that employ digital technologies. As the viewer enters the first gallery of the exhibition, they encounter the meticulously crafted, intimate works of Anita Bruce, Julia Caprara, Pat Selman, and Jackie Hodgson, which use embroidery, crochet, and collage techniques to reinterpret images in nature. In particular Bruce explores the boundaries of art and science by examining the complexities of evolved forms in plant and animal life. Her sculptures are constructed using elemental looping techniques, that have been used for thousands of years to create utilitarian baskets and nets. The complexity of the interlocking threads references the wonderful mechanisms discovered in the natural world.

Beverly Ayling-Smith uses cloth to evoke emotions of loss, mourning, and trauma, and has done extensive research into the power of textiles to help us process grief. Ayling-Smith's research is rooted in the Freudian understanding of mourning and melancholy, as well as the ways ancient cultures used cloths ceremonially in the burial and grieving process. She has also been influenced by Eva Hesse's experimental approach to material as metaphor. In Ayling-Smith's *Shroud* tapestry, the pieces of fabric are stained or painted and printed on, then stitched together to form a sixteen-foot long textile. In other projects, she has buried textiles in the ground so they will be eroded by nature. Kay Swancutt also works with found fabrics that embody the memory of their former functions and refers to her practice as "reforming" materials to ask new questions. While the scale and visual impact of their work differs, Ayling-Smith and Swancutt share a methodology of transforming raw material to comply with their visual sensibilities.

Alice Fox, Amanda Hu, and Meg Lipke rely on a painterly aesthetic in their approach to fabric. Their use of recognizable images gives their work a strong pictorial quality that is commonly expected of drawing and painting. The intimate and delicate textiles of Alice Fox are layered with multiple textures and forms of mark-making, inspired by nature and referencing biological forms. Amanda Hu similarly uses hand-dyed threads to weave poetic compositions reminiscent of seascapes and sunsets. Although she identifies primarily as a painter, Meg Lipke has incorporated textile-making techniques, such as batik and felting, across her body of work. Her family background of weavers and thread manufacturers has prepared her to move fluidly between mediums. In her most recent explorations, Lipke stretches painted, batiked muslin over antique hat-making forms; she also maintains an ongoing series of vibrant and textured pillow paintings stuffed with cotton filling.

With a background in fashion and design, brothers Steven and William Ladd celebrate the beauty of handcrafted objects. The landscapes they create combine scrolls of discarded belt material with hand beaded trees and beads pinned in extravagant clusters, into a vivid, colorful tableaux. The Ladds reuse all the excess material that accumulates through their practice, often including old bed sheets and fabrics from their childhood. The themes of their installations are directly inspired by their childhood memories growing up in a tight-knit Missouri family. Similarly, Channing Hansen's hand-knit two-dimensional structures require a labor-intensive process. Hansen dyes and blends his own fibers from silk, alpaca, mohair, and wool, to create the textures and colors he desires for the piece. The compositions, often generated by computer algorithms, are then pulled over stretcher bars to remove them from any pretense of function. This approach reflects Hansen's belief in "craft solves questions; art asks them."

Phillip Stearns and Robin Kang represent a new generation of artists using digital technologies in weaving production. The digitally operated Jacquard loom, a contemporary version of the first binary-operated machine and precursor to early computers, was used to create Phillip Stearns' large woven tapestry triptych *Fragmented Memory* (2013), which blurs the lines between photography, data visualization, textile design, and computer science. Robin Kang's textiles are inspired by the history of technology. They incorporate images of early circuit boards and pre-Columbian patterns, as well as overlaid Photoshop brush gestures. In Kang's Jacquard process, she lifts the pedals of the loom individually for the warp yarn and manually inserts the weft yarn using a traditional shuttle and bobbin. This allows Kang to experiment with different kinds of yarns and materials.

Heather Cook and Andrea Zittel's tableau-sized panels, which face each other in the first gallery, play with the language of painting. Cook's *Shadow Weave Navy Blue (23) + Neon Orange 8/4 Cotton 15 EPI #1a* (2013), is constructed using acrylic, hand-dyed string and looks, from a distance, like an abstract painting. Zittel's *Prototype for Billboard: A-Z Cover Series 2: Subjective Composition (Rust and Gold Geometric)* (2012), on the other hand, is painted on a wood panel to look like a blanket or rug. Zittel's creative practice examines all structures of life. In the home and studio complex that she designed and built outside Joshua Tree, California, her studio practice includes furniture making, sewing, framing, and gardening. For the 2000 series, *A-Z Time Trials*, she fabricated self-contained "living units" and charted her rhythmic habits of working, eating, and sleeping. Like the other artists in this exhibition, she weaves a link between life and art.

Anni Albers' relentless pursuit of order and beauty was rooted in her belief that innovation was a manifestation of transcendence:

If we think of change, we are thinking in the direction of technology, of ways of doing things. And if we think of the unchanging things, the timeless ones in contrast to the variables, we have in mind immaterial things, for instance, a belief in a cosmological order, in a forward development, in the good, the beautiful, things that have to do with art, as I see it.

The socially engaged ideas of Pia Camil's multi-faceted practice, translated into familiar objects from daily life—curtains, wearable textiles, and ceramic vessels—also speak to the intersection of life and art as it points toward the timeless. These themes resonate with Roberta Green Ahmanson, who is ever alert to the presence of the sacred as it manifests itself in human experience. As a steward of these objects and an appreciator of the creative process, she devotes her time and resources to empowering artists to contribute to the greater good.

-John Silvis