

Weaving Through Abstraction

And the Work of Mimi Jung

By Caroline Gerberick

Weaving traces back to the Neolithic era when even before fiber was used, branches and leaves were woven to create shelter and protection. As this advanced into textiles the process was done in the family unit for thousands of years. With technological advances and the Industrial Revolution weaving transformed into a highly specialized process that could produce large amounts of cloth inexpensively. The Jacquard Machine, a loom that uses a mechanized punch card system, is credited as one of the basis of modern computer science.¹ All this is to say that weaving has existed for so long and has become so embedded in our culture of clothing and goods that the process has almost become invisible. We no longer need to weave our own cloth to make our own clothes nor do we need to know how they are made. Although, in American and many other cultures weaving and other fiber-based processes became part of women's work for many decades and are deeply situated in domesticity. This association became the fuel for the Fiber Art movement that now uses textile-based processes in the contemporary art scene. Weaving, even within its own cannon of fiber/textile art, can mean a lot of things. It ranges from big bulky tapestry to the finest silk and unapproachable precision. The fiber arts movement had its revolution in the 1960's and 70's when fiber based structures and sculptures were created through various processes like knotting, twining, coiling, netting, felting, and weaving. Concept replaced design and the women's movement of the same era fueled work about domesticity, feminism and sexuality and the materials and processes used, of course, were related to women's work and the home. Weaving specifically was initiated into the contemporary art world when

¹ Janis Rozentals. "Weaving History." *Weavedesign*, WordPress, www.weavedesign.eu/weaving-history/.

international artists saw the potential of enlarging and altering the processes used in textile.² They created gigantic fiber-based installations using both on and off loom weaving techniques (see Figure 1). Seeing large woven pieces, monumental and mysterious, off of the wall allowed for a visual interaction with the viewer that was new and exciting. Being able to see the structure of the weave and the strength it provides illustrated that it was not a flat substrate but a meticulous intertwining. Anni Albers, who studied at the Bauhaus, became an idolized figure in weaving as well.³ Her modern design interpretation and proto-feminist ideology has solidified her significance in the fiber arts movement.

Today, although the huge-installation-based-type of weavings still exists, weaving has a huge presence as a type of painting and also resembling other forms of art. Meaning that weaving-based art can be framed and hung like a painting or placed on a pedestal like a sculpture. A weaving is not a painting but this comparison and approach of viewing it as close to one allows for topics of abstraction to be available. Artists who work with weaving like Samantha Bittman and Christy Matson are shown in galleries with the purpose of having conversations about painting. Bittman, who is dedicated to exploring the intersection of weaving and painting, alters her weavings with latex and acrylic paint creating conversations about weaving as ground, manipulative surface and visually relating to the op-art movement (Fig. 2). While Matson, uses the jacquard loom to actually translate her watercolor paintings and drawings into weavings (Fig. 3). While these artists provide great context for contemporary weaving and its current presence in galleries I've chosen to focus this investigation on artist

² Janis Jefferies & Diana Wood Conroy (2006) *Shaping Space: Textiles and Architecture—An Introduction*, Textile, 4:3, 233-237, DOI: 10.2752/147597506778691431

³ Sarah Archino. "Anni Albers Overview and Analysis." *The Art Story*, The Art Story Contributors, 2018, www.theartstory.org/artist-albers-anni.htm.

Mimi Jung and what her work contributes to the cannon, conversation and vocabulary of abstraction. Jung's work takes many different forms such as wall pieces, large sculptural installations and experimental three-dimensional forms. I've chosen to discuss one of each of these: a wall piece, a large sculptural piece and a smaller bronze casted piece. In all of these works, even in different forms, the structure and process of weaving are evident. However, the weaving plays a different role in each not only through form but how the pieces are created. The performance of weaving is also different but not exclusive in each of these works. The aim of this paper is to explore these three works by Mimi Jung titled, *Pale Blue to Black*, *Bronze Cast 2*, and *Four Teal Walls* and navigate how they fit into the cannon of abstraction. In part, this will mean approaching the wall piece as if it were a painting and discovering what it means to view something as a painting that which it is not. Pulling from language and approaches of analyzing painting I will examine all of the works individually while also considering the body of Jung's work as a whole. Another aspect of this exploration will be the performance element in weaving and specifically in Jung's work. Answering how the body, and the content of a body performing in relationship to others, exists in this work. Also, naming the moments, and accumulation of moments, of abstraction found in this woven work, which would enable it to transcend the confines of textile. It seems when naming something a textile it then loses its abstraction and its ability to be abstract. It becomes stagnant, as an object made by a textile process so therefore must be understood as a product. This brings up exploring how Jung navigates being an artist who uses weaving to create work and how she identifies within the art world. Along with the analysis of the works and their embodiment of abstraction weaving as a technical process must be explored. I will begin by breaking down the process of weaving to be understood by a wider audience whom may never experience weaving or even know what all it entails. Through this

description and highlighting different ways of weaving abstraction will continue to seep into the language. The technical and mechanical process of weaving has just as much to offer to the cannon. Through investigating the process of weaving, Jung's artist identity and her work abstraction, and its malleable understanding, will allow for a new way of looking at weaving in contemporary art.

Warp is the name for the yarn, or any other weaving material, that runs vertically in a weaving. When working on a loom the warp is held in tension so that it can be woven into. Weft is the name for the yarn that runs horizontal in a weaving. Weaving is a combination of warp and weft that intertwines itself in some variation of over, under, over, over. To weave, some portion of the warp is lifted creating a space, called the shed, for the weft to be placed in. Following that, the opposite portion of the warp would be lifted to create the next space for the weft to be placed. This creates an interlocking. In *Transformations of the Line: Traces, Threads and Surfaces* Tim Ingold describes that a weaving, "exists not as a composite of the threads of which it is made, but as an ordered system of differences among them. Taken together, however, these differences add up to something positive, namely the perception of a continuous line on a coherent surface" (28).⁴ Through the various combinations of over, under the yarn or woven material goes through results in a substrate that is understood as a whole. It is also important to consider that yarn (thread, silk, wool, etc.) is a surface itself that contains a front, back, side, inside and outside. The three dimensionality of the material allows for subtle variation and changes within the substrate as it spins on itself, lies on top, or hides underneath. This multi-surface quality is what allows for a woven material to be soft and drape, "Cloth, woven on a loom, incarnates the most

⁴ Tim Ingold (2010) *Transformations of the Line: Traces, Threads and Surfaces*, Textile, 8:1, 10-35, DOI: 10.2752/175183510X12580391270100

troubling of conceptual paradoxes. It is a grid, a matrix of intersecting verticals and horizontals, as systematic as graph paper, and yet it is soft, curved and can drape itself into the three-dimensional fold” (235).⁵ This material attribute is also important for understanding how color behaves in weaving. There is optical mixing happening because colors are packed closely next to one another but do not actually mix as pigments would. In *Color and Weave Relationship in Woven Fabrics* the authors describe this simply as, “In woven designs, in a case where fabric is made of multi-colored yarns, the final visualized color is a contribution of each color component present on the surface of the structure. Individual color components are blended and seen as one solid color”.⁶ Perceiving color on a woven substrate is more of an optical illusion. From a distance colors bleed into one another but as it is approached it becomes like a pixelated image where each line of color reveals itself. A weaving forms itself in one direction: a record of time and movements accumulating on top of one another. One other important note about the three-dimensionality of woven fiber is its relationship to space, architecture and the fold. This brings up abstract concepts such as interiority and exteriority along with opacity. Encapsulated by *Textiles and Architecture*:

As a surface technique, braiding and weaving invert the concept of masking, promoting greater transparency in architecture as they expose all parts of the structure. Whereas traditional construction designates one surface as interior and the other as exterior, braiding and weaving simultaneously link inner and outer spaces. As they metamorphose

⁵ Claire Pajczkowska (2005) On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth, *Textile*, 3:3, 220-249, DOI: 10.2752/147597505778052495

⁶ Kavita Mathur and Abdel-Fattah Seyam (July 27th 2011). Color and Weave Relationship in Woven Fabrics, *Advances in Modern Woven Fabrics Technology*, Savvas Vassiliadis, IntechOpen, DOI: 10.5772/20856.

the internal and external into a homogeneous whole, inside/outside divisions disappear altogether. (00)⁷

There are various ways and tools to create a weaving. A traditional floor loom is large, wooden and requires the length of the weaving to be wound on and then organized through an ordering system of slots to keep the material from twisting on itself. Working on a floor loom entails sitting on a bench and using your feet to press pedals, which lift chosen portions of the warp. Once lifted, a shuttle (a wooden boat that holds yarn wrapped around a bobbin) is thrown through the opening and the line of yarn is beat back towards the weaver. This process of weaving is quite physical and also mimics playing an instrument as you “read” your pattern and uses the loom accordingly. Another type of weaving is done utilizing a frame that warp is attached to and the weft is meticulously woven through by hand. In this case the length of the weaving is directly related and predetermined by the length of the frame. This type of weaving is not limited to the rectangle but can be done in any negative space where the warp can be attached at both ends. Mimi Jung uses this latter type of weaving creating both traditional rectangle frames but also less recognizable sculptural frames that she weaves onto. The process of weaving on these armatures is slow and tedious. Jung describes this process as similar to meditating saying, “I have a general idea of where to take the design of the weaving but since each weft takes a tremendous amount of time and patience, I can’t really get ahead of myself. It’s best to zone out and remain peaceful until the next change”.⁸ This speaks again to the accumulative quality of weaving; each weft is a response to the previous and occurs in turn. The actions of

⁷ Bradley Quinn. “Textiles and Architecture.” *HANDBOOK OF TEXTILE CULTURE*, BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS, 2018.

⁸ Jeff Hamada. “Interview with Mimi Jung of Brook&Lyn.” *Booooooom*, 2018, www.booooooom.com/2013/09/18/interview-with-mimi-jung-of-brooklyn/.

weaving are slow and repetitive which allow for a meditative state and an almost supernatural/divine experience but at the same time the actions are completely mundane.⁹

Mimi Jung was born in Seoul, Korea in 1981 and studied at both Cooper Union and HGK Basel. She has had exhibitions throughout the US and also in places such as Copenhagen, Brussels and London. Jung currently lives and works in Los Angeles.¹⁰ Alongside her art practice she runs a design studio with her partner Brian Hurewitz called Early Work formerly known as Brook&lyn. Jung comes from a fine arts background and has stated that although she enjoys the design work her art is the priority. Besides her own design company Jung has been included in various shows and magazines centered on architecture and interior design. This brings up interesting issues around viewership and the impulse to include weaving with utility, design or decoration. This is the navigation fiber-based and more specifically artists who work with weaving must solve with their artist identity when working with a medium that is commodifiable and is most easily accessed by the viewer through utility. Jung's work is about self-preservation and more specifically private and public self-representation and it takes form in both wall pieces and constructed sculptural forms. In many cases the wall pieces are research for the sculptural forms but I find them just as impactful and experiential which is why I have chosen to analyze one in this paper.

The concepts of self-preservation in Jung's work appear through the use of voids and translucencies. The experience of looking at the work is in large part determined by how you move around the pieces as their transparency and opaqueness alter depending on angle. Jung describes this experience as a chance for the viewer to reflect on their own behaviors and how

⁹ Pajaczkowska, Claire (2005) On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth, *Textile*, 3:3, 220-249, DOI: 10.2752/147597505778052495

¹⁰ "ABOUT." *MIMI JUNG*, www.mimijung.com/about/.

they as individual move through social spaces. From the text she provides about her work, “Jung’s limning of space is reflexive, visible to those who are predisposed to see it”.¹¹ This brings up ideas about opacity and who is more likely to engage with complexities of needing or not needing to be seen or known. What becomes interesting is the photograph of Mimi Jung posing with her sculptural pieces that talk about self-preservation and the navigation of the internal and external. Jung is seated on the top of a ladder that puts her head just above the height of her work (Fig. 4). She is centered and looking directly at the camera but in barefoot and casual posture. The work is experienced by looking through the pieces but also walking around and in-between them. Yet here she has situated herself above. This position allows her to have control over the self-reflective experience embedded in this work.

There is a huge lack of scholarship around Jung’s work because most of what exists about her is centered on her instead of the work. In one interview the introduction cites Jung as an artist taking weaving to a new level and mentions her painterly ability but then does not offer any serious questions about the work.¹² I find Jung’s photographs and descriptions to be most fruitful in understanding the work as each work has its own information but the connection between all is clear. On social media you can also watch Jung prepare some of her pieces. The frame for the piece has hundreds of nails perfectly spaced along the top and bottom which Jung wraps yarn around one by one. On larger pieces this means she must crouch down to loop over the bottom nail and then fully reach to be able to wrap around the top one. This process, warping, appears like a choreographed dance. The nature of videos on platforms such as Instagram is that they are on a constant loop however it takes time to finally realize it has looped because the

¹¹ “ABOUT.” *MIMI JUNG*, www.mimijung.com/about/.

¹² Sarah Codraro. “This Artist Takes Weaving to a Whole New Level.” *IDEO*, 2017, www.ideo.com/blog/this-artist-takes-weaving-to-a-whole-new-level.

motion is so repetitive. Each line of warp is a result of the same motion done over and over again. Jung holds the yarn with slight tension so that the weft will later on be able to be placed and secured which means that each frame is most likely done all at once as to keep even tension. This is a time consuming and exhaustive performance.

Now, I would like to move forward with visual analysis of Jung's work beginning with the piece *Pale Blue to Black* (Fig. 5). This work is a wall piece woven with natural fibers and is 60" x 84" x 2". Reading the piece from top to bottom the pale blue fiber goes from densely packed to slowly opening up revealing a black field. This means that at the top the fiber was woven together as tightly as possible; each weft pressed against the previous. Then as it was continued to be woven more and more space was left between each weft. This transition slowly extinguishes the light from the material creating a field of depth. As the distance between each blue line decreases the amount of black revealed from behind increases. In opposition, from bottom to top it reads as a landscape. The distances getting smaller as they begin reaching the vanishing point. The piece is on the larger side allowing the viewer to look into it as opposed to at it. This change in perception is important when understanding the relationship to painting that is present. Claire Pajczkowska in *On Stuff and Nonsense* describes this relationship:

The loom can be seen as a frame, portal, or aperture, which opens through the two-dimensional world of surface into the third dimension of space. The analogy between the frame of painting is significant here, as the frame is the device, which facilitates the change in the spectator's point of view from looking at the world to looking at a surface, for meaning (233).¹³

¹³ Pajczkowska, Claire (2005) *On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth, Textile*, 3:3, 220-249, DOI: 10.2752/147597505778052495

The size and reveal of materials along with the revealed process of weaving allows for a surface that can be looked at, through and behind all at once. This weaving is fixed by nature, each weft, a variegated soft length of mohair, determined and placed is secured by the tension of the warp. Fixed, but not static. The variegated material allows for areas of build up and areas of thinness, which creates changing texture and the ability for the softness and quality of the material to come through. The growing distance between each line makes it feel as if the material is slowly falling, dripping, disappearing. Looking through and around and being able to pause on a single moment where materials are interlocked and then the whole that is nothing more than this happening a million times. The black background gives the weaving a drawn line quality and frees it from its preconceived rigidity. There is both quietness to this work and a dull white noise imagined by the soft pixelated texture. Distance from this piece activates the black as a void not as a material. A void floating indefinitely backwards and pushing the woven substrate forward. This builds the weaving as a screen or permeable surface that holds an interior different than itself.

The next piece, titled *Bronze Cast 2*, is provided with more context, which is important to note (Fig. 6). It is related to Jung's experience with displacement and immigration and brings up ideas of assimilation. The text alongside this work states, "Through Jung's own identification with Korean, Asian-American and American cultures, her work examines the way individuals alternately accentuate and obfuscate facets of their cultures, based on their need to identify in a given environment. Her work questions what, if anything, exists at the core of cultural identification, when identification with one culture is dictated by the requirements of another".¹⁴ There is a certain fragility represented in the piece through gaps and unfinished-loose edges. Yet, it is casted in bronze, which makes it more durable and able to withstand certain

¹⁴ "Cast Bronze 2." *MIMI JUNG*, www.mimijung.com/cast-bronze.

elements much more than woven fiber material. The irregular edges also imply that the piece is just a portion of a larger one. Broken, torn, cut or shattered off leaving a sharp raw edge. Of course, despite this it is bronze so it feels valuable and precious. It is almost as if a weaving was fossilized in gold and preserved for centuries. Its luster reflects light in a way a weaving could never truly do which gives it object hood. The structure of the weaving is not just still present but highlighted by the reflective surface. Watching cords of bronze going over and under but in some places breaking off or drooping down. The structure is present but flawed. The unfinished edges in periodic breaks in the weft imply that it has the potential to continue to unravel and disintegrate but it is frozen and preserved in a haphazard state. The size of this piece, 12" x 17.5" x 1.5", confuses the understanding of the material. The quality of the woven line feels fine not bulky but in relation to the size of the piece it is on the larger side. This forces you to imagine what the original source looked like. Knowing that bronze flooded every small space created by woven structure you are reminded that this is not a surface but everything except the surface.

The final piece is *Four Teal Walls* (Fig. 7). This work is a series of four pieces that vary in shape but all are 78" tall. One of the forms is a simple C shape just big enough for a single person to stand in, the next is a long U shape, then a S shape and the fourth is something like the number 2 written out. They are placed in a configuration with a small amount of space in-between each form. The forms are outlined with steel and have been directly woven onto with natural-teal-colored fiber. Similar to the *Pale Blue to Black* piece, the top of each form is slightly more densely woven than the middle and bottom. The forms are translucent because of the open weave allowing you to see the other parts of themselves along with the forms next to them. The pieces are both monumental and quiet. The soft texture and ability to see through them is juxtaposed with their strength and size. It is clear right away that a person is able to navigate and

fit into spaces created by these forms. However, if someone were to isolate themselves in one of the corridors they would still be able to be seen. They would only appear slightly obscured by the woven material. In terms of Jung's interest in self-preservation this speaks to the desire for isolation but inherit need to participate with one's surroundings. The work's description saying, "Jung's woven partitions embody the semi-permeable membrane every individual holds between their solitary internal universe and the external one we all share".¹⁵ This is not only demonstrated through the form's design but also our relationship with textiles and their use for protection and covering. The fiber and weave used in this work is soft and open enough to not feel confining or harsh. The color choice feels comforting enough to be trustworthy but not overtly positive. The perception and interaction with this work is dependent on the relationship we have with fiber, "The existence of this interaction of tactile, visual and Symbolic registers as material reality is obscured by the fact that this dynamic is experienced as unconscious and therefore emotional or bodily reality" (227).¹⁶ This ability to abstract our relationship to textiles and use form to create physical spaces to navigate highly speaks to the concepts of self-preservation.

The relationship between the body and the gradient is very interesting in this work. Instead of being able to take it in as a whole the body is placed right in the middle of it. Looking up towards densely woven material and down at opening space, which allows for more visibility and light. The fact that where someone's face would be within this work is more concealed goes back to self-preservation and the desire to control self-representation. I chose this work, along with the other two, to demonstrate the variety of experiences and perception created through

¹⁵ "Four Teal Walls." *MIMI JUNG*, www.mimijung.com/four-teal-walls.

¹⁶ Pajaczkowska, Claire (2005) On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth, *Textile*, 3:3, 220-249, DOI: 10.2752/147597505778052495

Jung's work. Although in the wall piece there is the ability to be immersed in the field of weaving, here you are actually placed within it. The structure and accumulation of material, movements and time have built walls and corridors. The interaction of materials has created spaces both positive and negative. Just as looking at *Pale Blue to Black* where you are able to see past the surface, *Four Teal Walls* allows for the experience of seeing through, behind, in, around, outside of and past.

In Ariella Azoulay's text *Photography* she aims to differentiate between the *event of photography* and the *photographed event*.¹⁷ This then became a model for understanding the difference between the event of abstraction and an abstract piece of art. The event of abstraction is an action, moment and transformation that take place. The transformation of materials that occurs through weaving, which has been described in various ways throughout this paper, is in itself an event of abstraction. The process of weaving and its ability to create an ordered grid out of chaos is an event of abstraction as well as that weaving placed on the wall and approached as a painting. The surface of materiality and the interlocking of interactions becomes what are looked into instead of at. In Jung's sculptural works that require interaction and movement abstract what is visible and what is concealed. Obscuring visibility in order to abstract one's relationship to the space and others in the space. Jung also uses both the monochrome and the gradient in most of her works. Creating fields of light and depth.

Time is abstracted through how densely the weaving is packed as it takes more time to weave lines of weft tightly together versus giving more space in between. The weaving is a record of time and action suspended in the tension of itself. When looking at a painting the record of materials and movement is unclear as it happens over the entire surface simultaneously.

¹⁷ Ariella Azoulay. "Chapter One." *Civil Imagination: a Political Ontology of Photography*, by Ariella Azoulay and Louise Bethlehem, Verso, 2015.

But when looking at a weaving, specifically Jung's work, the accumulation of action and time moves in one direction. The artist's performance of making is present as you can follow each and every action taken. Weaving is truly an archive of action. Time secured in the over under of the material.

Abstraction and the grid. The rigidity of the grid associated with weaving is challenged by its pliability. A weaving can fold, drape, cover crease and unravel. Although it is held secure by its tedious interlocking it does have the potential to undo itself line by line just as it was woven together line by line. If the grid is a format to hold order and meaning then the structure of a weaving is the meaning. Each row of weft like data entry is placed on a fixed axis. The grid also supports textiles relationships with architecture, "Part surface, part join, weaving is essentially a system of continuous links, and a technique that can integrate a number of operating systems into a single structure. Just as a broken thread can be pulled out of a textile and replaced, so too can a cable. Whole components can be removed and exchanged, and the whole system seamlessly expanded" (53).¹⁸ Fixed but changeable the weavings strength as a grid is used as understanding other materials and building. This ties back into when weaving first hit contemporary art and artists were revealing the structure and strength of the woven structure. Allowing people to move around and see both its interiority and exteriority just as in architecture. Mimi Jung's relationship to the grid is combining it with the gradient. By having areas that are more densely packed with materials and color that fade into more open areas the grid appears to go from full to empty. By exposing the structure of the weaving, the grid, it is possible to see the potential for areas to be filled as they sit open with space around them. This

¹⁸ Quinn, Bradley. "Textiles and Architecture." *HANDBOOK OF TEXTILE CULTURE*, BLOOMSBURY VISUAL ARTS, 2018.

use of the grid and the gradient in Jung's work creates a sense of mutability and uncertainty, which abstracts the fixed notion of the grid.

Weaving's relationship to abstraction begins at its process but is far from limited to that. It seems the ISSUE for fiber-based work and especially weaving is our haptic relationship with the materials and our associations with the things we own and touch every day. However, that is an event of abstraction. Looking at one of Jung's pieces and knowing the feeling without touching adds a material understanding for viewing the work. What happens when those associations are presented in a "painting"? You begin to read past content and through material. What many can see in Jung's work as a *painterly style* is because of her use of abstraction tools. The grid, the gradient, surface, time and the body are circling through in all of her work. Is the woven plane a surface, a veil, a screen, a sculpture or a field? Through abstraction, weaving has the ability to exist in these multiplicities.



Figure 1. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Red* 1969

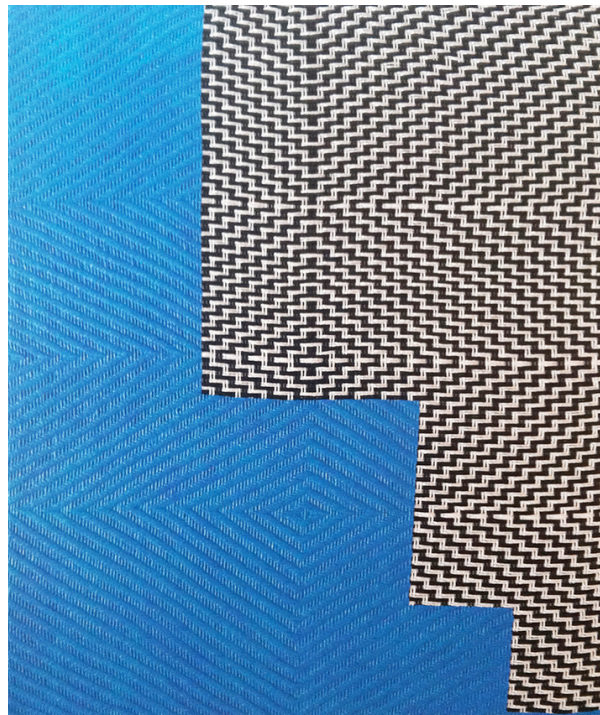


Figure 2. Samantha Bittman, *Untitled* 2014

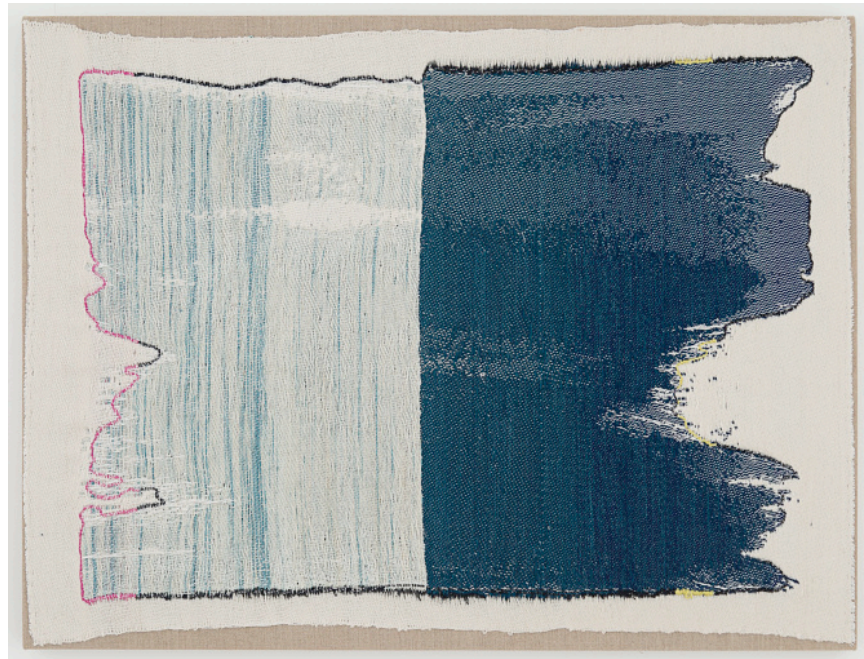


Figure 3. Christy Matson, *Plot #05* 2014



Figure 4. Mimi Jung 2018

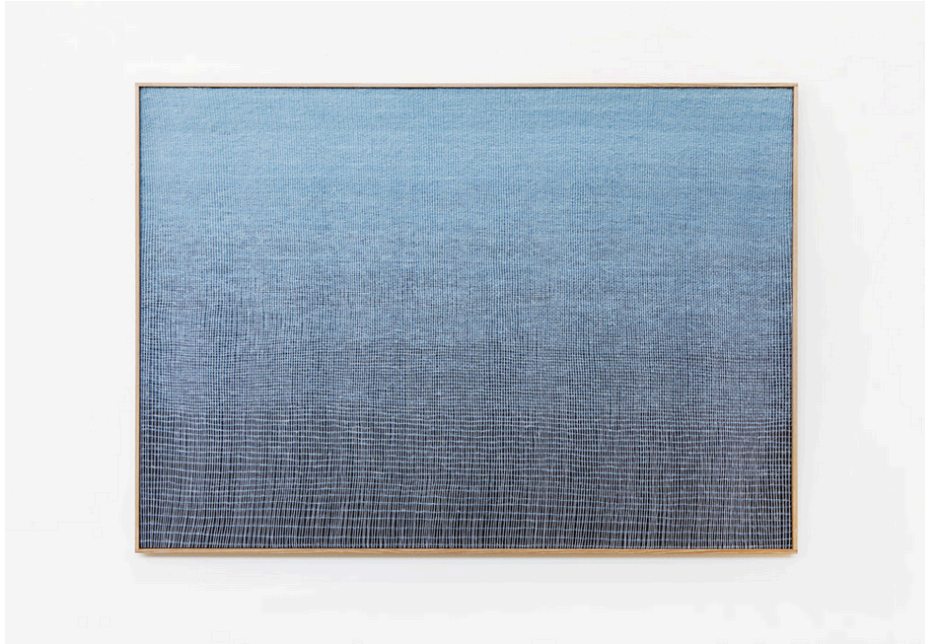


Figure 5. Mimi Jung, *Pale Blue to Black* 2017



Figure 6. Mimi Jung, *Bronze Cast 2* 2018



Figure 7. Mimi Jung, *Four Teal Walls* 2015

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