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GHADA AMER  
ARPILLERISTAS  
MERCEDES AZPILICUETA  
YTO BARRADA  
KEVIN BEASLEY  
SANFORD BIGGERS  
LOUISE BOURGEOIS  
DIEDRICK BRACKENS  
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# FOREWORD



What does it mean to imagine a needle, a loom or a ceremonial garment as a tool of resistance? How can a thread upend conventions and reimagine the world? *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* asks these questions, exploring the political potential of textiles in contemporary art. The curators of this exhibition set out to consider why, since the 1960s, textiles have become increasingly prevalent in artistic practice for subversive ends – a development that seems particularly significant in light of the medium being historically valued as inferior within the hierarchies of Western art historical canons. Why have textiles so often been considered ‘craft’ in opposition to definitions of ‘fine art’, and in what contexts have artists challenged these classifications? Why have textiles been marginalised both by scholars and the art market, underrepresented within the narratives of art history? What makes the medium particularly resonant for artists to speak about intimate, everyday stories as well as wider socio-political narratives, often teasing out these entangled concerns through a stitch, a knot, a braid, through the warp and the weft?

Rather than dictating a chronological history of the development of fibre art, the curatorial team wanted to allow intergenerational and transcultural dialogues to shape their understanding of the power of this extraordinary, expansive medium. Both the exhibition and this book are therefore organised thematically, delving into the myriad ways in which artists, during times of crisis and emergency, have embraced textiles to critique or push up against regimes of power. These artists communicate multi-layered stories about lived experience, invoking the vital issues embedded in fibre, thread and cloth: gender, sexuality, labour, class, colonialism, the movement and displacement of people, ancient forms of knowledge and more. As such, textiles have been a loaded medium for artists to raise consciousness, transgress boundaries and ask charged questions.

The conceptual origins of and research for this project began in 2020 at a moment when the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement and ongoing environmental destruction and mass extinctions were being felt acutely in both London and Amsterdam, where the Barbican Centre and Stedelijk Museum are located. Institutions and their structures were called into question; the distribution of power was examined and protested. At the same time, there has been a reappraisal of textiles and textile processes in recent years, with many of the artists included in this exhibition rightfully receiving solo exhibitions – particularly those who were making work in the 1960s and 1970s and who serve as important historical anchors and precedents for the more contemporary artistic experimentations in this exhibition. The collection of the Stedelijk Museum mirrors this evolution, encompassing works by artists spanning the early years of the fibre art movement to newer acquisitions that significantly enrich this exhibition.

The following chapters of this publication explore a range of pressing contemporary concerns, addressing how, for the past five decades, artists across the globe have used the medium of textile to challenge binary conceptions of gender and sexuality; to bear witness to political injustice and violence and resist oppressive regimes; to grieve, remember and explore a politics of care; as a means to map and pay homage to the displacement of people; to address exploitative colonial histories; to commune; and to reclaim ancient, pre-colonial forms of knowledge.

This project self-consciously proposes more questions than it answers. With its intergenerational and transnational scope, it suggests that any form of political possibility involves

Preparations for the exhibition

*Re-enchanting the World* in the studio of Małgorzata

Mirga-Tas, Zakopane, Poland, 2021



dialogue and reciprocity. Our advisor for the exhibition, Julia Bryan-Wilson (author of the influential publication *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, 2017), offered her support as a rigorous, enthusiastic and critical friend throughout, modelling this possibility through her own scholarship and exchange. Her flair, questioning and generous suggestions are reflected across the pages of this book.

Communicating the numerous ways in which textiles are related to power and value is a challenge. No textile is ever neutral, and the ways in which it may be considered radical – in what it is, what it shows, how it was used, what it might suggest, both in its material construction and through its metaphorical intention – is constantly shifting. We are grateful to the authors of this catalogue for their contributions; their texts pulse with aliveness, excitement and rigour. Thank you for your attention, care and expertise. We are lucky to have your voices as part of this project.

Miguel A. López focuses on the porous knowledge systems embedded in the medium, turning his attention to textile practices that are charged with pre-colonial and anti-colonial powers that honour ritual and spiritualism and refute binary modes of thinking. Julia Bryan-Wilson shines a new light on how we might conceive of textiles – her vibrant essay asks us to carefully consider textiles' multiplicity, queer potential and capacity to connect the human and non-human. Denise Ferreira da Silva offers a commentary on art and subversion. Thinking *with* the artworks in the show, she considers the workings of these objects and how they might expose the conditions underpinning racial, colonial and patriarchal subjugation.

The chapter introductions and artist texts were carefully written by the exhibition's curatorial teams at both the Barbican and Stedelijk Museum: Michelle Adler, Diego Chocano, Wells Fray-Smith, Simone de Haan, Lotte Johnson and Amanda Pinatih. Together, we thank Rochelle Roberts at Prestel for her generosity of spirit as well as editor Aimee Selby – this publication has benefited immensely from her keen editorial eye and sensitivity. We were awed by the imagination of our graphic designers at Atelier Dyakova. Sonya Dyakova, Marta Fernández Canut, Ben Greehy and Gabriella Voyias, thank you for bringing this book to life.

*Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* is the result of a collaboration between the Barbican and the Stedelijk Museum. Co-curating an exhibition is a collective creative undertaking, and we are united by a shared belief in art and exhibition-making; that creating physical experiences to delight and challenge is worthwhile. Lenders around the world share this belief, and we are immensely grateful to those who parted with works of international, historical and personal significance for this exhibition. A transnational exhibition of this ambition and complexity is not possible without the support of museums, collections, galleries and individuals. Our heartfelt thanks to: 31 Project; Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Alison Jacques, London; Art Jameel Collection; Axel Vervoordt Gallery; Dr. Barry J. Silverman, Aventura, Florida; Blindspot Gallery; Collection of Catherine Petitgas; Cecilia Brunson Projects; Estrellita B. Brodsky Collection; Flavia Nespatti Collection; Fusun & Faruk Eczacibasi Collection; Collection Giuliana and Tommaso Setari; Hales London and New York; The Hudgins Family; IA Studios; Jane Lombard Gallery, New York; Collection of Jeffrey N. Dauber and Marc A. Levin; KADIST Collection; Galerie Karsten Greve AG, St. Moritz; Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; Kode Bergen Art Museum, Bergen; Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and

London; The Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York; Lorenzo Legarda Leviste and Fahad Mayet; Love, Luck & Faith Foundation; Marianne Boesky Gallery; MASSIMODECARLO; Collection National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; NOME, Berlin; Collection Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine; Pace Gallery; Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich and Paris; Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London; Portia Kennaway; Roberts Projects; Rubell Museum, Miami and Washington, DC; Collection of Sabrina Buell and Yves Behar; Galerie Sfeir Semler; Sikkema Jenkins & Co.; Silverlens, Manila and New York; Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Stephen Friedman Gallery; Sumesh Manoj Sharma, Zasha Colah and Cosmin Costinas; Collection Sunderland-Cohen; T&C Collection; Tate; Valeria and Gregorio Napoleone Collection; Colección Violeta Parra; White Cube; and all those who wish to remain anonymous.

Staging an exhibition at the Barbican and the Stedelijk Museum is a challenge – their spaces are exceptionally different, and each has its own unique character. Donna van Milligen Bielke sensitively negotiated the architecture of both buildings, intervening in the galleries with the spirit of the artworks at the forefront of her mind.

Making an exhibition on this scale is a collaborative effort. This exhibition would not have been possible without our dedicated and engaged colleagues. At the Barbican, thank you to Will Gompertz, former Artistic Director, for championing this project and to CEO Claire Spencer for her continued support. Our heartfelt appreciation also goes to: Alice Lobb, Natasha Powell and Joe Shaw (Coordination); Katrina Crookall (Deputy Head of Visual Arts); David Corbett; Margaret Liley, Jamie Measure-Hughes, Lisa Penny, Bruce Stracy and Maarten van den Bos (Production), and all of the installation crew; Louise Carreck, Chinenye Ezeuko, Ian Fowles, Jacob Harrison, Adam Holdway and Priya Saujani (Front of House); Lily Booth, Hannah Carr and Georgia Holmes (Press); Hannah Moth and Isobel Parrish (Marketing); Natasha Harris, Susie Sterling and Alina Tiits (Development); Jo Davis and Rosie Gibbs (Retail); and Josie Dick and Vania Gonzalez (Creative Collaborations); as well as former colleagues and valued contributors to the curatorial research for this project, including Hilary Floe, Sophie Guo, Manuela Hillmann, Jessie Krish, Alyson O'Malley and Laureen Picaut. At the Stedelijk Museum, thank you to Esther Hemmes (Project Manager); Marieke van den Belt (Project Officer); Ariane Boogaard (Floor Manager); Charl Landvreugd (Head of Research and Curatorial Practice); Masha van Vliet and Carlos Zepeda Aguilar (Editors); Netta Krumperman (Coordinating Conservator Applied Arts and Design) and the conservation team; the art-handling team; Enrica Flores d'Arcais and Sarah Slootweg (Development); Emma Harjadi Herman (Manager of Education and Inclusion); Darija Kalkan (Marketing and Communication); and Justin Hahury and Marie-José Raven (Press).

Special thanks to the curators of this exhibition. Lotte Johnson and Amanda Pinatih brought their intelligence and vision to both institutions. Their understanding of the medium was greatly enriched by a research trip to New York, made possible by a Jonathan Ruffer grant. Wells Fray-Smith joined the project halfway through and carried it forward with drive and grace. Diego Chocano, alongside his fantastic work as Assistant Curator on this project, authored a glossary of textile-related terms to enrich our understanding of the skills and techniques found in these extraordinary objects.

A project of this scale is not possible without support. At the Stedelijk Museum we would like to thank our partners the Municipality of Amsterdam and the Vriendenloterij, all the



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These artists poured their bravery, imagination, indignation, rage, grief, doubt, fear, joy, hope, faith and selves into these works. Spanning intimate hand-crafted pieces to large-scale sculptural installations, their works are radical in both their form and their politics, revealing how textiles have been forces of resistance and repair. These artists' unique and courageous visions have guided the show and continue to guide us, too.

Shanay Jhaveri  
Head of Visual Arts, Barbican Centre

Rein Wolfs  
Director, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

**THREAD WEAVES  
THE WORLD**

**CONVERSATION**

**WITH**

**WELLS FRAY-SMITH,**

**LOTTE JOHNSON**

**AND**

**AMANDA PINATIH**



Wells Fray-Smith: Let's begin with the origins of the exhibition. Lotte and Amanda, what prompted you to think about the political potential of textiles, and how did *Unravel* come into being?

Lotte Johnson: Back in 2020, we had collectively noted how textiles were proliferating across contemporary artistic practices in divergent ways - from delicate embroidery to swatches of found fabric pieced together, to monumental sculptural installations. And crucially, so many of these artists were incorporating textiles and fibre to grapple with systems of power and hierarchies, and therefore histories and lived experiences of oppression and extraction, in order to forge new visions of the world in which we live.

We set out to ask why artists might turn to the tactile, resonant medium of fibre to question preconceived ideas and ultimately confront binary modes of thinking. Why is it that textiles are especially rich in their ability to unpack, to challenge, to unspool - to unravel and therefore reimagine the world around us? We set out with these questions, and an extraordinary group of 50 contemporary artists have helped us think through possible answers.

Textiles have a polyphonic potential not only in their material form but also conceptually, in the way that they can be both deeply personal and intimate materials for self-expression and speak to structural politics. Of course, these qualities are inextricably

Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Austral*, 2012, unspun wool and sound, site-specific installation at 18th Biennale of Sydney, dimensions variable



Installation view of *Perspectief in textiel (Perspectives in Textile)*,  
1969, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

linked; the personal is political, and vice versa. The more we began to unpack the medium and its deep history, the more we confronted the fact that textiles themselves are extraordinary carriers of messages, communicating complex layers of meaning and speaking to histories of marginalisation: how they have been gendered (often historically seen as feminine or 'women's work'); how they have been instrumentalised to reinforce hierarchies of value in relation to craft; how they materially manifest globalisation, trade and labour economies; how they reflect histories of movement and displacement; how they have embodied potent knowledge systems (often rooted in nature) that have been extracted, co-opted and appropriated through colonialism; and more. Textiles have been embraced and reclaimed by artists for all these reasons, and it's these associations that stimulated our imaginations and led us to develop the thematic structure for the exhibition. Ultimately, we realised that we were not interested in telling a linear history of fibre art, instead we wanted to craft a porous, hybrid exploration of how textiles hold incredible power, knowledge and political potential.

WFS: The exhibition presents the work of artists who are harnessing the medium to tell personal and societal stories of dissent, disobedience and resistance. They turn to the medium and its processes to portray, to circumvent, to criticise, to pacify, to raise consciousness, to remember, to commune, to summon lessons and techniques of their ancestors. With all

this in mind, how did you both decide on the temporal and geographical scope of the exhibition?

Amanda Pinatih: The exhibition is very much rooted in contemporary art practice but stretches back to the 1960s, when artists started to employ the medium for political reasons and when textile came off the wall and became more sculptural. This was also a moment of significant social and political upheaval around the world, marked by various resistance movements that emerged in response to issues such as civil rights, anti-imperialism and opposition to oppressive regimes: think of the civil rights movement in the USA, the global protests against the US invasion of Vietnam, campaigns for LGBTQI+ rights and the anti-apartheid movement. At the same time, many formerly colonised countries, particularly in Africa, gained independence. For us, this pivotal moment formed a starting point to explore what role textiles have in artistic practices that challenge dominant narratives and push up against regimes of power and hierarchies of value.

The way artists started to use textile to express certain collective and individual stories or to resist hierarchies of power is something I also noticed in the Stedelijk Museum's collection. The museum started collecting textile works around the 1930s, but their appearance, modes of construction and conceptual origins changed in the 1960s. Artworks in fibre and thread became three-dimensional, took up space and showed a great sense of experimentation. Artists like Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jagoda Buić and Sheila Hicks emerged as

the leading exponents of what we now call the fibre art movement, which completely overturned the prevailing hierarchy between textile, which was often perceived as craft, and art at the time. The large-scale works the Stedelijk acquired in this decade show this transformation of the medium. In 1969, the museum also staged the exhibition *Perspectief in textiel* (*Perspectives in Textile*). Today, we are again observing an increasing use of the medium in contemporary art practice, and it felt like the right time to honour the artists who radically pushed the perception of textiles in the 1960s and paved the way for its acceptance into art galleries and museums, as well as to celebrate younger practices of resistance.

The exhibition doesn't intend to be an overview of the whole period but creates intergenerational and transhistorical dialogues. For us it was important to look at artistic practices globally so that we are able to present the mutual challenges, joys and triumphs that artists share across time, space and geography. With this transcultural approach, we started to see common ground, shared politics and shared materials and ways of making. But at the same time, it's crucial to us to embrace and tease out difference, to find connections while allowing distinct identities and even frictions to emerge productively. By creating these dialogues, we seek to celebrate the ways artists, through textile, reflect hope and the power of community.

LJ: The materiality of textiles themselves prompted us to pose these intergenerational and transcultural dialogues, to present a chorus of different voices. The technical aspects of textile processes are important for us as a metaphor – threads weaving in and out of each other, the warp and weft of the loom, entangled threads. Textiles never move in one direction; they loop back and forth, they weave in and out of a surface, they refuse to be stationary, singular or striated. There's something about the possibility of thread or the needle in the maker's hand to take you in another direction in a subversive way, imbued with a questioning intent that is at the root of this project and our curatorial approach. Scholar (and textile artist) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has been instrumental for me in her reflections on the queer possibilities of the medium (and I'm thinking of 'queer' here in its most porous sense, in terms of exploring outside social norms) – she observed that 'fabric, thread, and other supplies press back so palpably, against my efforts to shape them according to models I've conceived'.<sup>1</sup> Many of the artists we've been researching in fact push the medium even further, consciously seeking to interrupt the grid and find new methodologies that swerve away from any prescribed rules. This has been our collective curatorial agenda: to think against the grain of explicit cause and effect, of linear progression, to understand how power relations are entangled within textiles.

There are so many textile scholars and curators whose work has influenced our thinking, from curator Mildred Constantine's medium-specific exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1960s and feminist scholar Rozsika Parker's assessment of the

gendered associations of the medium, to writer Jessica Hemmings's exploration of textiles' transnational status and curator and academic Elissa Auther's feminist inquiry into fibre's countercultural potential. One of the key contemporary thinkers who has informed this project is Julia Bryan-Wilson, in particular her 2017 publication *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. Julia acted as our advisor or 'critical friend' for this project, and we've returned again and again to her insistence on how textiles manifest both 'radical politics and radical forms of making': not only 'to suggest how textiles have been used to advance political agendas, but also indicate a procedure of making politics material'.<sup>2</sup>

WFS: Julia has also been helpful in prompting us to consider how we are defining textiles in general, and textiles in art specifically. When I joined this project in 2023 and got acquainted with your research, I noticed that you both were using 'textile' in a very expansive and capacious sense. Together, we've considered artworks that use cloth, fibre or thread, as well as artists who use a textile logic or textile-based processes of stitching, knotting, braiding, weaving, beading. Many of the works in the exhibition have a very hybrid character. They transcend narrow definitions of what historically may have been considered textiles in art (rather than craft): flat, two-dimensional woven or stitched fabrics without any functional purpose. By contrast, many of the works in the show may appear to be something else entirely. They may use fibre or textile processes, but also integrate painting or take up space as sculptures, like Mrinalini Mukherjee's larger-than-life, three-dimensional macramé deity forms. Some of the narratives undergirding the show are the myriad stories of how and why the status of these objects has changed at different moments in history, and how the hierarchies between art and craft or the separation between mediums and processes has dissolved to such a degree that an exhibition like this is possible.

We've had to think a lot about language and how it has historically been used to police conceptual borders; specifically, how definitions of craft and art have been wielded to include or exclude certain artists or artworks from what is considered to be art. I'm reminded of the different receptions to fibre-based work in the United States in the early 1960s and how the status and value of artworks in fibre or thread was so contingent upon how it was conceptually positioned and viewed. When curator Lucy Lippard organised the show *Eccentric Abstraction* in New York in 1966, works described as sculptures used fibre and rope, materials typically associated with craft and hand labour at the time. The use of fibre in these pieces was seen as an element of abstraction, and critics had no problem accepting fibre as a material advancement in 'high art'. Yet when MoMA curators Mildred Constantine and Jack Larson organised *Wall Hangings* in 1969, the first exhibition of large-scale, off-loom works in fibre, few critics paid attention.<sup>3</sup> The only review the exhibition received was by the artist Louise Bourgeois in *Craft Horizons*, in which she questioned if these works could even



be deemed art. She thought they veered more towards decoration and craft, somewhere between 'fine and applied art'.<sup>4</sup> So within just a few years, the use of fibre in some works helped to legitimate it as art, while in others it was considered to debase it to craft.

The boundary between art and craft has always been constructed rather than natural. What makes an object an example of craft or art has very little to do with the object itself, and everything to do with the cultural conditions and associations that are projected onto it - and that has been very important to remember as we have constructed this show. Elissa Auther's research has shown that the American art world's resistance to considering artworks that used fibre and thread as high art rather than craft was because of the deeply entrenched connotations of fibre as well as an inherent bias against the material because of its association with women and the domestic.<sup>5</sup>

LJ: Absolutely. And it was our conversations around these histories and hierarchies, in particular in relation to domesticity and the feminine, that led us to shape the first thematic section of the exhibition, which we have titled 'Subversive Stitch'. This section of the show brings together a group of artists who - in multivalent ways - confront how textiles and the act of stitching have been both valued as 'craft' and understood as women's domestic practices and therefore deemed subordinate. We're borrowing the phrase 'subversive stitch' from Rozsika Parker's 1984 book of the same name, in which she unpacks how textiles have been marginalised as 'women's work' and how makers have pushed back against these connotations and harnessed the potential for subversion and resistance embedded in the medium. Ghada Amer speaks to this history, deliberately using embroidery to challenge the masculine-dominated sphere of painting and literally represent scenes of sexual empowerment, while Tracey Emin pieces together fabric to question authority and Judy Chicago turns to stitching as a means to assert women's bodies as powerfully political.

It was important to us that this section didn't just include women; in fact, artists like Nicholas Hlobo and Feliciano Centurión deliberately take up textiles to both harness and upend the medium's gendered associations - with Hlobo embracing the slippery, sensual potential of stitching ribbons through leather and Centurión co-opting the feminised tradition of decorative embroidery to make poignant work about queer resilience in the face of precarity. Textiles have been taken up by artists of all genders for their subversive power.

AP: It's precisely the resilience and adaptability of the medium that gives textile its subversive potential, which is explored throughout the show. LJ Roberts's work, for example, mirrors the great flexibility and resourcefulness it takes for a nonbinary person to navigate the world they live in. In their work, we can see the margins reflected in the technique they use. In her essay 'Marginality as a Site of Resistance' (1989), bell hooks explores the concept of marginality as a productive space where individuals and groups situated at the margins of

society can cultivate forms of empowerment and agency to challenge norms.<sup>6</sup> As a marginalised material, textile can form a site where traditional norms of gender, sexuality and identity are challenged. And as you mention, many men have also taken up the medium to subvert fixed notions of gender and challenge antiquated binaries. It was very important to us that the exhibition show how textiles are not always indicative of a feminised labour.

WFS: It's also worth mentioning that in industry and out there in the world, men are often the ones weaving, dyeing and producing fabrics because of the sheer labour involved. This is true in some countries in Africa, where certain looms are exclusively operated by men, and that is reflected in the work of Ibrahim Mahama, who teamed up with male weavers (and female sewers) to make the fabric that forms the basis of his commission at the Barbican that coincides with this exhibition. For this reason, we were intentional about including artists who identify as male in this show - about one-third of the works are made by men.

LJ: Let's return to this idea that textiles are deeply connected to the body - it's perhaps the simplest conceit, but textiles are our companions throughout our lives. We're swaddled in them when we're born, we wrap our bodies in them every day, we're shrouded in them when we die. They live with us and protect us. I've been reading Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), which is about the brain, mind and body and the healing of trauma. If it's our body that keeps the score (a record of our experiences and, as such, a notation that might be used for future reference), then the textiles that we wear and that are around us are an extension of this - perhaps they are the dance or choreography determined by the body's score. The creation of a textile, a process contingent on the specific bodies of its makers, can therefore be the most immediate, haptic way of expressing trauma, joy and all the experiences that might be felt through those bodies.

AP: We explore the significance that textiles have in daily life in the section 'Fabric of Everyday Life'. Textiles are the most quotidian and essential material I can think of. Because of their closeness to our body, they form an intrinsic part of our lives and connect us to one another. For example, I remember vividly what clothes I wore at the most crucial moments of my life, from birthdays to job interviews.

Many artists employ the everyday materials they have at hand to communicate their lived experiences. Maybe the most direct example of the use of utilitarian materials is the quilts by Loretta Pettway, a Gee's Bend quilter. Gee's Bend, also known as Boykin, is a small, secluded community in Alabama. Quilts have been part of the fabric of life there for more than a century. The Gee's Bend quilters gained widespread recognition in the early 2000s when their quilts were featured in art exhibitions and museums across the United States. Their quilt-making traditions, characterised by vibrant colours, bold geometric patterns and the



Airing of the Quilts Festival, Gee's Bend, Alabama, 2022

use of previously worn materials like old clothing and fabric scraps, were seen as unique. Suddenly the quilts transformed from functional items used to keep the body warm to museum pieces, contributing to the discussion around the hierarchy of crafts and art.

LJ: There's something about the humility and intimate immediacy of the artists in this section that's so compelling. You can stand in front of a work by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Faith Ringgold or Sheila Hicks, all of whom use found fabric, and find your own personal connections – you think, 'Oh, I've got a dress like that', or, 'That's like the fabric on my grandmother's sofa.' These materials from the artists' everyday lives carry memories that we can relate to ourselves, and that's deeply powerful. This makes me think of the idea of 'aesthetic inheritance' that bell hooks proposes in an essay in which she discusses the work of Black women quilters.<sup>7</sup> She explores how deep histories of aesthetics carry memories and meanings, revealing so much about race, sex and class. This is of course relevant to the work of the Gee's Bend quilters, including Pettway, but also Ringgold and Tschabalala Self, who both take up the tradition of quilt-making in different ways. In some ways, hooks' concept could be related to every

artist in the show: they're all drawing on the knowledge and memories embedded in the materials they use. Every textile has an intrinsic aesthetic inheritance – maybe this is what defines a textile.

WFS: Your comment also reminded me of Pacita Abad, who referred to her paintings on padded and stitched fabrics as an 'archive of the third world experience', precisely because of how textiles embody particular forms of knowledge and memory.<sup>8</sup> Abad travelled the world, a privilege that, as a Filipino woman, she was often afforded because she was travelling with her husband, a white man.<sup>9</sup> But she also experienced racism and xenophobia, and people questioning her right to move around the world. Other artists in the exhibition reflect on borders – how they are policed, how borderlines are drawn and redrawn in imperialist and resistance movements as well as during times of war.

These reflections form the basis of the next section, 'Borderlands', which investigates how artists have used the language of borders to challenge dominant power structures and further progressive goals. Igshaan Adams, Margarita Cabrera, Cian Dayrit, Kimsooja and T. Vinoja reflect on borders as sites of conflict, extraction, rebellion and resistance. While some focus



on the representation of borders to reveal underlying power structures that have contributed to division and displacement, others suggest or invoke both literal and metaphorical border crossings, opening an imaginative possibility for boundaries – both actual and conceptual – to be bridged.

AP: Transitioning across boundaries and borders also raises the notion of liminal space. It was meaningful to explore what it means for artists to create in an in-between space or to express that feeling of liminality, of being at the threshold. Homi K. Bhabha refers to ‘in-between’ spaces as ‘terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself’.<sup>10</sup> Following Bhabha, we understand the liminal as a space that falls between two places or states of being; an ambiguous, atemporal, unfixed space, neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’. It can be an empowering, transformational place of potential. Artists turn textiles into bridges that connect different realms in productive ways; the threshold is a site where differing conditions are riveted together, whether by personal transcultural, queer or migrant experiences. Take Sarah Zapata’s soft installation, which creates spaces to suspend the viewer’s assumptions of past and present, gender, sexuality and definitions of crafts and art: they are in-between, not-quite-there, not-yet places.

LJ: It’s interesting to think about the urgency we felt for this exhibition. The idea for the project emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, a moment of global crisis, and with the backdrop of the insidious rise of the far right and fascist politics across the world. We were thinking about how textiles have been explicitly used to confront these forces, put to work as tools for protest and employed to call out and process injustices throughout history. The idea for the section ‘Bearing Witness’ emerged directly out of this thinking. These artists use both figuration and abstraction to offer socio-political commentary and ultimately communicate deeply painful loss – Hannah Ryggen articulating on her loom her rage at the USA’s brutal role in the invasion of Vietnam by portraying then president Lyndon B. Johnson facing a field seeping with blood, alongside Zamthingla Ruivah’s garments that pay tribute to a woman horrifically murdered by the Indian army for resisting rape. Textile has also been used by artists like Teresa Margolles to make injustice visible. She harnesses the generative potential of the kind of collaborative work that the medium so often invites, bringing together communities related to victims of state violence to craft visceral, emotive homages to the lives that have been lost.

AP: We also see this collectivity in the appliquéd and embroidered *arpilleras* from Chile. Women, the *arpilleristas*, would come together in the intimacy of homes or churches to depict the violence of the Pinochet dictatorship



Mrinalini Mukherjee’s works (left to right) *Nag Devta* (1979), *Basanti* (1984), *Pakshi* (1985) and *Yakshi* (1984) in a garage turned studio, 1985

(1973-90) using scraps of textile - often, as the name translates, burlap. These women documented the killings, abductions, torture and economic deprivation of the regime, but also the resistance against it. These are subtle, stitched messages of dissent, testimonies of protest. Violeta Parra also turned textile into activism, campaigning for peace through her pacifist, but not passive, practice. Her textiles tell the story of socio-political injustices across the world and in South America in particular.

LJ: There's also something about individuals turning to textiles in moments of crisis to find a way forward and to heal wounds. The creation of a textile becomes a kind of reparative act, for themselves and for others. I'm thinking of Angela Su and the works she made with human hair in the context of the Hong Kong protests of 2019, which are meticulously detailed depictions of body parts being pierced with thread. The stitch appears to be both exquisitely painful and reparative in her work.

WFS: As we've been researching this exhibition, I've been fascinated to see the myriad ways that artists have turned to textile because of its potential to express healing or reparation - that in the face of violence, atrocity and intense physical, psychic or social wounds, a stitch or cloth can be a gesture towards repair. We look at this in 'Wound and Repair', but it's an impulse that pervades the whole exhibition as artists turn to the material to process their personal experiences or socio-political events. Harmony Hammond employs cloths and rags to suggest bandages, while José Leonilson uses fabric as a surrogate for his body, to help him process his HIV diagnosis and its aftermath. Both the material itself and individual stitches are deeply intimate, profoundly personal, and are powerful carriers of emotion. Unlike in 'Bearing Witness', the pain is not pictorialised but is felt. And across the exhibition, the whole gamut of human emotion is contained in these materials - some pieces, like Leonilson's, are heartbreaking and uncomfortable, while other artists transmute difficult histories in expressions of joy or celebration.

Lotte, both you and Amanda were keen to bring out textiles' polyvalent potential - to show that they can operate on different levels and that the material itself isn't inherently one thing or the other but can be put in service of different feelings or stories. Why was that important to you?

LJ: Textiles are intrinsically bearers of memories and stories, but each of those stories will be different. Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin are both writers who inspired me and who, I think, have shaped our collective conception of what the artists in this show are doing, with their radical approaches to storytelling and their challenges to dominant narratives. Le Guin's essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (1986) has been a curatorial touchstone, especially given that the 'original' carrier bags or receptacles that Le Guin refers to, used by early humans to gather materials,

were likely woven from organic material, rather than the plastic receptacles that we use today! Le Guin proposes that we might think about these containers, these early human implements, as paradigmatic vessels for the messy, non-linear stories of our lives, rather than accepting the usual hero narratives promoted through phallogocentric histories that elevate weaponry and domination. We can therefore think of textiles as holding the potential for alternative modes of storytelling.

Textiles are always loaded with knowledge inherited by artists from their ancestors. In fact, fibre and fabric can be understood as knowledge systems in themselves and have been used as powerful forms of communication in Indigenous communities - from the practice of knotting known as *quipu* in Andean culture to the protective clothing crafted and worn by Native American communities. These ideas informed the final, and most expansive, section of the exhibition, titled 'Ancestral Threads'. From Cecilia Vicuña's *quipus* to Jeffrey Gibson's garment works drawing on his own Choctaw-Cherokee heritage, this section gathers together numerous artists who look to the deep, rooted histories of their antecedents, often tracing matriarchal lineages of creative expression to push back against patriarchal constructs of production and value. We are indebted to the thinking of many postcolonial scholars (from theorist Homi K. Bhabha to curator Okwui Enwezor) in our exploration of how we got to the point where Indigenous practices (including textiles) were suppressed. The answer of course lies in the history of colonialism. The history of the marginalisation of textiles can be understood as a history of violence, in which these knowledge systems were seen as threatening. What's so powerful about many of the artists in the show is that they are reclaiming, relearning and summoning ancient and Indigenous techniques and materialities as a way to transgress or push back against imperial forces, to find alternative, embodied modes of communication.

The idea of 'Indigenous futurism' has continued to resonate with us as we shaped this section of the show. This is a term coined by Anishinaabe writer Grace Dillon to describe how speculative futures may be conceptualised or expressed by using the tools and approaches of ancestral forebears, 'discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from [colonialism's] impact'.<sup>11</sup> Vicuña and Gibson seem to embody this approach. Artists like Tau Lewis and Kevin Beasley both summon their ancestors through their materials; Lewis through her use of indigo-hued found fabric to pay homage to enslaved women and children who died during their forced transport from Africa to the Americas (as well as the conflicted histories of indigo itself), and Beasley through his summoning of the ghosts of his matriarchs through the garments they have worn. And Mukherjee conjures hybrid creatures that reimagine ancient iconographies and craft traditions to offer new visions of the future.

AP: Elaborating on the history of textile in the context of colonialism that you touched upon, Lotte: in our exhibition we look at the roots and routes of textiles.

Following journeys of circulation and exchange, we turn to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, in her essay 'Culture' (1999), uncovers chains of production and consumption of textiles. Building on Karl Marx's work in the nineteenth century that connected the cotton trade to colonisation, enslavement and the development of capitalism, she starts by tracing the clothes she wears. Spivak demonstrates how the very fabric she wears on her body can be evidence of economic histories shaped by asymmetric power relations originating in (neo)colonialism.<sup>12</sup>

Our exhibition represents this travelling world of textiles in which the artworks form records of trade, extraction and displacement. Weaving together traces of colonialism and slavery, the large textile installation by Antonio Jose Guzman and Iva Jankovic interrogates the diasporic, cultural and economic history of the transatlantic textile trade. With her colourful *tikar*, or woven mats, Yee I-Lann challenges the symbolic status of the table by contrasting its innately colonial nature in the context of Malaysia with the communal character of the mat. And Yinka Shonibare CBE RA addresses race, class and the legacy of imperialism through his use of Dutch wax fabrics; produced in the Netherlands using an Indonesian technique and then exported to West Africa, the fabrics embody colonial trade and entangled economic histories.

WFS: One of the things I love about this section is that, in many works, there's this dual tendency to contend with colonialism, imperialism and histories of violence and extraction while also transcending those histories through courting the divine. There's a strong but simultaneously quiet and gentle undercurrent of artists invoking the spiritual in their work, using textile and fibre to aid communion with powers beyond themselves. For me, this comes through in the work of Lenore Tawney, Jagoda Buić, Sarah Zapata, Antonio Pichillá Quiacain and Cecilia Vicuña.

I think the essence of the spiritual is in paying attention, listening, getting close to something that's both within you and beyond you. Cynics and sceptics might say it's about escaping reality, but for all these artists it was the opposite: the tendency towards the spiritual is an attempt to accept and process reality; the very real, very fraught contexts and worlds they were each contending with. Vicuña's *precarios* are born from grappling with political forces. She was a student in London when Augusto Pinochet seized power in Chile, and she started making these small objects in resistance to the regime and in support of Salvador Allende's progressive government – she called them 'little prayers', considering them to be offerings that, in their beauty, might 'recomfort the soul and give strength'.<sup>13</sup> She said she hoped they could operate politically, aesthetically and magically. Each one is like a totem or talisman that simultaneously stands for socialism while offering protection and warding off extreme right-wing politics.

LJ: Vicuña's *precarios* end the exhibition and are also a fitting end to this conversation. From the start of this project, we knew that we wanted to send our audiences back out into the world with a sense of hope, to leave the gallery with a sense of the expansive, generative and poetic possibilities that textile can offer us. Vicuña's *precarios* are hybrid works – small, delicate creations made from life's debris, often threaded together or incorporating fragments of textile, that reflect the precarity of nature and the world around us. The artist calls them 'structures that disappear', while she also sees them as imbued with the ancient spiritual power to heal both humans and the earth itself. These works show us that we can create new worlds with the humblest means.

Throughout this project, I've returned to a poem by Vicuña titled 'Word and Thread'. There's a beautiful line: 'To speak is to thread, and the thread weaves the world'.<sup>14</sup> I feel that this says so much about the exhibition and the artists whose work we are exploring – their voices are articulated through their making. Thread weaves our world, offering us emancipatory possibilities to reimagine how we might move in the present, carrying the past while forging into the future.



- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Making Things, Practicing Emptiness', in Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust* (Durham, NC, 2011), p. 83.
- 2 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago, IL, 2017), p. 7.
- 3 On the exhibition *Wall Hangings*, see Elissa Auther, 'Fiber Art and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft, 1960-1980', *Journal of Modern Craft* 1, no. 1 (2008), pp. 13-33.
- 4 Louise Bourgeois, 'The Fabric of Construction', *Craft Horizons* 29, no. 2 (March-April 1969), p. 33.
- 5 Auther, 'Fiber Art', pp. 13-33.
- 6 bell hooks, 'Marginality as a Site of Resistance', in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 341.
- 7 bell hooks, 'Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand', in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 115-22.
- 8 As told to the author (Wells Fray-Smith) by Pacita Abad Estate, April 2023. Also referenced in Jeff Wagner, 'First-of-its-Kind Exhibition of Filipino Artist Pacita Abad Opens at the Walker', *CBS News*, [www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/first-of-its-kind-retrospective-of-filipino-artist-pacita-abad-opens-at-the-walker](http://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/first-of-its-kind-retrospective-of-filipino-artist-pacita-abad-opens-at-the-walker), 14 April 2023.
- 9 Saira Ansari, 'Owning Darkness: On the Immigrant Experience', in *Pacita Abad: I Thought the Streets were Paved with Gold*, ed. Nadine El Khoury, Muriel Kahwagi and Rachel Valinsky, exh. cat. (Dubai, 2022), p. 26.
- 10 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), pp. 1-2.
- 11 Grace L. Dillon, 'Imagining Indigenous Futurisms', in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, ed. Grace L. Dillon (Tucson, AZ, 2012), pp. 1-12.
- 12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Culture', in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (London, 2012) pp. 277-85.
- 13 Cecilia Vicuña quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, 'Spinning the Common Thread', in *The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Middletown, CT, 1997), p. 9.
- 14 Cecilia Vicuña, *Palabra e hilo (Word and Thread)*, trans. Rosa Alcalá (Edinburgh, 1996).