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Thread Lines

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Exhibition Review

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The Drawing Center, New York, September 19 to December 14, 2014

Fiber art is undeniably a social practice, intimately tied to histories of labor, textiles, handcraft, community, and gendered ritual. As a material and aesthetic practice, it has endured a somewhat complicated relationship to other artistic media; however, several concurrent exhibitions have sought to redefine the boundaries and intersections between fiber art and more hierarchical disciplines, among them the touring *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present*, organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and *Thread Lines*, recently on view at The Drawing Center.

An intergenerational sampling of 16 artists, including Shelia Hicks, Kimsooja, Alan Shields, Lenore Tawney, and Anne Wilson, *Thread Lines* highlights the affinities between textile art and drawing. According to the Drawing Center's press materials: "[This] exhibition ... disabuses the tradition of drawing as simply putting pen to paper, framing it instead

as an open-ended act in which lines can be woven, stitched, even embodied."

Yet despite the exhibition's premise, *Thread Lines*, relatively modest in both scale and ambition, offered a somewhat conventional, if not formalistic definition of drawing as a visual medium solely based on line. Many works were small and retained a two-dimensional format that substituted sewn or stitched thread for various forms of mark making, such as less-brazen examples of Shields' unique handmade assemblages, the influence of which is seen in Drew Shiflett's untitled "constructed drawing" that similarly combines watercolor, fabric, and paper. For others, line is an expressive, symbolic gesture, as evinced in Maria Lai's handmade books whose embroidered narratives shun any linguistic meaning, and in the celestial orb evoked in Jessica Rankin's stitched field of blue-black organdy. Likewise, William J. O'Brien's eye-popping

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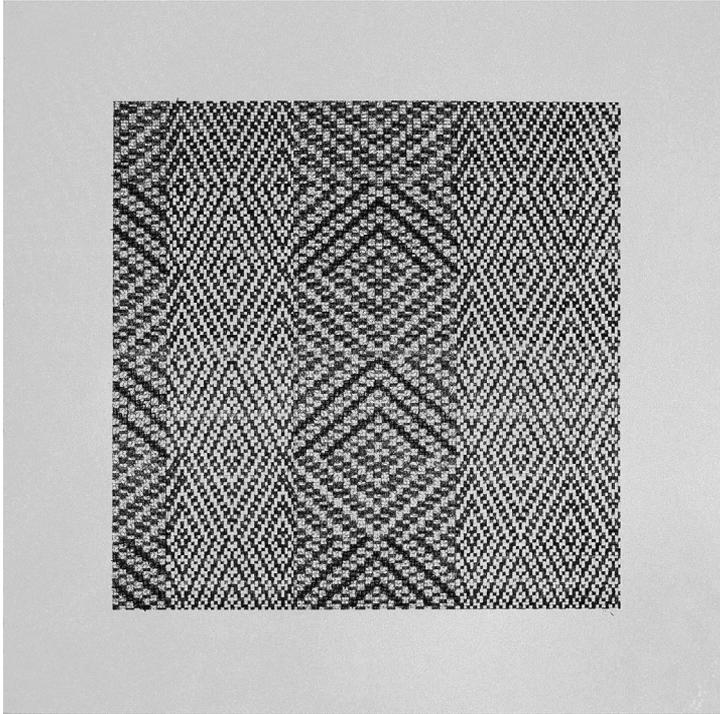


Figure 1

Beryl Korot; *Weaver's Notation-Variation 1*, 2012; Digital embroidery and inkjet on photo rag; 21 1/4 x 21 1/4 inches; Edition of 6; Courtesy Bitforms Gallery New York and Solo Impression, Inc.

untitled series of violet felt cutouts, while impressive for its visual aura, is mainly a study in color and geometric form.

A more expansive view of the relationship between drawing and fiber art is found in those works that draw parallels between mechanisms of textile manufacturing and various information technologies, namely the importance of the loom to the development of the modern computer. Thus the grid, as both a visual form constructed from nodes of intersecting lines and as an information network, becomes the physical and conceptual infrastructure for some of the exhibition's most rewarding

works, including those by Beryl Korot, whose groundbreaking installation *Text and Commentary* (1976–1977), was one of the first to explore this shared territory. Korot's original project combined video, textiles, and drawings that together revealed how information is encoded into patterns and lines. The two works on view here, *Weaver's Notation-Variation 1* and *Weaver's Notation-Variation 2* (both 2012) (Figure 1), are based on Korot's earlier drawings, but employ digital methods of embroidery to produce dense, dizzying patterns in black and white.

Works by Robert Otto Epstein share a visual connection to those

by Korot, however, his black-and-white drawings offer an “analog” take on the processes of textile construction and data visualization. In *Sleeveless Cardigan* and *Classic Cardigan* (both 2014) (Figure 2), the artist recasts sweater patterns into a matrix of flattened cells rendered in graphite on graph paper. Here, he connects the activities of knitting and drawing, as work made by hand, while creating graphic, totemic designs that also read as architectural renderings.

Ellen Lesperance's drawings (gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper) are also based on sweater patterns, those worn by female activists. The two works

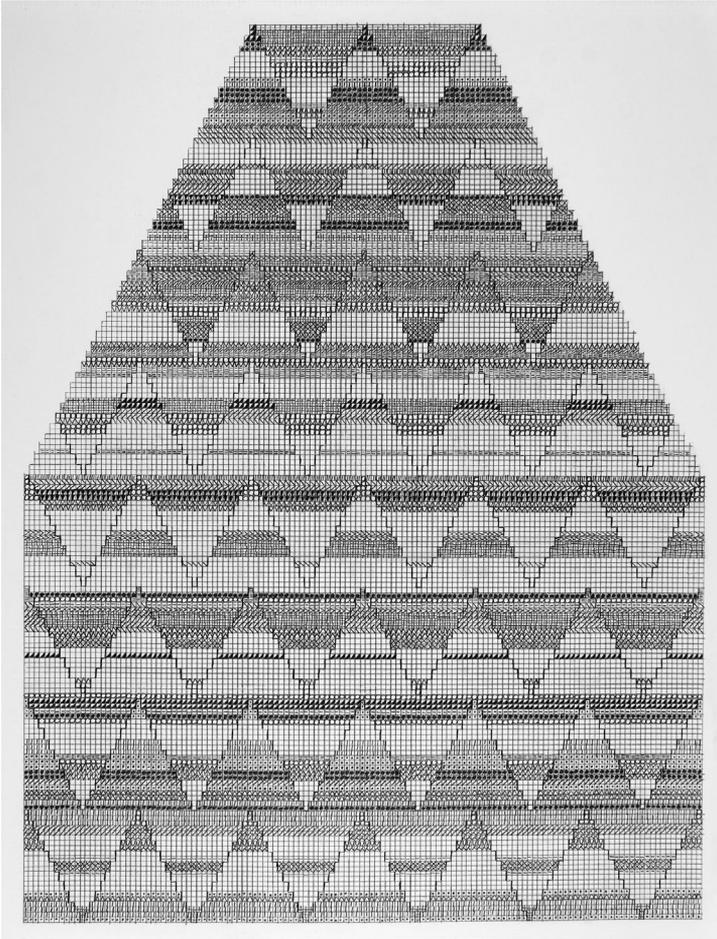


Figure 2

Robert Otto Epstein; *Classic Cardigan*, 2014; Graphite on paper; 23 1/4 x 17 7/8 inches; Courtesy of the artist.

included here commemorate peace advocate Rachel Corrie, who was killed in 2003 during a protest in the Gaza strip, by deconstructing the patterns of actual sweaters worn by Corrie into colorful grids of mauve and lavender, respectively. However, to this viewer, the political, memorial function of these works is muted by their overly stylized images.

The grid as an iconic structure of modernism is challenged by

those artists who employ textiles as a tensile, subversive medium open to a broader range of artistic and human values. Works by Lenore Tawney, whose pioneering contributions to both fiber art and drawing, are emblematic in this regard. Included here was the drawing *Union of Water and Fire II*, part of a series of ink drawings on graph paper she began in 1964. The artist later reinterpreted these two-dimensional drawings into

three-dimensional, free-hanging abstractions, an example of which, similarly titled from 1974 (Figure 3), was also on view. Sam Moyer's IKEA rugs (Figure 4), unraveled then painted in thick black encaustic, serve as a contemporary counterpart to Shelia Hicks' well-known "minims," (Figure 5) both of which destabilize the grid through their juxtapositions of materials hard/soft and high/low.



Figure 3

Lenore Tawney; *Union of Water and Fire*, 1974; Linen; 38 x 36 inches; Collection of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation.

Like Tawney, Louise Bourgeois stands as a central figure whose work spans *and* expands several media, while imparting a unique vision based on personal biography and symbolism. Concentric bands of colorful fabric cut from personal artifacts, such as clothing and linens, radiate from a central vantage point in a series of stitched-fabric drawings that evoke the artist's well-known spider webs (Figure 6).

Textiles have also been a mainstay of Bourgeois' sculptural practice, as they have been for several other artists, and *Thread Lines* might have benefited from the inclusion of more artists whose work similarly moves across a broader spectrum of media and cultural contexts (among them, Claire Zeisler, Eva Hesse, Fred Sandback, Richard Tuttle, Cecilia Vicuna). For example, curator Cornelia H. Butler has discussed what she terms Tut-

tle's "kinesthetic drawing practice" within the framework of dance and performance, noting the "expressive physicality of his creative process," particularly in terms of his *Wire Pieces* (Butler 2005, 171). As Sandback once stated: "A line of string isn't a line, it's a thing, and as a thing it doesn't define a plane but everything else outside its own boundaries. It's an 'aggregate of experiences ...'" (See Statements from the Fred Sandback Archive



Figure 4

Sam Moyer; *Worry Rug 1*, 2009; Ikea rug, encaustic; 47 x 28 inches; Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

http://fredsandbackarchive.org/atxt_1975stat.html

Works by Anne Wilson and Kimsooja were the few that directly engaged with ideas of community and enactment, connecting a more political, experiential view of draw-

ing and textile with deep history. Upon discovering that the Drawing Center was once the site of the Positive Motion Loom Company, Wilson transformed the interior spaces of the museum into a living loom in her site-specific performance *To Cross*

(*Walking New York*) (Figures 7a and 7b), the highlight of the show. At select dates throughout the exhibition's run, performers wrapped the museum's four central columns with fluorescent green thread to form a standard weaving cross or warp,



Figure 5

Sheila Hicks; *Transpercer 3 Fois*, 2009; Wool, silk, metallic thread; 9.25 x 8.125 inches; Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

using slow, repetitive movements that echo the methodical process of preparing a loom for weaving. Here, Wilson continues her well-known investigations with issues of labor and communal activity, at the same time creating a luminous sculptural form that thoughtfully activated the physical and conceptual spaces of the gallery.

Kimsooja also looks at textile traditions and indigenous craft in

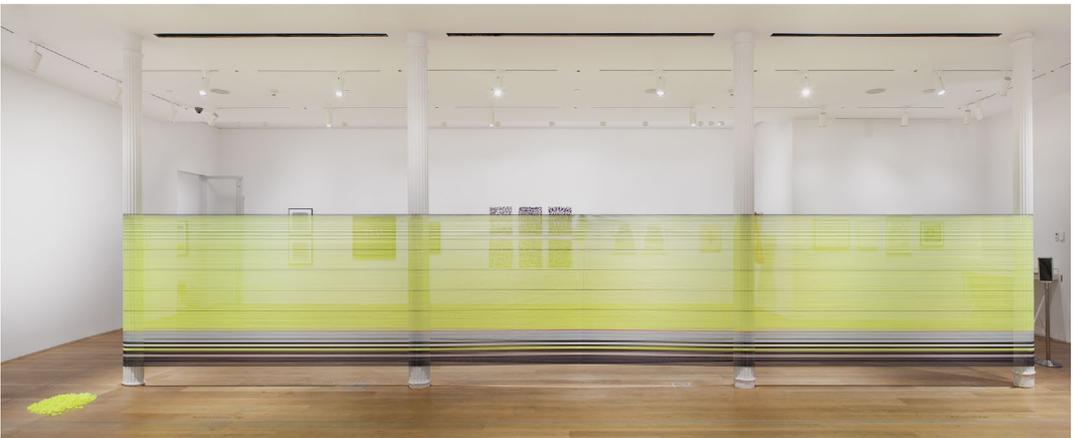
her film series *Thread Routes*, the first chapter of which, presented here although in a separate space from the main exhibition, explores a traditional weaving community in Peru (Figure 8). Close-up images of women's hands, both wrinkled and smooth, capture the repeated movements of winding fibers around wooden sticks and spools, while long, silent views of the highlands of Machu Picchu offer a

sense of place as richly textured as the threads being spun.

Thread Lines, with its impressive roster of artists, offered a first take on the relationship between fiber art and drawing. One looks forward to further explorations that expand the parameters of drawing, again presented here in terms of line, into other spatial arenas—artistic, social, and otherwise.



Figure 6
Louise Bourgeois; *Untitled*, 2006; Fabric; 15 x 22 1/4 inches; Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.



Figures 7a and b

Anne Wilson; *To Cross (Walking New York)*, 2014; Site specific performance and sculpture; Dimensions variable; Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery.



Figure 8

Kimsooja; *Thread Routes-Chapter 1*, 2010; 16-mm film transferred to HD format; 29:31 min, 5.1 surround sound; Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio.

Reference

Butler, Cornelia H. 2005.
“Kinesthetic Drawing”. In *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, edited by Madeleine Grynsztejn, 171. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.