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Exhibition Review

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John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin,
January 18 - October 11, 2015

Toward Textiles, a nearly year-long series of six exhibitions, takes an essentialist view of fiber art, presenting works by artists for whom materiality is central to their practice. Not unlike Process Art, with its emphasis on intuitive processes and expressive materials that challenged the structural stability of Minimalism in the mid-1960s, *Toward Textiles* sets out to reclaim fiber art from disciplines of mainstream contemporary art that have appropriated, and perhaps misappropriated, material-based practices. As such, it attempts to deliver fiber art back to the realm of the physical and the experiential.

Such sentiments are expressed in a curatorial statement by Alison Ferris, curator of *Material Fix*, a group exhibition of 22 artists that serves as the series' central showcase.¹ Included here are works that reinforce the "sensual and felt qualities" of fiber art, inherent qualities Ferris defines in terms of "affect" or "the affective," because of the medium's "relationship to ordinary, everyday textiles".² Thus

the private, domestic function of textiles becomes one of the exhibition's core themes, as do the politics of everyday practices, as suggested by Michel de Certeau (2011: xi), who sees everyday practices, such as "talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking," as "ways of operating" that are inseparable from the activities of the larger social body.

Within the context of *Toward Textiles*, these "ways of operating" might also include sewing, knitting, crocheting, weaving, and other hand processes that exploit and animate their commonplace, utilitarian materials with elements of visual and tactile pleasure, at the same time offering content at once subjective and gendered. Such tenets were also at the heart of the Pattern and Decoration Movement, and several artists continue this lineage, including Ebony G. Patterson, whose *Dead Treez*, (one of six exhibitions that complemented *Material Fix*, highlighting specific artists in depth), investigates male identity and fashion within the dancehall

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Figure 1

Ebony G. Patterson, *Swag Swag Krew* [from the *Out and Bad* series, 2011–2014]. Installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2015. Cotton, velvet, lace, plastic, and mixed media. Photo: Kohler Arts Center.

culture of her native Jamaica.

The artist's *Swag Swag Krew* (from the *Out and Bad* series, 2011–2014) (Figure 1), a diorama filled with mannequins dressed in opulent, Baroque layers of bling and patterned clothing, looks at issues of beauty and adornment as it defines black male sexuality within Jamaican popular culture. Patterson brings her same material interests and sense of theatricality to her series of tapestries (one wall based, the other four displayed on the floor), which similarly combine textiles, glitter, and readymade items (toys, shoes, plastic guns) to explore male identity and community. However, the rituals of celebration and pageantry that defined the installation work turn to violence and loss in the tapes-

tries, where images of headless bodies, victims of local crime materially translated by Patterson from photos circulating on the Internet, emerge from the cacophony of objects and textures.

Physically and conceptually framing the entrance to *Material Fix*, Jesse Harrod's over-the-top totems and wall-based environment built from colorful layers of craft goods and found textiles (fake flowers, scrolls of sequins, bits of kitchen fabrics, painted cardboard fragments) similarly commemorate decorative impulses within fiber art. Also employing mundane materials and processes of accumulation to create works that pulsate with movement and eye-popping effect, Susie Ganch transforms discarded Starbucks coffee lids

(still marked with the residue of lipstick and coffee stains), into a flowing white tapestry (Figure 2), while Polly Apfelbaum, in her *Bring Back the Funk* (2013), creates a cascading rug from vibrant scraps of synthetic crushed velvet, reminiscent of Lynda Benglis's pours.

Works by Anne Wilson and John Paul Morabito explore the private and social rituals of hand labor. In her *Dispersions* series (2013), seven of which were on view, Wilson transforms fragments of heirloom fabrics into intimate, cosmological fields suggestive of both presence and absence. Here, white damask table linens, each bearing a circular tear, are stretched taught like canvases in abutting white frames. Wilson hand stitches the edges of her voids with colored

thread and hair, creating a kind of push-pull effect that operates across spatial dimensions, extending the familial and the quotidian into other cultural spheres. Morabito similarly uses repeated movements and hand gestures in his hand-woven fabrics (wool, silk, cotton, linen), by methodically burning small holes into their cream and pale mauve surfaces to create all-over, geometric patterns (Figure 3). The four works included here, displayed either pinned on or draped from the wall, are reminiscent of scarred human skins; for Morabito, the painstaking act of hand labor is associated with self-sacrifice and, indeed, pain, a kind of secular penance.

The role of religious ritual is intimately tied to the history of textiles, and in several works aspects of community, faith, mourning, and healing play out in grand scale. Both Sheila Pepe's *Second Vatican*

Wrap (2013), an oversized liturgical garment crocheted from synthetic and natural yarns, and metallic thread, and Piper Shepard's *Lacing Space* (2010), a suspended muslin screen in which cut-out floral and serpentine forms evoke a medieval tapestry or stained-glass window, offer moments of marvel and reflection. *Lacing Space* also functions as an architectural frame through which viewers pass to witness Josh Faught's monumental mixed-media memory quilt, a sweeping band of vertical panels interweaving found objects, texts, and fabrics, including a Jacquard-woven reproduction of a panel from the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial quilt (Figure 4).

Christy Matson also employs the Jacquard loom to create abstract weavings that explore various art historical lineages, from Bauhaus textiles to modernist painting. The four works included here, woven in cool colors and a hard-edged geom-

etry yet with an expressive quality that draws attention to their tactile surfaces and labor-intensive making, celebrate utopian moments when art and craft shared similar trajectories (Figure 5).

Like Matson, David Harper is interested in how history and its institutions frame our understanding of the material present. His *Encyclopedia of the Familiar* (2015) (Figure 6), a fastidiously crafted replica of a horse, constructed from cowhide, synthetic fibers and horsehairs, is dissected in two and suspended from the wall. Tattooed upon its skin is a menagerie of painted images—birds, bugs, bones, wrapped limbs and hands, thimbles, scissors, spools of thread—familiar curiosities that draw connections between histories of sewing, medicine, and taxidermy.

The juncture between history, materiality, and the body



Figure 2

Susie Ganch, *Pile: Starbucks on Robinson, April–December 2012* (detail), 2013; plastic and mixed media; 120×84 x 12 in. Photo: Kohler Arts Center.



Figure 3

John Paul Morabito, *Warp Faced Plain Weave* (detail), 2009; cotton and linen paper; 55 × 47 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kohler Arts Center.



Figure 4

Josh Faught, *It Takes a Lifetime to Get Exactly Where You Are*, 2012. Installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2015. Sequin trim, hemp, cedar blocks, cotton, polyester, wool, cochineal dye, straw hat with lace, toilet paper, paper towels, scrapbooking letters, silk handkerchief, indigo, political pins, disaster blanket, gourd, gold leaf, plaster cat, and nail polish; 96 × 240 in. Photo: Kohler Arts Center.



Figure 5

Christy Matson, *Triangles in Pink, Grey, White, Green, and Browns*, 2012; cotton and tencel; 19×27 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kohler Arts Center.



Figure 6

David R. Harper, *Encyclopedia of the Familiar*, 2015. Installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center. Cowhide, polyurethane, synthetic hair, horsehair, fiber, and mixed media. Photo: Kohler Arts Center.

is instantiated in other works. For Yuni Kim Lang, for example, history determines identity as evinced in her series *Comfort Hair*, in which a large black wig, braided

and coiled from strands of black polypropylene rope, becomes the central prop for her sculptures and performance-based photographs that explore the artist's Korean

heritage. In the four images on view (all pigment prints, 2014), we witness the artist—either alone or in intergenerational groupings with other Korean women—donning the



Figure 7

Carole Frances Lung, *Factory to Factory*, 2015. Installation view, John Michael Kohler Arts Center. Photo: Kohler Arts Center.

wig, which serves as both a nest that nurtures and an appendage that links past, present, and future.

In her video installation *draw* (2003/2014), one of the accompanying solo projects, Ann Hamilton casts the image of a red thread as a basic element of fiber art and as a metaphoric blood line that links textiles to larger social histories and practices. Viewers enter a darkened room punctuated by the moving image of a red thread weaving its way across a piece of semi-transparent, white paper, projected from four spinning projectors, one installed on each of the gallery's four walls. Shot slightly out of focus using a surveillance camera, a hazy red line encircles the space, as does an audio track

that amplifies the rhythmic movement of thread, creating a bodily experience in which the viewer is in a continuous state of location/dislocation.

The works in Carole Frances Lung's solo show, *Factory to Factory* (Figure 7), made during a residency at the Kohler Foundry, are deeply grounded in the history of Kohler and the local industry of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, while continuing the artist's ongoing interest in labor histories and textile production. The Wigwam sock factory has been a mainstay of the city since 1905, and in a black-and-white video, we see Lung, who also goes by the name Frau Fiber, hand-knitting a sock in competition with the factory's industrial knit-

ting machine. The resultant sock is displayed nearby, alongside a cast-iron sewing machine and factory model. Also on view is an oversized pair of hand-woven denim overalls, modeled after those worn by Kohler factory workers, as well as the iron pattern weights used to make them. In addition to honoring those whose labor was integral to realizing the works on view, the uniform's imposing scale and placement on the wall recalls Joseph Beuys's felt suit, perhaps an ode to his well-known dictum "Everyone is an artist."

Many of the central themes that define *Toward Textiles*: materiality, hand production, individual agency, collective experience, culminate in Joan Livingstone's

impressive solo presentation *Oddment[s]*, a visual display of 35 discarded objects the artist has collected during her walks and travels. Certeau's "ways of operating" also manifest here, in particular, the theorist's notion that the city is experienced as a social rather than physical space through the everyday practice of walking. Livingstone's experience of the city, whether her home of Chicago or elsewhere, is actualized both through walking and the objects she encounters: rocks, bits of concrete, newspapers, metal piping, hairbrushes, ceramic cups, a soccer ball. The artist later transforms these artifacts by layering their surfaces in, for example, felt, paper, paint, or gold leaf, a

process the artist calls "reskinning." The result is an archeology that reinvests objects as carriers of meaning, and that, despite our increasingly digital existence, affirms the need for a practice that is material, physical, present.

Notes

1. *Toward Textiles* included the following exhibitions: *Material Fix* (13 March–11 October 2015), curated by Alison Ferris; *Ebony G. Patterson: Dead Treez* (18 January–13 September 2015), curated by Karen Patterson; *Ann Hamilton: draw* (18 January–27 September 2015), curated by Alison Ferris; *Sandra Sheehy and Anna Zemánková: Botanical* (15 February–30

August), curated by Karen Patterson; *Joan Livingstone: Oddment[s]* (15 February–27 September 2015), curated by Karen Patterson; *Carole Frances Lung: Factory to Factory* (22 February–11 October 2015), curated by Karen Patterson.

2. See the essay by Alison Ferris in *Toward Textiles*, brochure of the exhibition at the John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, 2015.

Reference

- de Certeau, Michel. 2011. "General Introduction." In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, 3rd ed., xi. University of California Press.