

To Weave the Sky:

Textile Abstractions in the Jorge M. Pérez Collection

Celebrating the significant number of textile-based works that have entered the collection in recent years, To Weave the Sky: Textile Abstractions from the Jorge M. Pérez Collection engages these acquisitions as focal points from which to structure creative dialogues with artworks presented in other mediums. Historically marginalized within Western Art contexts or relegated to the genre of craft, presently textiles, embroidery, and expanded weaving techniques are receiving increased visibility within Contemporary Art contexts and being engaged by prominent contemporary artists globally. This exhibition is inspired by weaving's traditional ties to abstraction and geometry, landscape and the organic, tactility and intimacy, as well as to indigenous cosmologies and ritual. The title of the exhibition implies both an impossibility -one cannot literally weave the sky due to its immateriality- and an aspiration, with the sky representing an unattainable beauty, spirituality or mystery that artists perpetually strive to articulate. The exhibition explores the diverse approaches to textiles evident in the collection and the formal and conceptual innovations they represent, as a speculative attempt to unpack the enigmatic attraction we have to these materials and methods currently.

While yours is fundamentally a painting practice, textiles have consistently played a significant role in many of your projects, which have included staining synthetic fabrics and the weaving of woolen rugs. These textile works have coincided with

investigations involving ceramics, common craft materials, references to quilting and other forms traditionally associated with "the domestic" and "women's work." How do you see these materials and references as dialoguing with or critiquing previous generations of New York-based painters?

When I moved to New York in 1978 this conversation was very much in the air - there was a lot of 'painting is dead' conversation, a lot of new conceptual work but somehow most of my friends were painters, and there was a lot of good painting out there. And then later, when I started showing in late the 1980's, I didn't identify with the Salle/Schnabel macho expressionist painting, but more with conceptually-based work coming out of the East Village galleries. And it didn't seem like a big jump to move from there to the stained works on the floor, I was thinking about post-minimal artists like Lynda Benglis and Richard Tuttle, or Alan Shields - it was the mix of those two strands, and probably others, that opened up to experimenting with materials, working on the floor and incorporating ideas of the domestic and feminism.

In 1992, with "The Blot on My Bonnet," I was already experimenting with textiles in dialogue with painting and sculpture, and my way of bringing the conversation back was the stain - which could be Frankenthaler, Sam Gillian or Morris Louis, but it could also be textile practice. In the mid 90's, my work was contextualized in shows like "Painting Outside the Frame" and "Painting in the Expanded Field." Painting became a door for people to understand my work, and painting practices were opening up too, I was happy to be part of that. It was around that time that the critic Lane Relyea, in "A dozen paragraphs scattered around the topic of stains," wrote

something that I think still applies: "Apfelbaum's art is both painting and sculpture and perhaps photography and fashion and formless material process as well. It is all these things - wildly so and wildly not so."

It was less about craft at that point; I became aware of that connection somewhat later, and it's true that my current ceramics are very painterly - that's a constant for me, but I only started doing ceramics seriously around ten years ago. The fabric connection is older, and I'm indebted to artists like Lenore Tawney, Shelia Hicks, and Annie Albers, who is probably the most painterly of those. Something that comes out of my own personal history is a long-standing love of Amish quilts and the Pennsylvania German homespun and theorems - which I always looked at as a form of painting, not craft, or domestic work.

A "wimple" is a fabric used within Judaism to wrap a male infant during his bris milah ceremony and forms the title of your 2009 piece included in this exhibition. Could you describe the context behind the production of this work and the aesthetic decisions it involved?

Right. The context was very specific: it was made for an exhibition at my family's synagogue, in Philadelphia. It's a Frank Furness building, and they have a very significant collection of Jewish artifacts. I just unearthed my artist statement for that show:

"I started with dimensions of the wimple (seven feet by seven inches) and went to the fabric store and bought a hunk of fabric that was seven feet long and 50 inches wide. I pinned the fabric on the wall, measured seven inches, and realized I'd have

a lot of leftover fabric. Not wanting to be wasteful I decided to make five. Five seemed better than one."

The fabric is synthetic rayon silk velvet, and I drew on the fabric with magic marker. The velvet takes the marker beautifully. The ink runs into the material like dye, which is something I use a lot of in my installations. I like the idea of using this kind of cheap, commercial material, and making it into something else. The fabric has no warp or weft, so I decided to make wavy lines that mimic weaving - a recall of the craft that would have been involved in making a traditional wimple.

The idea that the wimple is such an integral part of a celebration that marks an important stage in a life made me want to use all the colors that I had available so that it has all the possibilities of all the colors of a life.

Sun Target Drawings from 2018 is your second work presented in To Weave the Sky. It includes 77 distinct color variations on a target form, each with its center rendered in bright yellow. Targets of this kind recall those produced by several artists during the Postwar period, most recognizably Jasper Johns. What drew you to engage this form serially, and to use such a strong color palette?

The target has been in my work since the 80's. The first piece was titled "Wallflower," made of paper flowers pinned to the wall in the shape of a target. It was actually Rauschenberg not Johns who was the initial inspiration. He had a flower target in one of his performances. The form has such a rich

history - there are mandalas, rose windows, as well as things like commercial signs that influenced Johns. And many other artists have used it: Kenneth Noland, Alfred Jensen and Poul Gernes, for example, and for me, especially Hilma af Klint. It was around this time that there was a show in Los Angeles called "The Spiritual in Abstract Art," and I was probably thinking about that as much as Johns' idea of 'things the mind already knows.'

In preparing for my "Waiting for the UFO's" show at Ikon Gallery I became really interested in the target again and started making these gouache pieces very intuitively. The target colors ran through the show, starting with the original Gilbert Baker gay flag and becoming much more complex and experimental with the dozens of ceramics and drawings in the show. Everything was anchored by three large target rugs, woven in Oaxaca - you find targets in decorative arts too. The rugs used the primary colors as background, with yellow at the center, representing the sun. I also installed a "Wallflower" from 1988, so things came full circle.

Repetition and seriality have become more and more important to my work over time. I think there are a few things at work there. For one thing, in folk art there are often serial motifs - folk art is not about change and innovation, but about the repetition and perfection of a particular motif over time. My work is time intensive and many craft practices involve the repetition of small moves over and over - weaving is a good example, and I've tried to incorporate that idea, doing the same thing over and over, with small variations, I think that's very basic to craft practice. Finally, when I first moved to New York, composers like Phillip Glass, Steve Reich and Terry Riley

were coming onto the scene - it's significant to me that a lot of their ideas drew from non-western music, different ideas about organization, hierarchy and time.

Do you recognize a tension or competition between color and form within your pieces?

Absolutely not! They love each other.

You know, Brice Marden just passed away, and although I don't think my work is close to his, the absolute synthesis of color and form you see in his work is something that I aspire to.

We have seen an increased uses of fabric, weaving, knitting and embroidery within the productions of artists currently, while you have been engaging these materials and methods for several decades. How do you read these current interests and what might they say about our current cultural moment and aspirations?

I'll answer with two references, both tied to personal experience. I started making ceramics twelve years ago at Greenwich House in New York City, but more recently, I was very lucky, in 2019, just before COVID, to have a fellowship at Haystack Mountain School of Craft. My interest in craft is long-standing, it goes back to my childhood, but this was really the first opportunity I had to be part of that community, and see firsthand the bridges between the craft work and the art world. Fortunately, as you point out, those distinctions - which I think are arbitrary anyway - are starting to fade away. It's great to see another generation as excited about craft and material and making as I was and still am. I learned to weave out on a

beautiful deck under a blue sky in Maine on the same deck where Annie Albers taught classes on in the 1950's. To weave the sky is a beautiful metaphor for the future.

*Looking back further, I'm reading a new book about the group of artists who lived around Coenties Slip in the late 1950'S and early 1960's. (Prudence Peiffer, *The Slip: The New York City Street That Changed American Art Forever*). Coenties Slip is a few blocks south of where I've lived and worked since late 1970's. I met Ann Wilson, who had been part of that group, in what was probably the first exhibition I ever did in New York. But what really interests me is the strange mix of artists assembled there: Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Lenore Tawney, Jack Youngerman, Robert Indiana - all doing very diverse work, all in their own way, outside the mainstream. They talked about Coenties Slip as if it were not part of New York at all, a kind of world unto itself at the edge of the city. I liked the idea that they were a close and supportive community, but made work that was so different. Agnes Martin and Lenore Tawney in particular are artists I feel close to. So it links up to my own history, as a very young artist in New York, and there is something about that sense of being at the edge of things that I hold on to.*