

# Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art

Large Print Guide



Textiles are vital to our lives. We are swaddled in them when we're born, we wrap our bodies in them every day and we're shrouded in them when we die. What does it mean to imagine a needle, a loom or a garment as a tool of resistance? How can textiles unpack, question, unspool, unravel and therefore reimagine the world around us?

Since the 1960s, textiles have become increasingly present in artistic practices for subversive ends. This is significant as the medium has been historically undervalued within the hierarchies of Western art history. Textiles have been considered 'craft' in opposition to definitions of 'fine art', gendered as feminine and marginalised by scholars and the art market. The 50 international artists in this show challenge these classifications, harnessing the medium to speak powerfully about intimate, everyday stories as well as wider socio-political narratives, teasing out these entangled concerns through a stitch, a knot, a braid, through the warp and the weft. These artists defy traditional expectations of textiles, embracing abstraction or figuration to push the boundaries of the medium. They draw on its material history to reveal ideas relating to gender, labour, value, ecology, ancestral knowledge, and histories of oppression, extraction and trade.

Rather than dictating a chronological history of fibre art, the exhibition is organised in thematic dialogues between artists — across both generations and geographies — to explore how they have embraced textiles to critique or push up against regimes of power. Some artists work alone with solitary, near-meditative practices, while others reflect the shared approach that the medium often invites, working with collaborators in acts of community and solidarity. Spanning intimate hand-crafted pieces to large-scale sculptural installations, these artworks communicate multi-layered stories about lived experience, invoking the vital issues embedded in fibre and thread.

Stitching can be a subversive act; thread can work as a language to challenge fixed ideas and voice free expression. Across many cultures, textile-based art has been marginalised – deemed inferior as a domestic or ‘craft’ practice within a hierarchy of artistic value and framed as feminine through a sexist lens. Women, men and nonbinary artists have both resisted and reclaimed these limiting approaches to the medium, questioning gendered and value-based binaries and using the act of stitching as a radical practice.

The phrase ‘subversive stitch’ is borrowed from art historian Rozsika Parker’s 1984 book of the same name, in which she unpacked how textiles have been dismissed as ‘women’s work’ and how women have pushed back against these associations and harnessed their potential for subversion and resistance. Expanding on these ideas from a contemporary perspective, this section gathers artists of multiple generations and genders in dialogue, each responding to specific socio-cultural contexts. Mounira Al Solh, Ghada Amer, Feliciano Centurión, Judy Chicago, Tracey Emin, Nicholas Hlobo and LJ Roberts use textiles as vehicles for embodied liberation, perseverance and even protest.

b. 1978, Beirut, Lebanon

‘Paper Speakers’, 2020 – 21

Ink and embroidery on textile

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

This work was made in direct response to the protests that took place in Lebanon in 2015 amid a growing economic crisis, which led to a revolution in 2019. Al Solh stitches together scraps of fabric to depict a woman speaking into a makeshift megaphone, embodying the tens of thousands of people who marched together to protest corruption and demand change. Emanating from the speaker are the phrases ‘Go away!’ and ‘Who am I? Who are they? Who are we?’

Al Solh pays tribute to the essential role that women played in the revolution, fighting for their rights and pushing back against socially prescribed roles of domesticity. Drawing on a rich history in Lebanese culture of women embroidering to provide economic support for their families, Al Solh overthrows the preconceptions of this craft, instead putting it to work as a disruptive, rebellious force in society. Here textiles communicate a different kind of support — one of solidarity and resistance.

b. 1963, Cairo, Egypt

'Pink Landscape – RFGA', 2007

Acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas

Courtesy the artist

As a young student in the 1980s, Amer was not allowed to enrol in a painting class at art school because she was a woman.

Motivated by this exclusion, she uses the feminine associations of embroidery as a tool to challenge the traditionally masculine overtones of painting, asking herself: what role have women played, as both images and makers?

Amer refuses the stereotypes of women in art as defined by the male gaze, choosing to show a woman masturbating and in control of her own pleasure. She is partially obscured by horizontal and vertical 'drips' of loose thread that reference Abstract Expressionist painting, shielded from the power of nudity to arouse. Amer often presents nude women on her embroidered canvases, seeking to present women as sexually liberated to counter historical representations of women as submissive.

b. 1962 San Ignacio, Paraguay

d. 1996 Buenos Aires, Argentina

‘Eye with ñandutí, from the series La Mirada (Gazing)’, c. 1994

Ñandutí and acrylic on blanket

Flavia Nespatti Collection

‘Escucha el latido de tu corazón

(Listen to the beat of your heart)’, 1995

Embroidery on blanket

Private Collection, São Paulo, Brazil

‘Soy una flor silvestre que brota por medio del asfalto (I am a wildflower that sprouts in the middle of the asphalt)’, 1990

Embroidered panel over blanket

Private Collection, São Paulo, Brazil

‘Vestiditos (Little Dresses)’, 1994

Collage on blanket

Courtesy of Cecilia Brunson Projects/Private Collection

‘Soy alma en pena (I am a soul in pain)’, 1995

Embroidery on fabric

Private Collection, São Paulo, Brazil



‘Renazco a cada instante  
(I am reborn at every moment)’, 1995  
Embroidery on blanket  
Private Collection, São Paulo, Brazil

‘Estrella de mar (Starfish)’, 1990  
Ñandutí and acrylic on blanket  
Private Collection, São Paulo, Brazil

‘Estoy vivo (I am alive)’, 1994  
Embroidery on blanket  
Estrellita B. Brodsky Collection

Centurión used cheap cloths and mass-produced blankets as the ground for simple embroidered designs or decorative items bought from local markets. The aesthetic simplicity of his work can be considered a conscious political positioning by the artist. In the 1990s, engaging with modest materials and straightforward representations was an anti-elitist, democratic stance in response to decades of right-wing dictatorships in Argentina and Paraguay.

Censorship and fear of repercussions by these violent regimes led many artists and writers to write cryptically. Centurión’s poetic refrains subtly explore queer desire, religion, death and his deteriorating health after his HIV diagnosis in 1993.

Centurión's art embraces the 'feminine world' he was never allowed to participate in as a queer boy growing up in Paraguay. He deliberately practised a 'craft' — one associated with women's work — within a fine art context, ignoring and thus destabilising the gendered hierarchies that have served not only to oppress women but also to limit the identities of men.

b. 1939 Chicago, Illinois, USA

‘Birth Tear/Tear’, 1982

Embroidery on silk by Jane Gaddie Thompson

Collection of Jeffrey N. Dauber and Marc A. Levin

Chicago’s Birth Project (1980—85) was created in response to what she saw as an ‘iconographic void’ of images of birth in Western art. She collaborated with over 150 women who volunteered to translate her designs into textiles from their homes, using embroidery, quilting, macramé, needlepoint, crochet and more. She depicted the wildly diverse interpretations and experiences of birthing: ‘the mythical, the celebratory, and the painful’. Considering the attention given to ‘the paint strokes of the great male painters’, Chicago asked: ‘why is equal time not given to the incredible array of needle techniques that women have used for centuries?’

Birth Tear/Tear was embroidered by Jane Gaddie Thompson. Thompson developed a complex method of needlepoint to achieve the nuanced gradient effect, working with nine needles at a time (each strung with three threads). The intense palette and rippling forms convey the visceral aspects of birth, as well as suggesting an almost cosmic dimension. In the journal that Thompson kept while making the work, she reflected: ‘I have hopes that someday this work will be revered as one that began a social revolution.’

b. 1963, Croydon, UK

'No chance (WHAT A YEAR)', 1999

Appliqué blanket

Portia Kennaway

In this hand-stitched appliqué blanket, Emin gives voice to her feelings as a thirteen-year-old girl in 1977, the year a man raped her. Confrontational text, cut out in felt and hand-stitched onto fabric, recounts her experiences drinking, her attitudes towards school, and reveals aspects of her emotional landscape: indignation, alienation and rage.

Emin re-used fabrics that carried personal or political charge, like a Union Jack, as well as old blankets to evoke ideas of protection, comfort and tenderness. Together, the material and text provide an intimate, heart-rending portrait of a teenaged girl's longing and resistance.

b. 1975, Cape Town, South Africa

‘Babelana ngentloko’, 2017

Ribbon and leather on linen canvas

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York,

Hong Kong, Seoul and London

Hlobo takes on the loaded history of painting in his series of canvases that incorporate ribbon and leather. These works defy categorisation: the artist calls them ‘paintings’ but sees himself as a sculptor, and stitching is the key technique that runs through his practice. Here he uses ribbon to suggest two intertwined bodies. They evoke tentacled watery beings, or even sexual organs that transgress any binary codes. For Hlobo, the negative and ‘craft’ associations of textile are exactly what drew him to it, for its rebellious possibilities. His choice of ribbon is deliberate in its historical associations with women’s garments.

These works have been key to Hlobo’s exploration of his own sexuality as a gay man of Xhosa heritage in South Africa. He describes how stitching represents ‘what South Africans are going through, constant revision’, and the suture of the stitch refers both to the pain of colonisation and the possibility of healing after this suffering.

If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask the member of staff in the room 'Wound and Repair', who will share a sample with you.

b. 1980, Royal Oak, Michigan, USA

‘Jacqueline Mautner (Free CeCe)’, 2012

Embroidery on cotton

Courtesy the artist and Hales London and New York

‘rosza daniel lang/levitsky at the New York City Dyke March’, 2013

Embroidery on cotton

Courtesy the artist and Hales London and New York

‘Frederick Weston’, 2018

Embroidery on cotton

Courtesy the artist and Hales London and New York

Roberts embroiders their friends and loved ones in these small, intimate portraits that give visibility to the lives and activism of an intergenerational community of queer people. Jacqueline Mautner, depicted at a Drag March in the East Village, New York, sports a mascara moustache and shows her solidarity with CeCe McDonald, a transgender woman and activist who was incarcerated following a transphobic attack. rosza daniel lang/levitsky holds a placard among friends at the New York City Dyke March, while Frederick Weston prepares to raise awareness of the criminalisation of HIV at a Sunday Pride parade.

Roberts links the debasement of needlework as craft with the underrepresentation of queer people and their politics; these works reclaim both the people and the medium as worthy of attention and celebration. The works are displayed to show both the back and the front of the embroideries, which Roberts considers as important as each other. Behind every person or story is a messy underside, and the particular dissolves into a more universal web of connectedness.



Textiles are part of our everyday routines — they are in close contact with our bodies and our homes, they are used, felt, touched and seen. As such, the material is invested with personal narratives, making it uniquely suited to communicate the intricacies and complexities of lived experience. Embedded in these fabrics are stories ranging from love and labour to resilience and survival.

In this room, artists use textiles that have had a previous life as clothing belonging to members of their immediate communities. Working from the 1960s, Loretta Pettway used old workers' clothes to construct quilts, while Sheila Hicks in the 1990s and Małgorzata Mirga-Tas in recent years re-used clothes worn by friends and loved ones. Survival is central to Sanford Biggers' work, who uses antique quilts to explore how they may have been the key to enslaved people's freedom.

In the next room, artists use textiles and textile processes to reflect on their everyday experiences, often embracing the intimacy of the fabrics to represent their personal politics. In the 1990s, Faith Ringgold used quilts as a base for narrative storytelling, while Pacita Abad — whose work Ringgold admired — gave visibility to the humanity of immigrant women. Today, Tschabalala Self and Billie Zangewa show social and domestic spaces as sites of personal and political significance.

# Loretta Pettway

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b. 1942, Boykin, Alabama, USA

“Log Cabin’ – single block ‘Courthouse Steps’ variation (local name: ‘Bricklayer’), c. 1980

Cotton, cotton-polyester blend

Collection of Lorenzo Legarda Leviste and Fahad Mayet, courtesy of Alison Jacques, London

‘Two-sided work clothes quilt: Bars and blocks’, c. 1960

Two-sided quilt: cotton, denim, twill, corduroy and wool blend

Collection of Lorenzo Legarda Leviste and Fahad Mayet, courtesy of Alison Jacques, London

Embedded in these two quilts are stories of love, resilience and survival. Pettway is a member of the Gee’s Bend Quilting Collective, a group of intergenerational women working in Gee’s Bend, Alabama, who continue a tradition of quilting that emerged over 200 years ago. Many quiltmakers, including Pettway, can trace their family histories to enslaved people working at the Pettway Plantation, formerly owned by Joseph Gee after whom the town is named.

Quilts form a part of everyday life in Gee's Bend. Alongside tending to other responsibilities, women create brightly coloured, asymmetrical quilts to be used at home. They were made to keep people warm out of necessity; stains, tears and worn-down patches indicate this use.

These quilts were originally seen on beds or hanging from clothes lines while they were 'aired' after being stored for the summer. Today, they are appreciated as artworks with dynamic asymmetrical compositions. In 'Log Cabin' — single block 'Courthouse Steps' variation (local name: 'Bricklayer'), Pettway flexes her technical skill and feel for colour, form and pattern. Pettway's quilts, made twenty years apart, are made with recycled items of clothing. Two-sided work clothes quilt: Bars and blocks uses strips of denim, corduroy and cotton in a spirit of reclamation and resourcefulness.

b. 1970, Los Angeles, USA

‘Sweven’, 2022

Antique quilt, assorted textiles and acrylic

MASSIMODECARLO and Marianne Boesky Gallery

Biggers is interested in ‘codeswitching’, the ways in which people — often people from the global majority — change their behaviour in different contexts, not to fit in, but to survive. This work draws upon the contested history of quilts being used as ‘code’ to signpost routes for enslaved freedom seekers travelling on the Underground Railroad in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The colours and patterns on the quilts potentially indicated which way to go, where was safe and where was dangerous.

Biggers sees the pre-existing quilt patterns as a first layer of ‘code’ and his interventions as ‘another layer of code to be deciphered somewhere in the future.’ This work uses an antique quilt with a ‘bricklayer’ pattern similar to that used by Loretta Pettway. Sewn, cut and painted patterns collide in an optical illusion. The eye-bending intervention of clashing signs and patterns suggests that code is dynamically being written and rewritten in the continual present. What we see shifts; the visuals are as slippery as history itself.

b. 1978, Zakopane, Poland

‘From the series Wyjście z Egiptu (Out of Egypt)’, 2021

Textile, acrylic paint and mixed media on wooden stretcher

Private Collection, Switzerland

Mirga-Tas stitches found fabrics — clothing, curtains and sheets — into vibrant patchworks that tell quotidian stories of Roma people. They often cover walls or are displayed in groups, presenting — at human or larger-than life scale — narrative scenes that reveal both public and private aspects of Roma existence. In this work, she presents a snapshot of everyday life: women mend clothes, hang laundry and play cards.

This work was made in response to a print by the seventeenth century engraver Jacques Collot, who depicted Roma people as outcasts. His representations perpetuated commonly-held stereotypes of Roma people as impoverished travellers.

Mirga-Tas resists these associations, instead offering a positive iconography of Roma people today in which women exist in community with each other. For the artist, the fabrics carry intimate memories: ‘I personally feel moved when I see the scraps of material, knowing whom they came from, what I remember and associate with them, and whom they belonged to.’

b. 1934, Hastings, Nebraska, USA

‘Family Treasures’, 1993

64 wrapped pieces of clothing

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

In Family Treasures, Hicks draws upon the intimacy of textile: we all wear it, we invest it with feelings and it is literally the texture of our everyday lives. While in Amsterdam in 1993, she asked close friends and family members to surrender their most beloved items of clothing, which she wrapped in colourful yarn and thread. Each tightly-wound bundle is a reminder of what we hold dear.

Hicks is a leading member of the fibre arts movement in Europe and the United States in the 1960s and 70s, in which mostly women artists experimented with fibre and thread as a legitimate medium for art. Hicks’ work is often sculptural, playful and harnesses a variety of scales — from the small and intimate to the monumental — challenging the idea that textiles are flat, decorative and wall-based. Her work has been motivated by the acknowledgement that fibre permeates peoples’ lives. She has commented: ‘you can’t go anywhere in the world without touching fibre.’

b. 1990, Harlem, New York City, USA

‘Koco at the Bodega’, 2017

Coloured pencil, photocopies of handcoloured drawings, acrylic, flashe, fabric and painted canvas on canvas

Valeria and Gregorio Napoleone Collection

Self is interested in ‘how a body is consumed, how a body is experienced and how a body is inhabited.’ In Koco at the Bodega, she investigates the experience of living in a Black woman’s body, distorting the figure to emphasise the hips. Stitching allows her to draw with thread, as well as reference her artistic heroes like Faith Ringgold and the African American tradition of quilt making.

Bodegas — neighbourhood convenience stores — carry personal and political importance for Self. She notes that bodegas function as ‘architectural glue, holding together a street corner or an entire block’ in communities increasingly threatened by rapid change and gentrification, especially in Harlem, where she is from. Here, Self celebrates the bodega as a site of communal exchange created by and for people from the global majority.

b. 1930, Harlem, New York City, USA

‘Tar Beach 2’, 1990 – 92

Silkscreen on silk

Private Collection, courtesy Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London

This is one of Ringgold’s ‘story quilts’, partly made in response to her autobiography being rejected by a publisher. Textiles offered her a platform to tell her own stories. She draws on a rich tradition of African American women quiltmakers, including her great-great grandmother Susie Shannon, who had been born into enslavement in antebellum Florida and had produced quilts for plantation owners. Ringgold was also influenced by fifteenth-century Tibetan and Nepalese thangka paintings, whose rollable scroll form she saw as a solution to the challenge of moving, storing and transporting paintings. Textiles were a means for creative autonomy, both practically and conceptually.

This quilt charts the story of Cassie Louise Lightfoot, who dreams of the stars lifting her up from her family’s Harlem rooftop (‘Tar Beach’) to fly over the George Washington Bridge. The text reveals the conditions of Cassie’s life, including the financial pressures on her family and the discrimination they faced. For Ringgold, textiles can hold defiant stories of agency in the face of oppression. Cassie’s magical power of flying means that ‘I am free to go wherever I want to for the rest of my life.’



b. 1946, Basco, Batanes, Philippines

d. 2004, Singapore

‘From Doro Wat to Sushi and Chicken Wings and Tings’, 1991

Acrylic, oil, painted canvas, plastic buttons and beads on stitched and padded canvas

Art Jameel Collection

As a Philippina immigrant, Abad was deeply sympathetic to the experiences of those who left their own countries. She felt a social responsibility to represent, with humanity, the experiences of people from the global majority. Between 1990—94, Abad documented immigrant experiences in nineteen paintings using trapunto, a method of quilting involving padded fabric hand-stitched together to create richly patterned surfaces in high relief.

This work depicts a West African undocumented immigrant in Washington, DC, called Hadiatou, who, like many immigrants in the 1990s, opened an eatery in the city. Despite working with textiles for two decades, Abad always referred to her work as paintings. Aware of the hierarchy between fine art and craft, and contending with her own marginalisation as an immigrant woman trying to make a career in art, Abad was strategically protecting it from its potential dismissal as craft-based and ‘other’.

b. 1973, Blantyre, Malawi

‘Angelina Rising’, 2012

Hand-stitched silk collage

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

‘Midnight Aura’, 2012

Hand-stitched silk collage

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Zangewa states that she is ‘reclaiming my identity, my feminine power, and my significance in society at large’ in these two embroidered silk collages. Zangewa focuses on what she calls ‘daily feminism’; the things women do that are not typically acknowledged but keep society moving, including domestic labour like sewing. In these two works, she stitches her own story as a form of empowerment, showing herself in a state of rest to counter the capitalist drive for productivity, and within an urban landscape.

Midnight Aura and Angelina Rising reference the colonial history of trading Dutch or ‘Hollandaise’ wax print cotton textiles in West and Central Africa. The artist focused on two patterns made by the Dutch company Vlisco, known by the women’s names Angelina and Aura.

A 'borderland', according to the scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa, is a 'vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary'. Borderlands are spaces where two or more cultures meet, where different social classes encounter each other, where people of different races inhabit the same locales.

The artists in this section move beyond a border being a boundary that separates 'us' from 'them'. Instead, they ask how borderlands — as emotionally charged spaces — might be sites for profound creativity. In what ways can the language of cartography and the aesthetics of borders be appropriated to subvert power? And what happens when borders are transgressed? Through varied textile practices, the artists Igshaan Adams, Cian Dayrit, T. Vinoja, Margarita Cabrera and Kimsooja try to understand, reject, embrace, keep alive or question borders, but above all they attempt to transcend them to find a new way of being.

b. 1982, Cape Town, South Africa

‘Gebedswolke (Prayer Clouds)’, 2021 – 23

Gold and silver link chain, copper wire and cotton twine, gold wire, gold chain and spray paint, polyester braid, silver memory wire, metal charms, copper, brass and silver wire, wood, plastic and crystal beads, cowrie and sea snail shells, galvanised steel and wood centre, gold and silver link chain and clear lacquer spray paint

IA Studios

‘Paypakkies Groei Nog Op Die Wingerde

(Paypackets still growing on the vines)’, 2022

Wood, plastic, glass, metal beads, nickel-plated charms, gold memory wire and copper wire, steel, nylon and polyester braided rope, cotton ribbon

Private Collection

‘Heideveld’, 2021

Wood, painted wood, plastic, glass, stone, precious stone, metal and bone beads, shells, nylon and polyester rope, cotton fabrics, wire and cotton twine

Private Collection

This installation by Igshaan Adams grows out of his expanded practice of weaving and his exploration of so-called 'desire lines' in post-Apartheid South Africa, the informal pathways that are created over time through footfall, often acting as shortcuts. He understands these lines as 'symbolic of a collective act of resistance by a community who have historically been segregated and marginalised through spatial planning. Intentionally or not, these pathways remain symbolic of carving out one's own path, collectively or individually.'

b. 1991, Kilinochchi, Sri Lanka

‘Bunker & border’, 2021

Stitching on fabric

Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

‘The Day’, 2021

Stitching on fabric

Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

Vinoja is greatly affected by the decades long Sri Lankan Civil War, which ravaged her country from 1983 to 2009. Vinoja was born in a settlement outside the war-torn capital Jaffna, where she witnessed first-hand the effects of conflict on people and the land — loss of life, disability, displacement, landmine contamination and the drawing and re-drawing of borders. Vinoja chose to work in textiles because the material and process of stitching are connected to her direct experience of war. These aerial maps are informed by her own memories and the testimonies of others; stitches and salvaged textiles form borders, excavation routes, tents, checkpoints, bunkers and burial sites. She and her father used clothes to craft bunkers or temporary shelters by filling used saris with earth. The artist has spoken of the individual stitches as reparative sutures, and fabric was used in first-aid endeavours to wrap and cover wounds.

b. 1989, Manila, Philippines

(Made in collaboration with Henry Caceres)

‘Yuta Nagi Panaad (Promised Land)’, 2018

Objects and embroidery on fabric

KADIST Collection

‘Valley of Dispossession’, 2021

Objects and embroidery on fabric

163 × 185 cm

Courtesy the artist and NOME, Berlin

Maps are not only tools for navigation, they are also highly subjective instruments that, throughout history, have served to impose imperial power and control. Dayrit uses maps to reveal how the logic of colonialism is present in current capitalist forces, directly impacting the land of the Philippines.

These two works were informed by workshops the artist held with local communities. Yuta Nagi Panaad focuses on the Philippine island of Mindanao, where people have been displaced and land has been degraded by foreign multinational corporations.

Valley of Dispossession reveals how practices of extraction have destroyed land and communities in Central Luzon.

Slogans, borders, locations of land grabs and sites of destruction are laboriously embroidered on the textile map to make visible peasant and Indigenous struggle and resistance in the region. QR codes in the work open on to videos, reports and data gathered by human rights groups working in the region.



b. 1973, Monterrey, Mexico

‘Nopal (Christina Zarate)’,

from the series ‘Space in Between’, 2016

US Border Patrol uniform, copper wire, PVC pipe, foam,  
thread and terracotta pot

Jane Lombard Gallery, New York

‘Nopal (Wendy F.V.)’,

from the series ‘Space in Between’, 2016

US Border Patrol uniform, copper wire, PVC pipe, foam, thread  
and terracotta pot

Jane Lombard Gallery, New York

‘Pipe Organ (Rony P.L.)’,

from the series ‘Space in Between’, 2016

US Border Patrol uniform, copper wire, PVC pipe, foam, thread  
and terracotta pot

Jane Lombard Gallery, New York

In the Space in Between series, Cabrera extends her exploration of US-Mexico migratory politics using soft sculpture. These interpretations of cacti indigenous to the Southwestern United States are made from discarded US Border Patrol uniforms. They were made collaboratively, in workshops where largely Spanish-speaking communities recounted their immigration

stories and embroidered them onto the sculptures. The participants were taught Otomí embroidery, a sewing technique indigenous to the Otomí people of central Mexico, as an effort to maintain a relationship to cultural traditions from Mexico in the USA. The colourful depictions of homes, peoples, national flags, Catholic imagery and celestial bodies contrast with the connotation of the uniforms, which for some stand for security and safety, while for others they invoke feelings of fear, resistance and histories of violence.

The series is titled after the Aztec word *nepantla*, which refers to places of transition and 'spaces in between' — suggesting a symbolic landscape where the relationships of people across divides are renegotiated.

Textiles can communicate through touch. They are durable and malleable, and therefore capable of being circulated. They can be folded up and transported across borders or worn ceremonially and in protest. The act of weaving, as a contemplative and slow medium, can create spaces for collectivity, memory and grief.

Turning to textile to document or protest political violence has a long history. The Bayeux Tapestry, depicting the battles leading up to the Norman Conquest of England, for example, dates back to the eleventh century. The green handkerchiefs emblematic of the fight for fair abortion laws in Argentina are one of many examples of textiles playing important roles in marches and demonstrations against state power today. This section gathers arpilleristas (anonymous women artists from Chile), Teresa Margolles, Violeta Parra, Hannah Ryggen and Zamthingla Ruivah, artists and makers from disparate geographical, cultural and temporal contexts, who mobilise textiles to commemorate victims of oppression and speak back to power.

# Arpilleristas

'Untitled arpillera', 1970s

Cotton and wool on cotton and ink on paper

Tate: Presented by Guy Brett and Alejandra Altamirano 2018

'Untitled arpillera', 1970s

Cotton and wool on cotton and ink on paper

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'Untitled arpillera', 1970s

Cotton and wool on cotton and ink on paper

Tate: Presented by Guy Brett and Alejandra Altamirano 2018

Arpilleras are among the most potent and lasting depictions of resistance in Chile from the period of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973—1990). Literally meaning 'burlap', arpilleras were made in workshops by groups of women in economically deprived areas of Santiago from scraps of fabric (often used food sacks) that their makers had to hand.

These four arpilleras attend to the various personal and societal problems their makers faced while their country was in crisis — domestic and women's rights, questions of labour and agriculture, scarcity of natural resources and poverty — as well as the community they found together in their underground circle of making.

Small in scale, arpilleras were rolled up and smuggled out of the country to inform those outside Chile about state violence and human rights violations under Pinochet's regime. Though many of the arpilleristas did not consider themselves to be artists, the re-appraisal of women's work and anonymous craft practices has led to a surge of interest in their work within fine art and museum contexts.

b. 1917, San Fabián de Alico, Chile

d. 1967, La Reina, Chile

‘Fresia y Caupolicán (Fresia and Caupolicán)’, 1964 – 65

Dyed jute fabric with embroidery

Colección Violeta Parra, Pontificia,

Universidad Católica de Chile

Parra was an activist, visual artist and renowned songwriter whose embroidered works are greatly informed by Latin America’s long histories of textile making. This artwork depicts a passage from *La Araucana* (The Araucaniad), an epic poem from the sixteenth century that narrates the Spanish conquest of Chile, focusing on the Arauco War fought between the Spaniards and the Mapuche people, an Indigenous group in Chile’s Araucanía region. In the passage, Caupolicán, a toqui — the name for Mapuche war leaders — is captured by the Spanish. Upon seeing that he allowed himself to be captured alive, his wife Fresia throws their child at his feet in a fit of rage. Caupolicán, depicted in blue — a colour of great spiritual importance in Mapuche culture — is chained at the neck and ankles by a Spanish soldier who is depicted in green and black, while seven other soldiers look on. By depicting them in this act of barbarity Parra challenges the colonial notion that the Spanish were a civilising force.

# Zamthingla Ruivah

b. 1966, Manipur, India

‘Luingamla Kashan’, 1990 – ongoing  
Handwoven wool

Sumesh Manoj Sharma, Zasha Colah and Cosmin Costinas  
In 1986 a young woman in Northern India named Luingamla, a friend of the artist, was murdered by army officers who attempted to rape her. The officers walked free due to a law, a remnant of British colonial rule, that meant that armed forces were immune from being tried in civil courts. Student groups and the Tangkhul Shanao Long (Tangkhul Women’s Association) rallied to bring a case before the courts. They won the case in 1990, four years after her murder.

Ruivah wove this keshan — a woollen sarong worn by men and women in the Naga Hills of Manipur, northeast India — to commemorate Luingamla’s path to justice. Since then, the design has been passed down through Naga communities across the region, with more than 6,000 women having produced over 15,000 of them. They have become a symbol of solidarity with the Naga resistance movement and the fight against state violence towards women.

b. 1894, Malmö, Sweden

‘Blod i gresset (Blood in the Grass)’, 1966

Wool and linen

Kode Bergen Art Museum, Bergen, Norway

This tapestry addresses the atrocities of the US invasion of Vietnam (1955–75), about which Ryggen learned from the left-leaning newspaper *Dagbladet*, delivered daily to her remote home in rural Ørlandet, Norway. The work is a searing indictment of the USA’s brutal role, directly implicating then president Lyndon B. Johnson. Wearing a cowboy hat, Johnson presides over a landscape of lush green fields intersected by a fiery red grid, making visible a Vietnamese landscape devastated by bloodshed. The forms become almost abstract, grappling with the indescribable nature of the horrors.

Ryggen primarily used local plants to dye her yarn; however, this was the only work in which she used artificial dye, to achieve the blood-red colour. Most of her tapestries also exploit the graphic pictorial potential of the tight weave achieved by a loom. However, here the green squares are tufted, their loose texture directly contrasting the authoritarian Johnson opposite. This anti-war work followed a series of tapestries Ryggen made in the 1940s and 1950s that critiqued fascism in various global contexts. These were all created directly on the loom, with no preparatory sketches.



In the face of crisis, atrocity and deep physical, psychic and societal wounds, in what ways might textiles gesture towards healing and repair? What is the potential for fabric – with its inherent tactility and associations of feeling, touch and intimacy with the body – to reckon with personal stories of hurt and pain?

Louise Bourgeois, Diedrick Brackens, Harmony Hammond, José Leonilson, Georgina Maxim and Angela Su use textiles' close relationship with the body and memory to communicate stories of personal and collective trauma and its aftermath. Their work also suggests the recuperative potential of working with fabric and thread; we bandage wounds and breakages with cloth, and we suture cuts with threads. Many of the artists turn to sewing as a metaphor for healing in the aftermath of violence: to sew is to puncture, to mend, to bind together, to attend to a split in an attempt to bring fragments into a whole.

b. 1969, Hong Kong

‘Sewing Together My Split Mind: Straight Stitch’, 2020

Hair embroidery on fabric. Private Collection

‘Sewing Together My Split Mind: French Knot’, 2020

Hair embroidery on fabric. Füsün & Faruk Eczacıbasi Collection

‘Sewing Together My Split Mind: Chain Stitch’, 2019

Hair embroidery on fabric. Courtesy of the artist and Blindspot Gallery

These works were made in response to the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2019 and Su’s reckoning with the effects of state violence on the mind and body. An eye and a breast are punctured by a needle, while two sides of a vulva are stitched together. The work draws upon a tradition of body sewing in protest of the suppression of freedom of speech used by activists and artists.

Su embroiders with hair instead of thread because of its charged associations with the body and femininity. The act of embroidery mirrors the representations of bodies being punctured and sutured (surgically stitched back together). Su commented: ‘Suturing is about trying to heal, but it’s very painful. How do we heal after traumatic experiences? Can we, or will there always be a scar?’

b. 1963, Culiacán, Mexico

‘Dylegued (Entierro) (Dylegued (Burial))’, 2013

Single-channel video, colour, sound

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zurich/Paris

‘american Juju for the Tapestry of Truth’, 2015

Single-channel video, colour, sound

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zurich/Paris

‘Dylegued (Entierro) (Dylegued (Burial))’, 2013

Mola on fabric permeated with blood from the body of a woman assassinated in Panama City, Panama; created with the participation of the Rosano family, of Kuna descent, in memory of Jadeth Rosano López, a seventeen-year-old teenager who was assassinated. Panama City, Panama

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann Zurich/Paris

With an enduring and deep commitment to addressing death and its aftermath, Teresa Margolles often uses material residues from murder sites in her art. These two patchwork tapestries carry the impressions and memories of bodies lost as a result of violence; one is soaked in the blood of a woman from Panama City, while the other was laid on the ground at the site where Eric Garner, a 43-year-old Black man, was killed in Staten Island, New York.

Over the course of two years, Margolles worked with embroiderers in six cities to document and bear witness to killings and murders. Fuelled by the knowledge that countries around the world are united by a common thread of atrocity, the works are material protests against forgetting.

These two works pay homage to the lives and deaths of Jadeth Rosano López, a 17-year-old boy assassinated in Panama City, and Eric Garner, who was placed in an illegal chokehold and killed by the New York Police Department. Laid flat on lightboxes, the textiles evoke their bodies as though on autopsy tables.

The works were made collaboratively with embroiderers who were close to the victims. Rosano López's two aunts stitched the image of his body being buried. Members of the Harlem Needle Arts cultural arts institute gathered to reflect on Garner's death; their patchwork also honours other African American victims of police brutality. The process of making these works — documented on film — opened space for conversation and mourning.

# José Leonilson

b. 1957, Fortaleza, Brazil

d. 1993, São Paulo, Brazil

‘Where can I find one bay to rest my head?’, c. 1990

Thread on rustic silk

Private Collection, Munich

‘Sem título (Untitled)’, c. 1991

Thread on velvet

Private Collection, New York

Leonilson trained as a painter but worked almost exclusively in textile from 1991, when he was diagnosed with HIV.

In *Where can I find one bay to rest my head?*, the artist embroiders the titular question and lists three cities. This reference to geography is typical of Leonilson’s work, in which naming cities became a trope to represent his search for artistic, economic and sexual liberation. In *Untitled* he explores the effects of HIV on his body, using textiles’ associations with intimacy and the body to communicate a tactile, emotional tenderness. Leonilson documents different elements of his being — both physical and spiritual — across velvet panels. We read his height and weight, alongside the more ineffable aspects of his identity: a cross represents his Catholic upbringing, while two embroidered

fish represent his zodiac sign, Pisces.

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# Harmony Hammond

b. 1944, Chicago, Illinois, USA

‘Bandaged Grid #9’, 2020

Oil and mixed media on canvas

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

A leading figure in the feminist art movement in the United States in the 1970s, Hammond uses textiles to invest her work with emotional and political content. Ripped and cut pieces of canvas, strips of burlap, rags and a piece of domestic linen affixed to the canvas disrupt the purity of abstraction; here, something has gone horribly awry. Red-stained pieces of cloth hang on the surface as evidence of violent actions outside the picture frame, while frayed canvas and burlap hang like reparative bandages on the surface. No body is pictured, but its presence is suggested by a grid of grommets that ooze with paint, like wounds leaking bodily fluids.

Hammond believes in the power of materials to carry messages in her work, noting that ‘materials have a physical and metaphorical weight, linking painting to the body and frequently alluding to trauma of some sort and recovery.’

# Louise Bourgeois

p. 48

b. 1911, Paris, France d. 2010, New York city, USA

‘Arch of Hysteria’, 2000

Fabric

Galerie Karsten Greve AG, St. Moritz

Bourgeois’s family were tapestry restorers outside of Paris and she worked at her mother’s side as a child. Over seventy years later, she returned to textiles in her artwork as a way to process the effects of her childhood, in particular an acute fear of abandonment. She commented: ‘I have always had the fear of being separated and abandoned. The sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole.’

This work refers to the supposed physical symptom of hysteria, historically thought to be a psychic condition mainly affecting women. Bourgeois was interested in how psychic pain could be transferred and expressed through the body; how an arched back or bodily scars might suggest psychic wounds. The body is riddled with seams, crudely sewn together as if to suggest the haphazard scarring of a hastily healed wound.



b. 1980, Harare, Zimbabwe

‘Dear Fesmeri and Marení, The Dress Doesn’t Fit’, 2022

Textile and mixed media

31 Project

Maxim sees stitching as a meditative and healing act; the repetitive motion of sewing enables her to focus her attention and process trauma. This work is a response to Maxim’s upbringing and her experience of being raised by her grandmother, who she thought was her mother. Maxim’s mother passed away when she was three years old; she sees her work as a dual attempt to process her loss and search for the mother she never had. ‘Fesmeri’ is a nickname for her grandmother and ‘Marení’ is a nickname for her mother.

Maxim draws on the ability of textiles to carry the memory of a person. When a person dies in Shona culture, their belongings are distributed among the living. If a piece of clothing is pricked by a needle, it can be preserved and mended in the future. Maxim’s repetitive stitches are her attempt to ensure the textile — and her mother’s memory — will be preserved.

If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask the member of staff in this room, who will share a sample with you.

b. 1989, Mexia, Texas, USA

‘fire makes some dragons’, 2020

Woven cotton and acrylic yarn

The Hudgins Family

Brackens learned to sew with his grandmother before taking a fibre class at art school. Cotton is his primary material, chosen for the ease with which it can be manipulated and dyed and, as the artist himself has explained, for its ‘historical significance in the US relating to enslavement, violence and subjugation [which] has had lasting effects on black bodies’.

Modes of survival — in particular for queer Black bodies — are central to the artist’s thinking. During the Covid-19 pandemic, he encountered a statistic published in 2016 in the USA: ‘If current HIV diagnoses rates persist, about 1 in 2 black men who have sex with men (MSM) and 1 in 4 Latino MSM in the United States will be diagnosed with HIV during their lifetime.’ Grappling with this, the artist asked: ‘What do you do in the face of annihilation, apocalypse, pandemic?’ The embrace of the two silhouettes — one held aloft by another engulfed in flames — manifests his belief that we find ways to attend to one another through the care of community. Brackens seeks to push the sculptural potential of textiles, here experimenting with latch-hooking fiery-coloured threads to create the textured flames.

If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask the member of staff in this room, who will share a sample with you.

Textiles lead us back to our ancestors. Embedded in a fabric are multiple living histories and memories of the hands that have crafted them. Entangled in a textile are the knowledge systems of Indigenous people, who for centuries have used thread as a means for communication — to share information, to tell stories and to express themselves.

Unravelling the layered history of a textile reveals stories of globalism and trade, and the extraction and displacement caused by colonisation. For example, a single thread of cotton dyed with indigo summons histories of empire and the transatlantic trade and labour of enslaved people — both through the production of cotton, harvested by enslaved people in the USA, and through the trade of the dye, extracted from the *Indigofera tinctoria* plant, which itself was cultivated in plantations in the Southern states of the USA as well as those established by the British Empire in India. At points, one length of indigo-dyed cloth was considered to have the same economic value as an enslaved person — a brutal reflection of how both humans and nature were understood as currency. Textiles therefore not only reveal histories of creativity and imagination but also speak to the systems of marginalisation and violence that have sought to suppress Indigenous knowledge for fear of its power.

The final section of the exhibition extends across the lower galleries and gathers a group of intergenerational artists who look to their own ancestors for inspiration. Many draw from cultures beyond their own, and acknowledge their debt to the practices they took from. Together, these artists reclaim, relearn and summon ancient techniques and materialities to find alternative, embodied modes of communication in the present. Reaching back to ancestral knowledge systems often involves contending with histories of oppression and extraction; many artists work to transcend these forces through courting the divine. The artists here use textile and fibre to aid communion with powers beyond themselves. Rather than a way of escaping reality, these artists lean towards the spiritual to process the world around them.

A hybrid embrace of the spiritual and secular runs through the work of Cecilia Vicuña and Sarah Zapata, two contemporary artists from different generations whose practices speak to each other in both form and content. Vicuña's quipu takes inspiration from the ancient Andean practice of knotting, both a functional form to communicate information and a ritualistic practice that connected its makers to the cosmos. Zapata embraces her family history of Peruvian textile makers in her sprawling 'shag sculpture', which reinterprets the form of a Nazca ceremonial site. American artist Lenore Tawney studied Peruvian textile techniques to develop sculptural methods of weaving in the 1950s. She understood the act of weaving as one of spiritual devotion. Against a backdrop of capitalist

mass production and commercialisation, these artists consciously embrace the tactility of craft practices, perhaps for the 'counter' potential embedded in these ancient traditions.

Thinking through the origins of textiles involves attending to their literal material beginnings, crafted and teased out from the earth itself. This is manifested in the work of three artists practicing in the 1960s and 1980s. Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz saw fibre as the material from which all living organisms were built and embraced vernacular traditions to propose a new sculptural language in weaving. Similarly, Jagoda Buić drew on her own Dalmatian and Yugoslav cultural heritage to create experimental, three-dimensional 'tapestry situations' made with raw fibres. Indian artist Mrinalini Mukherjee's deity-like creatures surge up from the ground as if organic beings hewn from the earth. Their knotted and braided forms are drawn from ancient Indian iconographies as well as local craft practices. A reverence for organic matter underpins these practices, the tactility of natural fibres offering scope for experimentation.

# Jeffrey Gibson

b. 1972, Colorado Springs, USA

 'PRISM', 2018

Repurposed quilt, printed chiffon, polyester organza, printed polyester, polyester satin, polyester batting, nylon ribbon, vintage appliqués, vintage whimsies, vintage brass stamping, rhinestone appliqués, vintage beaded hair barrette, assorted glass, plastic and stone beads, artificial sinew and tipi poles  
Courtesy of the artist, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., Roberts Projects and Stephen Friedman Gallery

'SPEAK TO ME SO THAT I CAN UNDERSTAND', 2018

Acrylic paint on canvas, vintage Seminole patchwork, plastic beads, glass beads, nylon, water-based ink on sublimated polyester, metal jingles, tipi poles and deer hide  
Collection Sunderland-Cohen

'WE PLAY ENDLESSLY', 2018

Neoprene, printed polyester, silk, printed chiffon, canvas, polyester satin, brass grommets, nylon ribbon, acrylic paint, polyester laces, glass and plastic beads, artificial sinew and tipi poles  
Courtesy of the artist, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., Roberts Projects and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Vinyl, neoprene, printed polyester, glass beads, brass grommets, nylon, printed cotton, acrylic paint, deer hide and tipi poles

Courtesy of the artist, Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,  
Roberts Projects and Stephen Friedman Gallery

Gibson draws on his Choctaw-Cherokee heritage and the Native American women in his family whose textile work sustained them. These four works were partly inspired by garments worn by dancers in Native American powwow ceremonies, particularly those worn by the Northern Paiute people as spiritual protection in the pacifist Ghost Dance movement of the late nineteenth century. They also incorporate contemporary references: the phrase 'People Like Us' derives from a 1965 print by artist and nun Sister Corita Kent, while 'We Play Endlessly' pays homage to Icelandic rock band Sigur Rós. Gibson embraces hybridity, seeing his practice as 'a mash-up of intertribal aesthetics' in resistance to essentialist understandings of Indigeneity. Gibson links overcoming his rejection of craft as a student to coming to terms with his sexuality as a gay man. He highlights 'the nonbinary gender roles found in many indigenous cultures' and his garments are deliberately ungendered. Vibrating with colour, texture and animated potential, they have previously been installed hanging in procession-like formations, as shown here, or activated by performers.



b. 1993, Toronto, Canada

‘The Coral Reef Preservation Society’, 2019

Recycled fabrics and seashells

Courtesy of the Love, Luck & Faith Foundation

Lewis sees herself in conversation with generations of makers and understands the textiles that she salvages and repurposes as evoking specific memories. This patchwork quilt in part pays homage to the enslaved women and children who lost their lives during the Middle Passage (the enforced transport of enslaved people from Africa to the Americas in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries). Reimagining them as sea creatures, Lewis transforms the trauma that lies in underwater territories into spaces of regeneration and emancipation.

Lewis’s mother collected objects from yard sales and the street, and the artist sees her approach to the value of objects as a challenge to ‘classist, racist and capitalist biases’. She often uses worn-down pieces of conch to articulate the eyes and teeth of her characters, collected on the beach in Jamaica and evoking memories of what she imagines her ancestors would have stepped on and held close to their bodies. Incorporating scraps of cloth from previous works into each new piece, she is invested in fostering an exchange of ‘material DNA’ across her work, embodying her respect for the cultural lineages embedded in the African diaspora.

# Kevin Beasley

b. 1985, Lynchburg, Virginia, USA

'Phasing (Flow)', 2017

Polyurethane resin, housedresses, kaftans, du-rags, audio equipment, speakers, boundary microphone and wood shelving unit

T&C Collection

Beasley engages with the history of objects: their beginnings, present and future. Through a process of casting, distorting and rebuilding, the artist transforms materials and embeds new meaning within them. This chorus of spectral figures comprises housedresses acquired from a dress shop in Harlem, New York, frequented by the artist's grandmother and great-grandmother, as well as kaftans and durags, all cast in resin. It is one of Beasley's 'ghost' sculptures, in which he cuts and sews articles of clothing, then coats them in malleable resin and drapes them over foam spheres. He reshapes the garments with his own body as the moulds are removed and the resin begins to set. The sounds emitting from these apparitions are being collected by a microphone placed in a different location in the gallery, processed in real time through the equipment on the floor. Both sound and materials reverberate with new personal and historical resonance.

b. 1968, Port-Au-Prince, Haiti

‘Pa Pouvwa Gran Mèt la Mèt Jean Simon Britus Grann Brigitte  
Capitaine Jean Zombi Se Nonm Sa yo ki mèt et mètres 4 kwen  
ak mitan simitye (By the Power of the Almighty, Jean Simon  
Britus, Grann Brigitte and Captain Jean Zombi are Masters and  
Mistresses of the Four Corners and Centre of the Cemetery)’,  
2014 –17

Sequins and beads on cotton

Dr Barry J. Silverman, Aventura, Florida

Constant has transformed the practice of making drapo Vodou. In Haiti, these flags, depicting the spirits (or lwa), were typically embellished with sequins; Constant incorporates beads, a finer material that allows her to capture light, movement and perspective with a complexity previously unseen in the artform. In this drapo, Constant, whose father was a Vodou priest, sews a complex cemetery scene. At the centre of the composition, Bawon Samdi and Grann Brijit, the lwa of the dead, storm a cemetery on horseback while their hands hold whips hoisted into the air to strike figures in red and black. These are the malefektè (transgressors) who are attempting to capture zombi — a body or spirit that is raised from the dead and forced to obey the reviver, usually carrying out manual labour or acts of criminality on their behalf.

In Vodou, the zombi embody exploitative labour, and the ropes<sup>60</sup> that bind them are a direct reference to enslavement. For some who follow this religion, the capturing and use of Zombi has ambiguous moral implications. In this scene, Constant asserts that the dead should not be exploited.

## Iva Jankowicz

b. 1971, Panama City, Panama (AJG)

b. 1979, Ruma, Serbia (IJ)

‘Messengers of the Sun’, 2022

Indigo-painted, block-printed and embroidered textile

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

This work is part of Guzman and Jankovic’s Electric Dub Station series (2020 – ongoing), which delves into the complex history of indigo. Enslaved people who were taken from the African continent brought their expertise of cultivating indigo to the USA. Indigo became so popular that, in the 1700s, the profits generated eclipsed the revenue from cotton and sugar. The deep blue dye became a currency: one length of cloth was traded for one human body.

Guzman and Jankovic make textiles blockprinted with calligraphic designs and embroidered with scriptures inspired by grisgris – small talismans originating in West African Islamic traditions, which were banned by European colonisers. They tear and then piece them back together with Japanese boro stitches. The title of this installation refers to a fictional Afrofuturist story in which the lost children of the prophet Sun Ra are the ‘messengers of the sun’. With their patchwork of

references, the artists pay homage to the ancestral knowledge systems disseminated across the world through the enforced migration of people.

b. 1971, Kinabalu, Malaysia

with weaving by Kak Sanah, Kak Kinnohung, Kak Budi, Kak Leleng, Kak Horma, Makcik Bilung, Kak Roziah, Adik Dela, Adik Erna, Abang Bobby, Adik Alini, Adik Aisha, Adik Darwisa, Adik Marsha, Adik Dayang, Adik Tasya, Adik Shima, Adik Umaira and Abang Tularan

‘TIKAR/MEJA’, 2018

Bajau Sama Dilaut pandan weaving with commercial chemical dye and matt sealant

Courtesy the artist and Silverlens, Manila and New York

Yee is interested in how textiles in the form of woven mats resist legacies of colonialism. In pre-colonial Southeast Asia, people sat and met on woven mats called tikar. Tables were introduced by Western settlers as Borneo was colonised by the Portuguese, British and Dutch.

In TIKAR/MEJA, images of tables are woven into the mats through the weft and warp of colourful strips of pandan leaves, using the same techniques Yee’s ancestors used for centuries. The table serves as a symbol for the imposition of a patriarchal and colonial worldview onto a population, while the mat signifies a more democratic and mutual power, imbued with ancestral knowledge and traditions. This display shows twelve

works from a series of sixty that can be displayed in different configurations.



b. 1962, London, UK

‘Boy on a Globe’, 2008

Mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile and globe

Private Collection

Shonibare references the history of brightly coloured Dutch wax fabrics to comment on colonisation, hybridity, and authenticity. The fabric originated in Indonesia before being produced by the Dutch in Manchester and sold for mass consumption in Africa. He began using the material in the 1990s after one of his teachers commented that Shonibare, an artist of African origin, was not making ‘authentic’ African art.

Boy on a Globe addresses the ways in which humanity has exerted power over the world it occupies, often with disastrous consequences. The globe, yellow in tone and reddening in certain sections to indicate warming, is a dual symbol for environmental disaster and the redrawing of territory under Empire. The boy is perilously perched, as though about to fall. This sense of precarity offers a visual manifestation of the deconstruction of colonisation and empire, countering the ideas of stability and linear, forward progression that justified colonial missions.

# Mercedes Azpilicueta

b. 1981, La Plata, Argentina

‘Lady’s Dreams or Stop Right There Gentlemen!’, 2019

Cotton and wool jacquard textile

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Azpilicueta frequently reclaims the form of the monumental tapestry — a medium traditionally used to convey ‘grand’ patriarchal narratives — to dismantle rigid (often colonial) histories. Here she pays tribute to a protofeminist retelling of the colonial myth of Lucía Miranda, a white woman captured by the Indigenous population of what is now known as Argentina. Argentinian writer Eduarda Mansilla reframed the popular legend in her 1860 novel *Lucía Miranda*, in which she instilled both the titular character and the Indigenous people with agency, building bonds and exchanging knowledge. Mansilla herself rejected societal norms as a traveller, translator and educator.

Imagining a fictional dialogue between herself, Lucía and Mansilla, Azpilicueta depicts a panoramic landscape populated by women who defy gendered stereotypes and seek ‘alternative ways of life’. The digitally created composition was woven on an industrial jacquard loom in the Netherlands. The surreal scene pays homage to Latin America’s literary tradition of magical realism, while details like the ‘vanishing’ women floating in the

upper half of the tapestry tells of their systematic erasure p. 67  
from history.

If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask a member of staff at the ticket desk, who will share a sample with you.

b. 1948, Santiago, Chile

‘Quipu Austral’, 2012

Unspun wool and sound

Collection Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine

Lengths of knotted, unspun wool stream down from the ceiling, accompanied by the sounds of Vicuña chanting poems related to water, for which thread is a metaphor in Andean culture. This monumental work, which Vicuña describes as a ‘poem in space’, embodies her deep engagement with the ancient Andean form of the quipu (meaning ‘knot’ in the Quechua language): a system of ‘writing’ with knots. This ritualistic way of communicating was understood to connect its makers to the cosmos.

In 1583, following the Spanish conquest, quipu were banned and ordered to be destroyed. For Vicuña, reviving the quipu is ‘an act of poetic resistance’ — it is ‘a way to remember, its potential involving the body and the cosmos at once.’

Quipu Austral was commissioned for the 18th Biennale of Sydney in 2012. Proposing the work as a ‘prayer for the union of the world’, Vicuña found poetic resonances between the ancient Indigenous peoples of South America and Australia, connecting their world views of exchange, equality and freedom.

This included the parallel oral traditions of the Andean concept of the cosmographic ceque (meaning 'line') and the Aboriginal 'Dreamtime' songlines, as metaphysical maps honouring the life-giving force of earth, water and song. The vibrant colours of the wool are based on the hues prevalent in both Aboriginal Australian rock paintings and Andean weavings. Vicuña describes the unspun wool as embodying fertility and symbolizing the 'not yet' state from which everything is born.

If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask a member of staff at the ticket desk, who will share a sample with you.

# Lenore Tawney

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b. 1907, Lorain, USA

d. 2007, New York City, USA

‘Breath of Earth’, 1964

Linen and beads

Courtesy The Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York, and  
Alison Jacques, London

‘The Megalithic Doorway’, 1963

Linen

Courtesy The Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York, and  
Alison Jacques, London

‘Secret Path’, 1965

Linen

Courtesy The Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York, and  
Alison Jacques, London

‘Path II’, 1965 – 71

Linen

Courtesy The Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, New York, and  
Alison Jacques, London

Tawney was one of the pioneers of the fibre art movement in the United States from the 1950s. Displayed off the wall, her woven hangings challenged Western-centric conceptions of textiles as

merely functional. Tawney studied Peruvian textile techniques, among those of numerous other cultures, to develop her own idiosyncratic methods of weaving in the 1950s that enabled her to experiment boldly with sculptural form. In *Path II* and *Secret Path*, she left vertical slits in the weave, disrupting the idea of a textile as a flat, continuous surface. The diagonal strands in *The Megalithic Doorway* and *Breath of the Earth* were another technical innovation that broke with European and American textile conventions at the time.

Tawney courted the sacred and spiritual in her life and art. She viewed her woven forms as an act of devotion in search of truth and authenticity. In the early 1960s, she used black and cream threads, as well as simple shapes like squares and crosses, to focus attention on what she perceived to be most essential: form and construction.

b. 1949, Mumbai, India

d. 2015, New Delhi, India

‘Sri’, 1982

Dyed hemp

Private collection

‘Pakshi’, 1985

Dyed hemp

Collection Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), Bengaluru

‘Vanshri’, 1994

Dyed Hemp

Collection Jayshree Bhartia

Embracing the expressive possibilities of natural fibres, Mukherjee developed a distinctive sculptural language by twisting and knotting ropes found in local markets in New Delhi. Her singular approach to fibre as an artform was radically different to her artistic peers in India. The complex system of knots that make up these three beings embody the artist’s vision of ‘sculpture as a kind of organic unfolding’. Two of the three Sanskrit titles of these works suggest gendered characters (Sri means ‘female deity’ and Vanshri can be translated as ‘goddess of the forest’, while Pakshi means ‘bird’). However, their rippling contours, folds and protrusions convey



ambiguity and challenge the binaries of plant-animal, human-deity, male-female and figuration-abstraction. Mukherjee drew from myriad sources — Indian and European histories of sculpture, theatrical traditions and local crafts indigenous to India, as well as sacred and mythological iconographies. She insisted that her work was not ‘the iconic representation of any particular religious belief, rather it is the metamorphosed expression of varied sensory perceptions’.

Mukherjee used hoop-like structures to work from the base upwards; each figure emerged knot by knot, as if an elemental force born from the earth. It often took over a month to prepare the fibre — ropes had to be uncoiled and straightened, organised by colour and thickness, dyed and dried, before knotting could begin.

b. 1930, Falenty, Poland d. 2017, Warsaw, Poland

‘Vêtement noir (Black Garment)’, 1968

Sisal, iron and horsehair

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

‘We are fibrous structures’, Abakanowicz proclaimed. She saw fibre as ‘the basic element constructing the organic world on our planet, as the greatest mystery of our environment’. Playing with utilitarian materials like wool, horsehair, burlap and sisal (a plant fibre), she often reused discarded ropes found in Polish harbours, unravelling and re-dyeing them. During the 1960s and 1970s, she conceived her Abakans, like this one — huge ‘off loom’ (hand-woven) sculptures that suggest ancient beings, human tissue or hybrid organisms.

In post-Second World War Poland, the Soviet communist government closely monitored the arts, promoting a nationalist agenda through figurative painting and ‘folk’ craft practices, which were seen as emblematic of rural life. Abakanowicz embraced the vernacular traditions of textiles — including kilim weaving — as a space for experimentation. With her visceral ‘environments’ composed of earthy textures and undulating organic forms, she proposed a new sculptural language that unsettled traditional, hierarchical boundaries between fine art and craft.

If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask a member of staff at the ticket desk, who will share a sample with you.

b. 1930, Split, Croatia

d. 2022, Venice, Italy

‘L’ange chassé (Fallen Angel)’, 1967

Wool, hemp and sisal

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Incorporating traditional Yugoslav weaving techniques, L’ange chassé suggests a comet-like structure that is crashing down. Or, as the title suggests, it may be an angel tumbling from the sky, the spiralling structure mimicking its dramatic fall. Several slits between the overlapping and irregularly structured layers of sisal rope, braided together into coarse, structured surfaces, allow the viewer to look into its depths and hollow spaces. The heart of the work hangs close to the ground, conveying how the material seems to gravitate downwards, its mass held up only by thin loops.

Buić drew inspiration from the architecture in Dubrovnik and Split in Croatia, where she was born, as well as the country’s Dalmatian coast and its cultural heritage. Her expressive fibre works were seen as a revival of local crafts and an ode to the rural and coastal environments of what was then Yugoslavia. If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask a member of staff at the ticket desk, who will share a sample with you.

# Sarah Zapata

b. 1988, Corpus Christi, Texas, USA

‘To Teach or to Assume Authority’, 2018 – 19

Natural and synthetic fibre, handwoven fabric and wood

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

‘I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.’ This passage from the Bible inspired the title of Zapata’s first sprawling ‘shag’ sculpture. Its structure references the architecture of the Nazca ceremonial site Cahuachi, where a huge woven cloth was excavated in 1952. She transforms the ruin into a landscape of vibrant latch-hooked threads, refusing any risk that this ancestral site might be lost to time. The undulating form subverts the notion of the rug as floor-based: Indigenous communities in Peru only began using textiles on the floor after the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century.

Zapata embraces the complexities of her identity as a Peruvian American, two cultures in which textiles are integral; her Peruvian grandfather was a textile salesman and her mother is an evangelical Christian from Texas, a cultural context in which weaving is commonly associated with feminine virtues and domesticity. She addresses, integrates and reclaims her dual heritage in an act of radical self-expression.

If you would like to feel the texture of the materials used in this artwork, please ask a member of staff at the ticket desk, who will share a sample with you.

Kerunen creates abstract compositions with woven natural fibres to tell stories inspired by her experiences of joy, love and ecstasy. Her work has deeply personal origins in overcoming pain and trauma but, in its material and construction, invokes and celebrates the wisdom of the land and the skills and labour of communities in Uganda.

Made primarily of palm leaves and raffia, Ayelele 'came from the earth and will return to the earth.' The choice of materials also reflects Kerunen's concern for the changing climate. Palm leaves and raffia are fragile but resilient; raffia palms grow in wetlands, and their growth is dependent on the conservation of these habitats, which are threatened by our current ecological crisis. Embedded in the work is an inherited knowledge of making — the work was made collaboratively with women who knotted, braided, wove and twisted each fibre, using techniques they learned from fellow women community leaders.

# Entangled Earth

Organic matter has been integral to the creation of textiles, from cotton to wool, linen, silk, jute and more. While new technologies involving synthetic fibres, dyes and industrial production have opened up exciting new possibilities, plant and natural fibres continue to offer fertile ground for the artists gathered here to explore our entanglement with the earth, which supports and sustains our existence. These artists refuse the idea — imposed on many by Western modernity — that humanity is separate from, or even opposed to, nature.

Yto Barrada, Solange Pessoa and Antonio Pichillá Quiacaín interrogate the colonial histories that have led to our fraught relationship with our planet. However, hope germinates through their work, offering us alternative ways of feeling, thinking, knowing and being with the earth.



b. 1982, San Pedro La Laguna, Guatemala

‘Kukulkán’, 2023

Yarn and wood

Courtesy the artist

‘Cordón umbilical (Umbilical Cord)’, 2021

Single-channel video

Filmed and edited by Jaime Leonardo

Courtesy the artist

Cordón Umbilical shows Pichillá Quiacaín using a backstrap loom attached to his abdomen and wrapped around a tree to create a long, cord-like textile. For the artist, weaving with a backstrap loom ‘represents ... the connection of the body with the textile, the textile with the trunk of the tree, the tree with its roots in ... nature’. The textile (a human creation made of earthly material) that connects Pichillá Quiacaín to the tree asserts that ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are inextricably linked.

In the artist’s sculptural work, he provides an interpretation of a Maya deity, a feathered serpent called Kukulkán, by tying an entangled assemblage of yarn to a serpentine loom. The design is taken from a Maya codex which was taken to Spain and is on display in the Museo de América. Pichillá Quiacaín displays the loom vertically as a provocation intended to raise questions

about hierarchies of knowledge and anthropological displays of  
non-Western art. 82

b. 1971, Paris, France

‘Untitled (cosmos yellow)’ 2021

Silk and dyes from natural extracts

Courtesy the artist, Pace Gallery and Galerie Sfeir Semler

‘Untitled (indigo grey)’, 2021

Silk and dyes from natural extracts

Courtesy the artist, Pace Gallery and Galerie Sfeir Semler

These two naturally dyed silk patchworks are born from the context of Barrada’s ecofeminist garden project The Mothership in Tangier, Morocco. At The Mothership, Barrada cultivates a variety of plants that can be used for natural dyes. Her use of indigo, madder root and eucalyptus to create blue, pink and grey summons the history of botany within Morocco, and centuries of women — denoted as ‘witches’ — who were oppressed and killed for their powerful knowledge of the medicinal properties and creative potential of plants.

Barrada uses natural dyes to invest her work with political and ancestral narratives. The Mothership is an ode to her mother and the land, as well as a ‘survival strategy’ to resist the European deals with the Moroccan government that have encouraged only farming one crop rather than a rich variety. Barrada commented: ‘All my work explores strategies of

survival — of resistance and constraint ... The central question remains disobedience and insurrection. How does one acquire and transmit political courage?’

b. 1961, Ferros, Minas Gerais, Brazil

‘Hammock (part of 4 Hammocks)’, 1999 – 2003

Thread, fabric, clay and cotton

Courtesy of Rubell Museum, Miami and Washington, DC

Hammock was created in response to the land of Minas Gerais, Brazil, where Pessoa grew up. Textiles — in the form of rags and canvas — act as a carrier for living and decaying matter. Here fabric bags, stained with the orange soil that fills them, resemble voluminous, lumpen bodily forms that evoke internal and external organs, as well as life and death. They could be breasts, uteruses, entrails, testicles. In Brazil, cadavers are often transported in hammocks instead of stretchers.

Pessoa is interested in the intertwining of the body and the landscape, believing that the two are interconnected expressions of the natural world. Pessoa sees her work as alive, expressing the polarities, complexities and unknowability of existence: ‘they do not follow an agenda or goal, they are unpredictable and subject to transformation ... They happen, they gain body and autonomy ... They seek to express the perplexity of life.’

# Cecilia Vicuña

'Animita (Spirit House) for Salvador Allende',

1974/2023

Mixed media

101.6 × 72.4 × 58.4 cm

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin,

New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

'Bolsita morada', c. 2000

Plastic netted satchel and seed pods

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong

Kong, Seoul and London

'Palmas no palmas', c. 2017

Basket and plant fibre

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong

Kong, Seoul and London

'Cohetes rari y paleta', 2009

Wooden stick and thread

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong

Kong, Seoul and London

‘Pájaro telefónico’, 2000

Dyed feather and coated metal wire

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

‘Poncho oro uno’, 2012

Mixed media

Collection of Sabrina Buell and Yves Behar

‘Corteza con cola’, 2017

Tree stick, bark and string

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

‘Nudo aplastado’, 2014

Wire knot

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

‘Cable amarillo’, 2015

Found braided cord

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

‘Huso de piedra’, 2009

Bamboo, thread and stone

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

‘Untitled’, 2018

Mixed media

Collection of Catherine Petitgas

‘Untitled’, 1992

Mixed media

26.7 × 14 × 8.9 cm

Collection of Catherine Petitgas

‘Untitled’, 2018

Sticks, wire and thread

Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

Vicuña’s precarios are delicate sculptural assemblages juxtaposing discarded natural and manmade materials, often incorporating scraps of fabric or loosely held together with thread. Her earliest precarios were created in 1966, composed of debris gathered on the beach in Concón, Chile — a site of ancient rituals — which were then swept away by waves and wind. Like offerings to the elements, they were created in dialogue with nature. As ‘structures that disappear’, the precarios make tangible the histories of disappearance with which the artist engages throughout her work, especially the knowledge systems of Indigenous cultures. Vicuña sees her works as ‘little prayers’ with the power to heal. She has continued to make these works amid political and environmental crises, honouring the intrinsic precarity of life.



While living in London in 1973, she made an object every day in support of the resistance against the right-wing dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile. The work in the centre of this room is a recreation from this time. Vicuña asks us to listen to our ancestors: 'We are now pushing the earth to a very dangerous unsustainability, so it is time for us to hear the ancient voices in a new way'.

These talismanic objects are testaments to the poetic power of weaving — in the most expansive sense of the word, for the artist sees weaving as a metaphor for anything in dialogue — as an act of resistance. Taking Vicuña's words and work as our cue, textiles invite us to pay attention to our ancestors, listen to our bodies, and reflect on the possibility for change in the world.



