

ARTS & LETTERS

## Some of the Most Provocative Political Art is Made With Fibers



"Kachakchi" (2017), a hand-woven wool rug designed by the Iraqi artist Hayv Kahraman, recently on view at San Francisco's Fort Mason Chapel. Commissioned by the FOR-SITE Foundation; courtesy the artist, photo: Robert Divers Herrick

By Leslie Camhi  
March 14, 2018

THE ANCIENT GREEKS put fate in the hands of three old women, goddesses who spun the thread of life, twisted it to allot each individual a measure of joy or sorrow, and wielded the “abhorred shears” (in the poet John Milton’s phrase) that could cut life short. The Greeks knew something that artists, along with a new generation of “craftivists” (people combining craft with activism), are rediscovering — that fiber (woven, knitted,

braided, quilted, crocheted, embroidered) can be an expressive medium, one more powerful, perhaps, for its ubiquity. Textiles, after all, accompany us on nearly every step of life: We are born and swaddled, buried in shrouds; most of us are even conceived between sheets.

The renewed embrace of fiber might have something to do with our increasingly virtual world, scrubbed freer every day of human contact and face-to-face interaction. Textiles, in contrast, are earthy and inherently tactile. We speak of the “hand” of fabric, meaning the feel of it — whether slick and cool or rough and grainy. We speak, too, of the “fabric of society,” especially when it is unraveling.

“Modern industry saves us endless labor and drudgery,” the Berlin-born artist and designer Anni Albers noted back in 1965 in “[On Weaving](#),” her pioneering compendium on the art, reissued last October to coincide with her retrospective at the Guggenheim Bilbao. “But, Janus-faced,” she continued, “it . . . leaves idle our sense of touch.” Both her hand-loomed abstract tapestries and her factory-produced functional fabrics tempered the harsh glass-and-steel architecture of her Modernist contemporaries.

In 1922, Albers joined the Bauhaus — the school Walter Gropius founded in Weimar with the utopian aim of integrating art and design into everyday life — as a reluctant weaver. A neuromuscular disorder causing weakness in her legs contributed to her abandonment of wall painting. But then she heard Paul Klee’s famous lecture that drawing involved “taking a line for a walk,” and decided to adapt the lesson to her new medium. “I thought,” she later recalled, “I will take thread everywhere I can.”



Faith Ringgold's "Tar Beach (Part I from the Woman on a Bridge series)" (1988), one of the artist's "story quilts," with an acrylic-on-canvas center and a border of printed and painted cloth.

In the late 1950s, when Albers's husband, Josef, was heading the Department of Design at Yale University, he introduced his wife to a student who'd been turned on to textiles after seeing a picture of Peruvian mummy bundles. Now in her 80s, Sheila Hicks has woven, twined and wrapped her way around the world with fiber-based bas-reliefs and installations that snake through tall grasses (on view through the end of the month [on Manhattan's High Line](#)), pile up in brilliantly colored heaps (as at last year's [Venice Biennale](#)) or cascade from high places (as in a piece planned for a 22-foot tower on Capri). Her retrospective, which opened last month at the [Centre Pompidou in Paris](#), also showcases the small, jewel-like weavings she calls "minimes," incorporating shells, rubber bands, toothpicks and hair — eccentric, lyrical poetry of the everyday.

Hicks is sometimes linked with other '60s and '70s post-Minimalist sculptors, including Françoise Grossen and Jackie Winsor, female artists who turned to fiber (often rope) both for its formal properties and its associations beyond the art world, its household and industrial applications. Other artists of that era put textiles at the center of an explicitly feminist program, using conventionally "dainty" handicrafts — knitting, crocheting, embroidery — to express ambivalence about childbearing, or rage at women's domestic oppression. For "[Womanhouse](#)," a fabled group installation organized by [Judy Chicago](#) and Miriam Schapiro in an abandoned Hollywood mansion in 1972, the artist Faith Wilding created a room-size net of crochet work that recalled spider webs, Gothic horror films and human tissue, including uterine lining.

These artists weren't necessarily thinking of posterity. Textiles are notoriously difficult to conserve. Some fiber artists, taking their cues from the newly insurgent genre of performance art, intended their works to be temporary. Grossen, known for her sculptures and installations of braided rope that hang from the ceiling or twist along the floor, saw many of her largest works dismantled as the spaces they were created for (building lobbies, corporate offices) were altered or changed hands. The Polish-born artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, who for nearly three decades beginning in the 1960s created haunting abstract sculptures in burlap and sisal, began working in bronze (a more traditionally "heroic" medium, valued for its durability) in the late 1980s. In fact, in the hierarchy of artistic materials, textiles (with the exception of tapestries) have often occupied a lowly rank. Toward the end of her life, even Anni Albers gave away her loom and her stock of threads, turning her attention to printmaking. "She said she realized that as a textile designer or weaver she would never be admitted to the magic circle of art," Sheila Hicks recalls.

YET A GENERATION later, fiber art looks fresh again. Two years ago, for example, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas purchased one of octogenarian artist, author and activist Faith Ringgold's "[story quilts](#)" for \$461,000 — a record (times 30) for the artist. The quilts, which the painter began making in 1980 — inspired by Tibetan *thangkas*, her seamstress and designer mother and her great-great-grandmother, who quilted as a slave — combine painted canvas, fabric piecework and handwritten text to reclaim unexplored corners of African-American life and history. And

for emerging artists, fiber offers renewed possibilities of eloquence and emotivity. [Sophia Narrett](#), a recent Rhode Island School of Design graduate whose solo exhibition of embroideries opens at Brooklyn's BRIC Arts/Media center in May, wrote in an email, "When an object is developed by human hands for hundreds of hours, it leaves a quality in the surface that can be sensed." Her wall hangings, stitched with cotton thread in a lush, painterly style, detail surreal encounters — naked figures cavorting in basements and woodlands; immolated princesses. Their hand-worked surfaces make them seem intimate and vulnerable, in keeping with her art's themes. "This physical commitment is a part of how I communicate my sincerity," Narrett explained. "Embroidery and its implicit history help specify the tone of my stories, one characterized by obsession, desire and both the freedoms and restraints of femininity."

Jane Austen, who sat writing "Pride and Prejudice" in a drawing room corner as her women friends whiled away the hours embroidering, might have arched an eyebrow. Can we really fight patriarchy with weapons borrowed from the history of upper-and-middle-class women's confinement? But then one remembers the one million knit "[pussy hats](#)" that appeared at last year's Women's March in Washington. Pussy hat co-creator [Jayna Zweiman](#) learned to knit while in architecture school and returned to it while recovering from an injury. "I went with my friend Krista to a knitting store and discovered a place where you could be with people and listen," she said on the phone from L.A. "Things kind of flow, and everyone is supportive. I think it's a fantastic model for community."



Sheila Hicks's "Torsados" (2017), made of spun yarn that's laid flat before being hung. From the show "Free Threads" at Museo Amparo, Puebla, Mexico, courtesy of the artist

Zweiman's most recent effort is the [Welcome Blanket](#) project: more than 2,675 40-by-40-inch blankets, created by people from across the U.S. and abroad in response to President Trump's proposed border wall. After being exhibited at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art last fall, the blankets — objects of protest transformed into instruments of comfort and hospitality — are currently being distributed to newly arrived refugees.

In fact, fiber art, with its inherent portability (you can fold it, roll it, wear it) seems uniquely suited to our era of geopolitical crisis and mass migration. In "[Sanctuary](#)" — a recent project by the San Francisco-based FOR-SITE Foundation — handmade wool rugs designed by 36 international artists reflecting on themes of refuge, cultural identity and displacement covered the floor of Fort Mason Chapel. Visitors were asked to remove their shoes to experience the work: "It makes people feel more vulnerable," the curator Cheryl Haines explained. "But the rugs are so sumptuous — people tell me they also feel calmed and engulfed."

That's something the Chinese artist Lin Tianmiao also noticed in [her recent show](#) at New York's Galerie Lelong & Co., for which she carpeted the space with antique Chinese rugs, thickly embroidered with words in several languages denoting "woman," ranging from cryptic sexual slang ("burger") to expressions of devotion ("goddess"). Many of the phrases were derogatory, and yet "it surprised me," Lin said, "that almost every viewer seemed to be very happy within the work."

Call it the "fiber effect," if you will. It must be part of what motivates guerrilla yarn-bombers who, under cover of darkness, envelope fire hydrants, tree trunks and parking meters with knitted coverings that seem like the product of someone's seriously wacky grandmother. (The movement's Texas-based founder, [Magda Sayeg](#), once knitted the equivalent of a tea cozy for an entire Mexico City bus.) In a political climate marked by its coldheartedness, let's not underestimate fiber's power to evoke memories of a more congenial era, to celebrate the handmade and, not incidentally, invoke wonder and that rarest and most coveted of emotions: joy.