

HYPERALLERGIC

The Fibers That Make Up Our Lives

Textile techniques serve as medium and metaphor in *Unravel* at the Barbican Centre, conveying possibilities for art and resistance.

By Julie Schneider



Tracey Emin, "No chance (WHAT A YEAR)" (1999), appliquéd blanket, 85 x 89 4/5 inches (all photos Julie Schneider/*Hyperallergic*)

LONDON — Sprawling across the two floors of the Barbican Centre's art gallery, *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* is an eclectic global showcase of works made from fabric

and thread. Exploring a massive tangle of interconnected themes — systemic oppression and war, violence and trauma, loss and grief, politics and protest, identity and community, ancestry and survival, love and hope — the exhibition feels like a maze of vivid, and often wrenching, human experiences. Or a patchwork of perspectives, casting light on the terrible and the beautiful alike. Wending through it all, textile techniques serve as medium and metaphor, conveying possibilities for art and resistance.

To wrangle the artworks, made by 50 artists from about 30 countries, *Unravel* is organized into different concepts. Each one is contained within the eight galleries on the ring-shaped upper level, which radiate like petals off the central open space, and convene works by five to eight artists.

The first gallery, titled “Subversive Stitch,” borrows its name and premise from *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, a book by British art historian Rozsika Parker that pushes back on dusty, dismissive, and gendered notions of textiles as lowly “women’s work.”



Sarah Zapata, “To Teach or To Assume Authority” (2018-19), natural and synthetic fibers, handwoven fabric, and wood, 72 x 134 x 173 inches

Doubling as a foundation for the rest of the exhibition, this room explores “the act of stitching as a ... radical art expression,” as the catalog states, and, like the subsequent sections, sets up a conversation of sorts among artists of varying identities and different generations, nationalities, and cultural and social contexts: Nicholas Hlobo, Ghada Amer, Judy Chicago, Tracey Emin, Mounira Al Solh, Feliciano Centurión, and LJ Roberts. Their works, tender and charged, relate to the body, activism, and the pursuit of liberation. Amer’s “Pink Landscape – RFGA” (2007), illustrating women with legs spread and eyes closed in ecstasy, reclaims women’s self-pleasure. A patchwork wall hanging that Al Solh made in response to 2015 protests in Lebanon, titled “Paper Speakers” (2020–21), depicts a woman raising her voice into a makeshift paper megaphone. Extending from the wall like flags, a trio of Roberts’s striking, snapshot-like embroideries portray friends from their queer and trans community holding signs at marches and in “everyday action and resistance,” as the artist puts it in a quote in the exhibition catalog. On the reverse side of these portraits, you can see a beautiful mess of threads—or a tangle of connections.

Occupying the center wall, Emin’s appliquéd blanket “No chance (WHAT A YEAR)” (1999), rages in all caps with spirited, diaristic proclamations, such as, “Sometimes nothing makes sense and everything seems so far away.” Emin made this piece to reflect the emotions she felt at age 13, the year a man raped her. Reading this in the wall text filled my gut with a sick feeling and haunted me. The vague recollection of a content warning on the Barbican’s website bubbled up from my memory.



Louise Bourgeois, "Arch of Hysteria" (2000), fabric, 5 1/2 x 17 1/2 x 11 inches

The upstairs galleries continue, clockwise, like book chapters: Fabric of Everyday Life, Borderlands, Bearing Witness, and Wound and Repair. Some figurative pieces — for instance, Billie Zangewa's stitched portraits, Faith Ringgold's story quilt ("Tar Beach 2," 1990–92), and Tschabalala Self's lively bodega scene — reveal the ways that textiles can represent daily life, with a zest and depth that's sometimes overlooked in pervasive narratives. "A lot of cultural dialogues that exist or are perpetuated around femaleness and Blackness or Black femaleness are two-dimensional," said Harlem-born Self, quoted in the exhibition catalog. "By making my work increasingly complex, or even odd, in some instances, I'm able to create alternative narratives."

Other pieces serve as remembrances. A darkened room, cloaked with a reverent hush, even on a busy pay-what-you-wish Thursday night, holds a work from Mexican artist Teresa Margolles's

series of tapestries, each crafted in collaboration with local community members, in response to murders in six cities (five in Latin America and one in the US). This piece, titled “american Juju for the tapestry of truth” (2015), made with members of Harlem Needle Arts, mourns Eric Gardner, as well as other lives cut short by police violence. Videos document the tapestry’s making and show sewing as a communal activity and a way to hold space for grieving.



Tau Lewis, “The Coral Reef Preservation Society” (2019), recycled fabrics and seashells, 180 x 230 inches

Resistance, in many forms, thread throughout the exhibition, as seen in four *arpilleras* stitched by anonymous groups of Chilean women. The women, known as *arpilleristas*, documented scenes of resistance with appliqué in the 1970s, during Augusto Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship. Some works incorporate clothing from family members who were “disappeared” by the state. Nearby, Swedish weaver Helen Ryggen’s wool-and-linen tapestry, “Blod i gresset (Blood in the Grass)” (1966), addresses the US’s role in the Vietnam War.

Since *Unravel*’s opening, other artworks selected for the show have sent a message of dissent through their absence. Artists and collectors withdrew nine works from the show as an act of solidarity with Palestine, in response to the Barbican’s decision not to host the London Review of Books Winter Lecture series, including writer Pankaj Mishra’s talk “The Shoah After Gaza,”

delving into national violence and genocide in Gaza. Though included in the hefty exhibition catalog, the missing works, by Yto Barrada, Cian Dayrit, Pacita Abad, Diedrick Brackens, Mounira Al Solh, and Loretta Pettway of Gee's Bend, left prominent gaps and empty plinths throughout the galleries. (Al Solh's "Paper Speakers" was on view when I visited but later withdrawn.)

By the time I reached the end of the upper level, my spirit felt unraveled by emotional whiplash — moments of beauty seemed to be slipping out of my grasp, overshadowed. Delving into atrocity after atrocity — war, rape, pandemics, police brutality, oppressive regimes, murder — these rooms left me overwhelmed, devastated, leaden.



Left: Billie Zangewa's hand-stitched silk collages: "Midnight Aura" (2012), 39 1/3 x 37 inches; right: "Angelina Rising" (2012), 31 1/2 x 36 2/3 inches

The small, confined upstairs rooms give way to a soaring, bright space downstairs, for the exhibition's finale. Grouped under the title "Ancestral Threads," the monumental artworks are connected by themes of spirituality, origins, and the sweep of history. These pieces underscore the vast range of what textiles can be: floor-to-ceiling lengths of vibrant unspun wool, retro shag sculptures, a web of banana fibers and pom poms, chunky rope salvaged from harbors, indigo

and other plant dyes, colorful woven mats (*tikar*), a jacquard mural. To see them in full, you must tilt your head and raise your eyes skyward — a stargazing posture, summoning a sense of wonder.

At the same time, the experience of being among these textiles is grounding. The forest of colossal rope sculptures — knotted and hand-woven by Magdalena Abakanowicz, Mrinalini Mukherjee, and Jagoda Buić — are unmistakably rooted to Earth. “I see fiber as the basic element of constructing the natural world on our planet, as the greatest mystery of our environment,” Polish sculptor Abakanowicz proclaimed in a 1978 presentation, quoted in the *Unravel* catalog. “It is from fiber that all living organisms are built, the tissues of plants, leaves, and ourselves.”



Jeffery Gibson, “SPEAK TO ME SO THAT I CAN UNDERSTAND” (2018), acrylic paint on canvas, vintage Seminole patchwork, plastic beads, nylon, water-based ink on sublimated polyester, metal jingles, tipi poles, and deer hide, approx. 85 x 70 x 15 inches

The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art continues at The Art Gallery at the Barbican Centre (Silk Street, level 3, London, England), through May 26. The exhibition was co-curated by the Barbican Centre and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where the exhibition will be on display next, starting in September 2024.