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REMATERIALIZING: Interviews with Emerging Artists About Physicality, Pattern and Textile Techniques

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REMATERIALIZING: Interviews with Emerging Artists
About Physicality, Pattern and Textile Techniques
 Caroline Hayes Charuk

I began conducting these interviews in spring of 2014, about a year after my graduation from California College of the Arts' MFA program, where I focused in textiles. I began this project as a way to investigate and record the way that my peers use textiles in their work, and in a sense, to situate myself among them as I begin to negotiate how to be a working artist outside of school. Each of the three artists I talked to attended CCA's MFA program as well. Margo Wolowiec and Diedrick Brackens studied in the textiles program, and Teresa Baker studied in the painting department. It is worth noting, however, that CCA's graduate program is extremely flexible; as one of my advisors described it, students enter the program through a media-specific door, but once admitted, we are all able to freely move about in one big space. Our individual studios are mixed by media, we selected from a pool of advisors with a broad range of material and conceptual interests, we participated in critiques with peers whose work bore no resemblance to our own, and our practices were free to take on new forms.

I chose each of my interviewees based on the simple criteria that they use textiles or fibers in their work. However, I'm sure that each of them would define themselves not just as textile artists, but as artists who have many anchor points and overlapping influences and ways to describe their work. References to textiles may be foundational for the work, or brought in as a means to an end. The conceptual basis of their work is contained within its physicality, and they acknowledge (or knowingly set aside) histories of handwork. Each artist has a practice that necessarily slides on a line between the dematerialization of conceptual art and a rematerialization that recognizes haptic experience as indispensable and compelling.

DIEDRICK BRACKENS is a weaver who uses a wide variety of materials to create a narrative or illuminate something about the maker. He continually works to resolve a disjunct that he sees between the clearly labor intensive work of weaving, and his admiration of minimalist objects that seem to exist with no acknowledgement of their maker. Diedrick has show at Johansson Projects in Oakland, the Ghetto Biennale in Haiti, and was awarded CCA's Barclay Simpson Prize. He is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Fibers at the University of Oregon.



Right to left: Unicorn Kente. 2014. Hand woven cotton and acrylic, 6'x6'

Not every passage/position is comfortable. 2014. Handwoven nylon and redwood, 38"x58"x6"

Holy, hole-y, wholly, 2014. Hand woven and sewn fabric; hand dyed cotton, and commercially dyed cotton, nylon, and acrylic yarns, 85"x 30"

Images courtesy of the artist

Caroline Hayes Charuk: When I was first thinking of doing this interview series, I was talking to Margo Wolowiec about what it's like to be an artist who uses textiles, but who is also trying to operate in the contemporary art world. [Textile artist] is a label that she feels like she needs to set aside. And I'm wondering if you have any ambivalence towards textiles, because it seems like you're actually from a pretty straightforward background.

Diedrick Brackens: Yeah, when I started grad school and when I was applying to grad school I was starting to have this weird relationship with it. I was like, "I have to tuck it inside of painting or something else, or I have to step away from weaving." I tried to do it and I didn't like anything that I was making, or it seemed forced or weird. And now I feel like I can embrace it. I can talk about textiles like it's textiles, and I can still participate in contemporary art that I love. But I also feel like that's in part due to location, because there are a lot of people weaving in the Bay Area. There's a lot of craft work happening right now in contemporary art, whether or not people define it that way, so it gives me more leeway to be like, "Yeah, I am making textiles," or "I'm weaving," and expect or hope that people will just rise to being able to have a conversation about it. It feels kind of sneaky though, because there are a lot of people who have had to talk about it in other ways.

CHC: It's interesting that craft is a really big movement in the Bay Area, and there's this particular aesthetic that's very commercialized and product-oriented that's in so many shops.

DB: Raw and natural plywood, aloe plants.

CHC: Yeah exactly. And in regards to that aesthetic, where it's all about natural dyes and so on, that's something you use sometimes in your work, right? Some pieces have parts that are hand-dyed, and then there's the sparkly acrylic.

DB: I guess for me that's a way of playing with people's ideas of craft. It's like, I'm in a sunlit room with berries and I have to make my color. That doesn't ever happen, but there's something about that aesthetic where people can imagine it happens. But it's completely broken apart when you see this cheap glittery yarn. So I do feel like there are ways when dealing with what it means to craft where I'm walking that line of how pristine and beautiful it is, or how ugly or messy or sloppy it is, or faded, or shiny. I think that helps it out. It takes it away from the pastoral image of fields and rainbows.

CHC: How did you end up coming to CCA?

DB: I applied to three grad schools. I only applied to programs that had an emphasis on textiles, but specifically weaving. In the end, it was between CCA and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. SAIC felt more isolated, like there was a textiles department within the whole grad department, whereas at CCA I felt like I could hang out with the painters or photographers or whoever, which at some points kind of sucked, but I do feel like in the end I found my cohort of people who I could talk to and who knew what I was doing.

CHC: What was hard about the painters and the photographers?

DB: In my undergrad, it was an all textiles/fibers department, so I think that [labor] was a given for us, and we were able to talk about other things. [In critiques at CCA] people would be like "This reminds me of childhood," or "It's so nostalgic" and it seemed to them like these things were specific to craft, but these things were happening in their work as well. It's not the backbone of what I'm doing, but there are things there that we should have a discussion about, like why they feel so in the fore of my work as opposed to being in the fore of your work. I remember in a critique we were in a painter's studio and I was just like, "I feel like I'm just looking at things we saw in art history about abstract painting," and several people in the room got visibly offended. They were like, "Painting's dead, there are no rules." I don't understand what that means. How do you work through still being part of history and repeating something you've seen before? Why is it yours? Why do you still have to do it?

CHC: In textiles and craft-based work, I see that one's lineage as an artist is often very important to people, so to be around painters who are like, "Nope, I can pretend I don't have this" is really interesting. Where do you see yours?

DB: It feels really piece and part, and I think that's exciting and interesting. For a painter there's an established history, and not necessarily your relatives that you can think about like you can in textiles. I can say my grandmother sewed and quilted, and there's a domestic aspect to it, and it's so everyday. I feel like that was sort of dormant, though, like it was something that I was around but I didn't necessarily want to do. But once I was going to school and discovering artists that I was into, like

minimalist work, and then I was doing this thing that's almost counter to it, I really struggled. Why do I identify with this work that doesn't seem to be like anything I'm making? But I think now there's more of an understanding that while the objects I'm making DO have a lot of labor involved, but it doesn't bother me. There's a relationship between the viewer and the object that speaks to minimalism in some way. I think there's a relationship between you and the object that seems to be the most important aspect of a lot of minimalist work. I think about Carl Andre's floor pieces being like a metal rug. At first I didn't think about it that way and I was trying to avoid weaving because I love all this non-labored work.

CHC: But to make something really hyper-smooth like a Donald Judd box takes a lot of work! Nothing just comes out that way, you know? I really love that read of Carl Andre though, because it stabs holes in some of their ideas and calls into question the idea of their neutrality.

DB: For sure, and I think that's part of the project now; to think of ways that my objects can be part of that history. To say that kind of thing, like this isn't neutral, or these are ways minimalism is being imagined in ways that brings in people of color, my queer self, all of these things that weren't necessarily part of these hyper-masculine, neutral, quiet objects. But I think it is a lot of contemporary craft theorists who I figure are part of my lineage, and some not-so-contemporary folks like Sheila Hicks or Ed Rossbach that I 'grew up with' as an artist, being shown their work-- people who were doing fibers, but brought it into a visual arena that I still really admire.

CHC: I want to know about your unicorn weaving!

DB: So for me there's a lot of trying to play with what would be a textile history or a textile lineage. Thinking about the Unicorn Tapestry as being the pinnacle of textile history is what I was starting with. But then the idea that the Western art object that has its own set of concerns, and to say that this is the pinnacle of weaving says something about weaving from other parts of the world.

CHC: So it's the pinnacle in the sense that it's so finely detailed and representational?

DB: Right. In reading about the unicorn there are all of these big, weird and exciting myths, and things that people did when they thought [the unicorn] was real and they wanted to find it. So sort of at the same time as colonialism started, and things became more widely traded around the globe (people, objects, crops, animals), all of the sightings of unicorns were happening in India and Africa. There's something about that that I found really exciting, to think of how I could take the idea of making an object in a weaving style that would have been rendered in those parts of the world. So liberating it from its tapestry and producing it in kente cloth, to correct the history felt really compelling to me. It also sort of stands in for me, or for any black queer person in a way, even though now the unicorn has become almost synonymous with like a skull on a t-shirt. You see unicorns on people's backpacks, tattoos, jewelry or whatever else. It almost means nothing now.

But I was having a conversation with a mentor who's a craftsperson about how it's really in style right now to do these things that we just fell in love with by accident. She was like, "Oh, well when I started doing ceramics, I was a black single mother, and I was making pots and nobody cared." Now there's a way that people like her peers and people in the art community who would want to collect or show the

work are very covetous about it, and there's a way that her peers are like, "Ugh, how did you get that show?" or "Why is someone interested in that work now?" that it's made to seem undeserved. There's something about a unicorn in that we want it, we love it, it's this beautiful image from childhood, but it's still the way that it is in the days of the tapestry. It was tracked and hunted and killed. There's some parallels there that I was really interested in playing with.

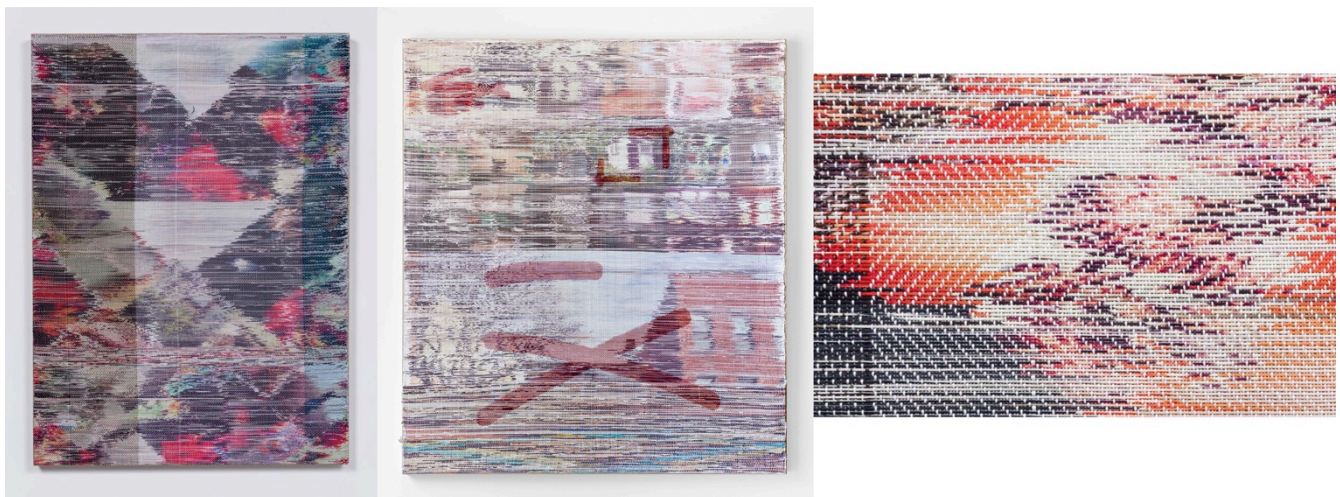
I think that there's exciting things about being able to make it in such a way that it gestures to kente cloth, but it also gestures to tapestry and makes statements about quilting. I'm really excited about it being this mishmash of different textile references in a way that I think painters can achieve when they paint. I can talk about weaving in the same way, referring to different histories. It's become really empowering and exciting recently. So going back to your question about whether I try to downplay the weaving aspect, no, not really.

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Of the three artists I interviewed, MARGO WOLOWIEC's work is the most highly pattern-oriented and process-oriented. She collects images from social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, arranges them on the computer, and then transfers the images to her warp threads using sublimation printing. As she weaves the printed threads, the images become distorted and other visual patterns are revealed.

Margo studied in the Fibers and Material Studies program at SAIC before coming to CCA, and currently resides in New York. Margo was a recipient of CCA's Barclay Simpson award in 2013. She has shown at Anat Ebgi in LA, Grizzly Grizzly in Philadelphia, and Lisa Cooley in New York.

After an informal conversation, I interviewed Margo via email.



Left to right: You'll Be Missed Too. 2014. Handwoven polyester, cotton, sublimation dye, fabric dye. 81 x 57 inches. In step. 2014. Handwoven polyester, cotton, sublimation dye, fabric dye. Detail from Those Sounds at that Place, 2014

Images courtesy of the artist

Caroline Hayes Charuk: What attracted you to textiles in the first place?

Margo Wolowiec: I was first attracted to textiles/weaving in particular, because of textiles inherent relationship to language. Learning that "text" stems from the Latin "texere" or, "to weave" really opened me up to the possibilities of a textile as a metaphor for communication and language. Textiles also have the ability to embody/hold information and data, and have a deep correlation to digital information. Woven cloth is essentially a system of ones and zeroes, threads are either up or down, on or off. This relationship to digital information makes even more sense when looked at through its history within computer technologies: Joseph Marie Jacquard's punchcards that he employed to operate his automated looms were directly borrowed to organize/compute information on the earliest computers. So that link really got me excited and thinking about textile's relationship to contemporary digital media.

CHC: Where do you see your lineage as an artist?

MW: As far as my lineage in relationship to my work - I see myself coming from a line of conceptual artists starting with Fluxist/language based practices of Yoko Ono and Alison Knowles, to minimal/process based artists like Sol Le Witt, and also feel very connected to artists that are concerned with materiality as metaphor, such as Ann Hamilton, Anne Wilson, Carol Bove. I'm also heavily influenced by early video work, although I don't really see my work connecting to it directly - like Yvonne Rainer's hand video, Richard Serra's videos (catching lead), and Baldessari's video work, I think this work explores the body and its relationship to a single material and influences the way I think about my own processes and materials. I find myself treating my materials as a conduit for communicating data - and the actions I choose to perform with them change their outcome and distort the data. Currently, I see myself aligned with contemporary artists that are working between physical materiality and digital immateriality, like Alex Hubbard's video work, Phillip Timischl's sculptures that pair digital monitors with paintings, and Laura Owen's most recent paintings that mash up advertisements with painterly gestures and Photoshop looking brush strokes.

CHC: You described a systematic approach to reweaving and distorting the images you use, and you also told me that you've been making more decisions on the fly. When and why do you choose to either follow a strict system or assert more control over the image?

MW: I'm constantly exchanging between the two. I find this has a relationship to my interests in the way we currently navigate the digital world. We have constant access to a fully interconnected online network, yet are balancing our relationship to it at all times, choosing what to keep private, choosing what to share. The information I'm sourcing comes directly from the online realm of social media/blogs/tumblr, things that people are continually using and uploading imagery to, and constantly redefining their relationship to. So on the one hand, I am sourcing images that I am directly translating to thread and weaving into cloth, but I decide as I'm weaving the imagery together when to leave the image legible and when to let it fall apart into an illegible distortion. This sometimes has to do with my own relationship to the images that I'm choosing to use. For instance, sometimes I let images that I'm really attracted to visually stay legible in the final piece, or other times, a more personal image of someone I know will be in the work and I'll intentionally distort it to make it illegible, to hide it. This is an intuitive process, and sometimes I'll divorce myself completely from the content of the images and focus only on formal qualities such as color - I'll be weaving and a really nice color will come together through a blend of imagery and I'll try and keep that together for a while. So this back and forth that I continually navigate between letting an image translate directly and choosing to distort it relates directly back to the way we are using/sharing information online - we allow technologies of sharing to either come into our personal lives and share our lives with our family or friends or the public in

general, and at the same time we find ourselves trying to navigate them in a way to keep our distance and control our privacy— its all very odd because connecting to the digital world has become something that is continually becoming more and more accessible, yet opaque at the same time. we don't know where the information we are sharing will show up, or how it is being stored in the long run, or how it is even changing our relationship to the physical world around us.

CHC: You've recently started showing with Anat Ebgi in LA. What are some benefits and challenges of working with a commercial gallery that isn't dedicated to craft?

MW: For the context of my work, it is completely important that I show at a gallery that is not connected to craft, or to a specific medium. Although I work with the very specific medium of textiles, I connect my work to many other practices and ideas that expand beyond the scope of textiles or, weaving. That said, it is a challenge to convey my particular practice to dealers who are used to working with artists that make work at a completely different pace. Weaving is time intensive! As are other practices that are based in material traditions. So, while some dealers are used to working with artists who can make 50 paintings a month, I can make about 5 weavings a month, max, and that is working in my studio full-time and with an assistant to help. So, its really always a conversation of pace and timing, and reminding people of how I work, and how long things take for me to produce. Beyond that, for me it is mainly a benefit to work with contemporary galleries that show diverse ranges of work, because it keeps me connected to a whole world of artists, curators, and critics who are involved with the contemporary art world and are able to look beyond just the woven process I use and connect the ideas i'm working with to larger issues. I am learning that context is everything, and although I'd be thrilled to show at a craft museum or craft focused gallery, the primary context of my work isn't specifically married to the types of dialogues that are highlighted at craft-specific spaces.

CHC: The relationship between materiality and digital ephemera seems pretty central to your work. Images are translated from the screen to objecthood through dyeing and weaving processes. So much artwork lives online though: on your website, on show announcements, in reviews. How do you think about the difference between viewing your work in person vs. online?

MW: Work is always going to be shown online, especially now. That is really how a lot of artwork circulates, and many people become interested in my work through seeing it online first on some blog or on someone's Instagram feed. There are a lot of artists right now that are playing directly with the relationship between work that is shown in person and its dissemination online, Brad Troemel for instance who runs The Jogging, a weird tumblr blog that I don't even really fully understand but I think that is probably it's intention, is constantly playing with the feedback loop of work existing in real life while being disseminated online and vice versa. That is a really interesting territory right now, but my work isn't specifically addressing that. My work really thrives on its in-person materiality, and is very seductive in that way. I think thats a big part of the equation between the information i'm sourcing and how i'm translating it into an object. The finished work really lives as a material object, and that object reigns supreme for me right now. So while I'm thrilled that my work is being shared freely online, it currently comes back firmly to the in-person experience.

TERESA BAKER is a painter who began using textiles in her work as a way to explore materiality. I was particularly interested in Teresa's use of textiles as a way to break the plane of the painting. When

asked about the potential references of textiles that she uses in her work, she says that she appreciates their formal qualities first, and actively tries to remove them from any particular reference. She uses textiles for their ability to twist, fold, and hang.

Teresa was the 2013 recipient of the yearlong Tournesol Fellowship at the Headlands Center for the Art. She has shown widely in the Bay Area and nationally, at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Di Rosa Foundation, Interface Gallery, and the Luggage Store.



Under In. 2013. Acrylic, Polyurethane foam, felt. 2 1/2 ft. x 3 1/2 ft.
Teresa Baker, Mhazuetsa. 2014. Felt and acrylic on cotton, 6 x 7 feet.
Mhazuetsa II. 2014. Acrylic on felt
Images courtesy of the artist

Caroline Hayes Charuk: Can you start by describing your relationship to textiles?

Teresa Baker: I guess I just think of them as materials. I mean, right now I'm using felt because of its properties. It's thicker, it doesn't absorb light, it's really flat and when I paint on it I get this automatic texture. If I just leave it [unpainted] it already comes with this inherent vibrant color. It's doing all the things I want it to. Sometimes it can be kind of off putting, and I like it for that reason. I like that it's not regarded [highly] in the textile world. It makes me think of being young, working with it when I was in grade school.

And the other thing is that I can get edges with the felt that I can't get with other materials. I was working with urethane foam previously, which gives these irregular edges. It stays really strong and felt does this also.

CHC: You entered graduate school at California College of the Arts as a painter, stayed pretty identified with the painting department, and you're here at the Headlands on a painting fellowship. So I'm curious how this materiality became important to you.

TB: Well, material has always been important in my work. I've never thought of myself as a strict

painter. I feel like I'm somewhere in between using sculpture and painting because I'm drawn to the material first and then markmaking comes after. It's very material-heavy because my concept is always the same, in the sense of what I want from a piece. I always want it to be visceral, and I'm interested in using basic shapes and colors and mixing them together to make something somewhat unidentifiable. And so it's not interesting enough for me to just use paint, so I started looking at other materials. I also like materials with structure because they don't necessarily need the support of stretchers like a painting does. I'm now in territory where I actually do end up dealing with that more than I was because once you use fabric it does need some more support, but I'm also using sometimes in a way where I'm just letting it be. I think a lot about showing the materials off and not trying to conceal them.

CHC: I think that trying to evoke a visceral experience is really interesting. That's something that reads for me in the sense that your work is not just a flat picture plane that I'm looking into. It exists in my real space.

TB: Well yeah, I think it's more interesting to let the materials play with the depth and perspective, rather than me actually painting it. I always want them to be more objects than paintings. I want there to be autonomy in each piece, and so I'm responding to what each piece needs with that in mind.

CHC: Autonomy in the sense that you're just focusing on one at a time?

TB: I want each one to have its own sense of identity.

CHC: The idea of viscosity is something I think about in my own work. I appreciate the idea that you're using material for a bodily response. Even if a viewer isn't able to touch the work, they're imagining how it feels. With respect to that, and to the idea that these pieces have identities, do you think of them as bodies to some degree? I see that they each perform a gesture.

TB: Oh yeah, I do in that sense-- in the sense that they have gestures. My work is becoming a little bit more figurative than it used to be. When I start something and it makes me laugh, I'm like, "Okay, that's good," because it's reached a particular point for me. It's these little things that I'm definitely picking up-- more figurative ideas or gestural ideas from people. That could be happening because of the material I'm using. I'm not using urethane foam anymore. I'm using things that are more associated with clothing. They can have a floppier way of having a gesture. And in comparison to that really stiff foam, it's going to bring a different element in.

CHC: It affords you more opportunities for irreverence, because it doesn't stay where you put it.

TB: I guess so, yeah it's true. And I'm okay with letting that happen.

CHC: So you said a little bit about it already, but do you choose materials for their references? You talked about craft felt, but some of these look like they have upholstery fabric or carpet.

TB: I'm actually drawn more by the formal qualities than anything else. I'm not as interested in

references. If it does have a reference, I'm trying to get rid of it. I mean, enough of it stays that you do think of that, and that's okay, but if I can take you a little bit beyond that, then that's what I want. I'm not necessarily interested in carpet.

CHC: Earlier, you mentioned coming from a background of textile work. Can you tell me more about that?

TB: I'm from the Midwest, and I have a family that's really into quilting, and so I have a bunch of quilts from my grandmother on my mom's side. She could make us quilts, but we could never have them as the top thing on our beds. We'd have to have a comforter over it so that the sun wouldn't fade it, and to keep it clean. So there are these ideas I have about materials; that I think they should be treated really well, and regarded as something very important that holds a lot of history.

My dad is Mandan and Hidatsa, so there is a long tradition of blankets on that side of my family. We had star quilts and Pendletons. When we were growing up, they'd have giveaways for someone's graduation, or because someone's reached a great point in their life, or even for funerals. At giveaways, you generally give blankets. Blankets are like the highest form of really nice things, so if someone's really important then you give them a star quilt. And generally it's a star quilt that someone has made, but maybe they buy it nowadays. The second tier is a Pendleton, and the third tier is almost like a motel blanket or whatever, just as a sign of like, "Thanks for helping out, here's a little something." There's also the other history of smallpox blankets [given to Native Americans by white colonizers], but here it's really my own associations with blankets and fabric and materials.

So actually, since I've been making these pieces I've become more aware of my cultural references. And it's not necessarily something I feel is important to let everyone know about, but it's something I'm thinking about. I think those two cultures from both sides of my family fused the idea that materials should be considered and should be taken seriously as something more than just a material.