

High Fiber

WOMEN TO WATCH 2012

November 2, 2012–January 6, 2013



Kathryn A. Wat and Chelsea Beroza

THE SEVEN ARTISTS FEATURED IN HIGH FIBER stitch, weave, knit, crochet, and wind fabric, felt, yarn, ribbon, and wire. Their expressive forms center on nature, history, relationships, and the power of making.

Prior to the 1960s, critics classified fiber art as a cousin to craft. They presumed textile-based objects to be feminine, decorative, centered on repetitive handwork, and therefore without the philosophical content that underpinned modern abstract painting and sculpture. A touch of critical anxiety about fibers lingers in our culture, but contemporary artists have found it generative. They often use fiber materials to sharpen the impact of their works.

High Fiber is the third installment in NMWA's biennial Women to Watch exhibition series, which features artists from the states and countries in which the museum has outreach committees. The committees participating in Women to Watch 2012 worked with curators in their respective regions to create shortlists of artists working in fibers, and NMWA selected from this group the artists whose work is on view in the exhibition.

Below from left to right:

Beili Liu, *Toll* (detail), 2008; Silk organza, 72 x 36 x 8 in.

Tracy Krumm, *Draped (Screwed)*, 2011; Crocheted metals, fabricated steel hooks, found wood, pigments, and patina, 81 x 57 x 11 in.

Ligia Bouton, *Six Photographs of People I Don't Know: Photograph 5, The Bouquet*, 2007; Fabric, metal, sisal rope, burlap, and sand, central object: 72 x 72 x 72 in.

Debra Folz, *XStitch Stool*, 2009; Steel base, perforated steel, and nylon thread, 20 x 14 x 12 in.



Contemporary artists create what modernist critics thought unlikely: meaningful, visually compelling, and emotionally charged works of fiber art.

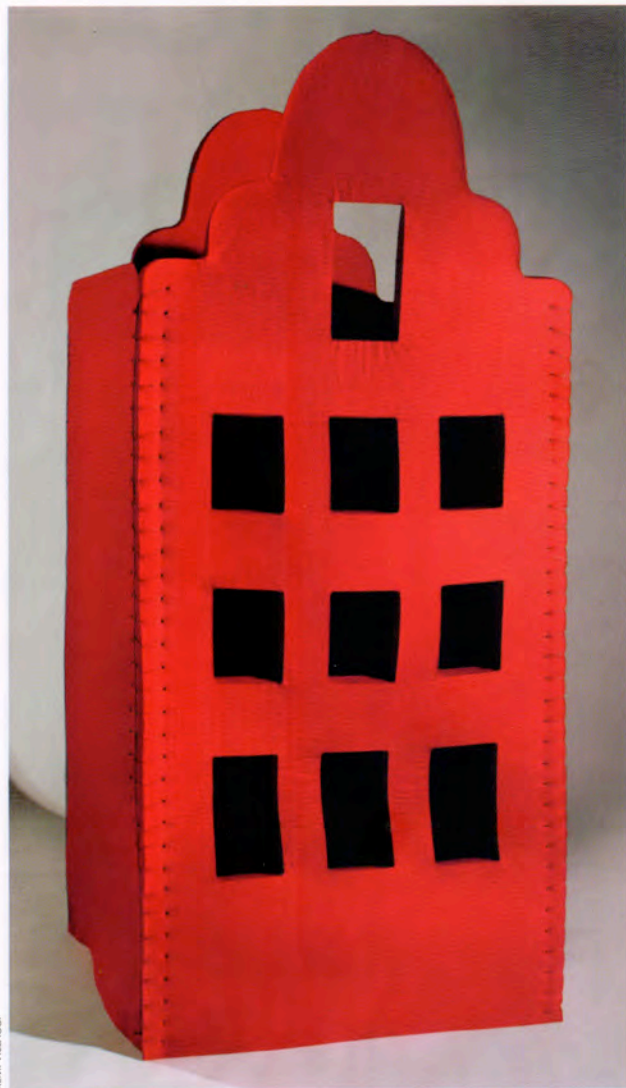
Tapestries by **LOUISE HALSEY** (b. 1949; Arkansas Committee) are a coda to the debate that played out among weavers in mid-twentieth-century America, when, influenced by Bauhaus principles, some artists advocated for experimentation while others sought to maintain traditional styles.¹ Halsey has mastered classic weaving techniques, but she is among a group of contemporary artists who present narrative images in textile panels rather than the more conventional formats of painting or prints. Halsey's tapestries depict houses with cracked façades or massive superstructures hovering above, alluding to prevailing social attitudes about home, family, and the natural environment.

In the 1960s and '70s, some feminist artists critiqued the home (and its attendant chores, including sewing) as an historically

oppressive space for women. **LAURE TIXIER** (b. 1972; Les amis du NMWA) explores domestic architecture from a more metaphysical standpoint through her vividly colored house sculptures made of felt. Based on structures from around the world as well as her own imaginative designs, Tixier's soft, hand-sewn houses recall children's blanket forts. Tixier emphasizes architecture's basis in both fantasy and physical need. Parts of her houses dip and bend, like the vulnerable human bodies they are meant to protect.

Below left: Laure Tixier, *Plaid House*, 2008; Wool felt and thread, 90 1/2 x 39 1/2 x 33 1/2 in.; Collection of Mudam Luxembourg

Below right: Louise Halsey, *Supersize My House*, 2011; Wool weft on linen warp, wood, and found objects, 27 1/2 x 17 1/4 in.



REMI VILLAGGI



GEORGE CHAMBERS, LITTLE ROCK, AR

TRACY KRUMM (b. 1963; Greater Kansas City Area Committee) upends the notion that crochet is a technique for making quaint textiles. She also dismisses the idea that you need a fibrous material to do it. To create her sculptures, she crochets fine-gauge wire into organically shaped pods or multi-hued panels that resemble blankets or curtains, complete with lacy edges made from exuberant loops of wire. But these pieces do not comfort or shield. Suspended from imposing armatures made from steel and found wood, Krumm's crocheted structures appear to be the shells of historical objects whose original purpose has been lost through time.

A pioneer of the KIP (Knitting in Public) movement, **RACHAEL MATTHEWS** (b. 1974; Friends of NMWA, U.K.) also challenges common perceptions of needlework. Although her art school peers dubbed knitting a "low craft," Matthews uses her knitting-based installations and performances to position needlework as a fundamentally expressive medium. *A Meeting Place for a Sacrifice to the Ultimate Plan* (2010–12) combines enigmatic knitted objects—a skull and crossbones, hourglass, oversized glove, crown, and roses—that appear to be relics from some ceremony or misadventure. Matthews's co-owned art space and haberdashery shop in London (called Prick Your Finger) is typically hung with knitted guitars and cauliflowers rather than hats and scarves.

Like many contemporary artists, **DEBRA FOLZ** (b. 1979; Massachusetts Committee) is attracted to fiber precisely because of its association with craft. She relishes the stark contrast between the handcrafted, highly tactile surfaces of her furniture designs and their spare machine-made bases. Folz stitches nylon thread and rubber cord into her metal and acrylic chairs, tables, and mirrors, and wraps wood shelving and stools with knitted cozies or intricately pleated fabric. She notes that people often connect with her designs because they have personal experience with the stitchery involved and clearly perceive her investment of time.

Fiber-based art often comprises painstaking processes, and the steps involved in making the work can be crucial to its content and meaning. **BEILI LIU** (b. 1974; Texas Committee) uses time and inventive techniques to transform modest materials into evocative installations highlighting the tension between her Eastern origins and Western influences. To create *Toil* (2008), Liu used burning cones of incense to trim the edges of thin strips of silk, a fabric historically associated with Liu's native China. She then coiled the silk into dozens of cones that appear to sprout from the gallery wall surface. Liu's meticulous work invokes what artist and critic Kathleen Whitney terms a "fetishism of effort," as viewers thrill to imagine the handwork involved.²



Installation artists like Liu and **LIGIA BOUTON** (b. 1973; New Mexico Committee) are drawn to fiber because its tactility complements their goals for creating physically immersive works. Bouton drew inspiration for her *Six Photographs of People I Don't Know: Photograph 5, The Bouquet* (2007) from a vintage wedding photograph she found of a couple unknown to her. Bouton engineered an extreme shift in scale by translating the floral spray held by the bride in the tiny photograph into a six-foot-square fabric bouquet that is suspended from the gallery ceiling. Bouton's displacement and distortion of the bouquet are forceful metaphors for the time and space that separate us from the past.

Since conceptual and feminist artists brought fiber art into the Western mainstream in the 1960s and '70s, textiles have become central to contemporary artistic practice worldwide. Artists of all genders find fiber's tactility, cultural references, and persistent association with craft to be rich resources. They create what modernist critics thought unlikely: meaningful, visually compelling, and emotionally charged works of fiber art.

Notes

1. On this debate and the rise of fiber art in American culture, see Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
2. Quoted in Paula Owen, "Fabrication and Encounter: When Content is a Verb," in Maria Elena Buszek, ed., *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011): 83–96.

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