

Art in America

Fiber: Sculpture 1960-Present

by Kristen Swenson

Diller Scofidio + Renfro's glass-and-steel museum seems an improbable site for an exhibition of fiber art, a genre that intimates preindustrial weaving and crocheting. Yet encountering Sheila Pepe's *Put Me Down Gently* (2014) en route to the galleries quickly reveals the show's ambitions to cast fiber as a major sculptural medium of the last 50 years, one that embraces new technologies and conceptual tools. Installed in a glass elevator shaft, *Put Me Down Gently* presents a three-story-high cascade of fiber-based materials as varied as parachute cord, lace and silk. Its crocheted forms are partially tethered to the elevator; the sculpture ascends and descends with museum visitors. Like the exhibition as a whole, Pepe's work dismisses stale associations that have marginalized fiber art. It is proudly crafty, even kitschy, and sensuous, while also playfully responsive to its technological surrounds.

Organized by ICA senior curator Jenelle Porter, "Fiber: Sculpture 1960-Present" begins with fiber art's "radical evolution" in the early 1960s and follows the medium's progress from "wall bound weavings to massive, three-dimensional abstraction," Porter notes in her catalogue essay. International in scope, the show features 33 artists and presents works that are to be encountered on formal and material terms—autonomous objects largely unburdened by conversations about gender and craft. However, the show's scholarly catalogue counters this approach by engaging critical debates in detail.

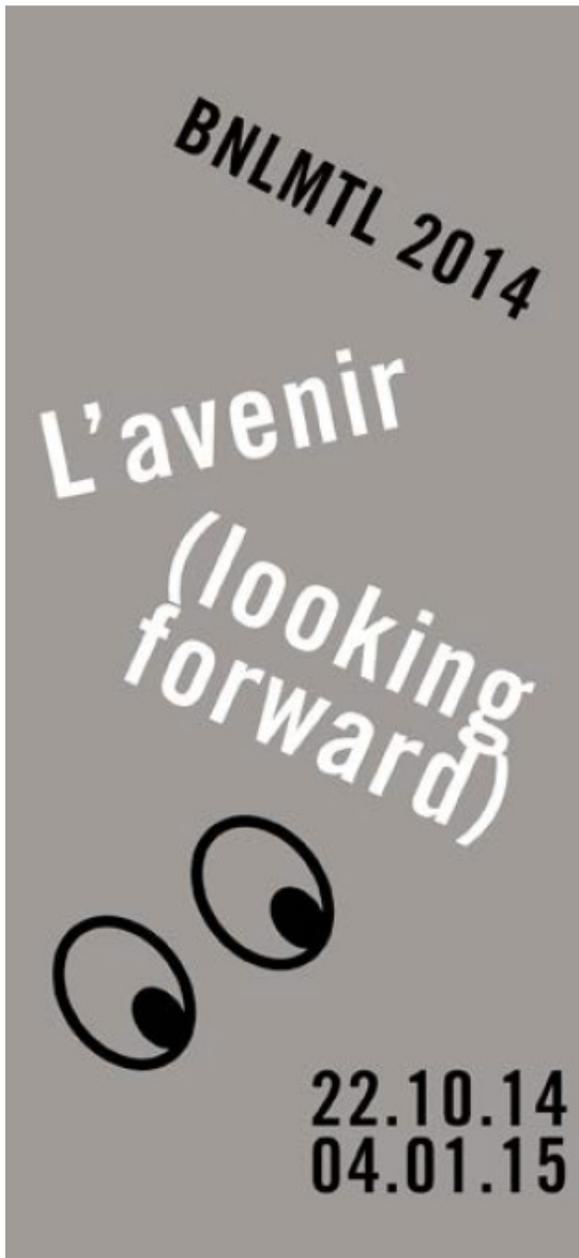
Pepe's elevator installation is displayed near Lenore Tawney's *Dark River* (1961, over 13 feet tall), and the two provide historical bookends. Tawney's open-warp, black-linen weavings hang from the ceiling and away from the wall, occupying space in a vaguely anthropomorphic fashion even as surface is still emphasized. It is the earliest piece in the show, representing the emergence of fiber as an experimental medium encompassing sculptural sensibilities. The rest of the show is organized into thematic groupings—color, the grid, gravity and, finally, feminism. Dominating half of the color gallery, Wisconsin weaver Jean Stamsta's *Orange Twist* (ca. 1970), a long wool floor piece that forms a fanlike arc, evokes the "primary structures" moment of New York Minimalism. Nearby, color layers and changes kaleidoscopically as one moves among floating scrims stretched with vibrant fibers by Elsi Giaouque (a student of Sophie Taeuber-Arp). This installation from 1979 is grounded in European geometric abstraction, particularly the legacy of Cubism.

The grid—a property of any woven piece—is writ large in the late Robert Rasmussen's 1969 *Rope Piece*, re-created for the show by students from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. (It was first made in 1969 for the Whitney Museum's storied exhibition "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials.") The rope grid spans an entire wall. Anchored by nails, it is detached at one corner and appears to be peeling up, a staged collapse of rational geometry. Ropes emerge from the grid of Eva Hesse's relief *Ennead* (1966), drooping to the floor and tacked to an adjoining wall. While Hesse's use of materials is a touchstone for many artists in the show, *Ennead* nearly disappears in proximity to Sheila Hicks's exuberant *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column* (2013-14), a shower of brilliantly hued fibers twisting from ceiling to floor. Hicks was Hesse's

Jean Stamsta: *Orange Twist*, ca. 1970, wool, synthetic yarn and wood, 43 by 103 by 43 inches; in "Fiber" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston.



classmate at the Yale University School of Art, where she took Josef Albers's color theory class. The visceral impact of colored fibers that convey both chaos and control is a longstanding interest of Hicks's. Also on display is her *Banisteriopsis II* (1965-66/2010), a mound of innumerable soft bundles of wool and linen. The pale yellow fibers are concentrated in such a way that the work possesses a sense of excess and infinity, which contrasts with its slumping, impassive form.



The final gallery is organized under the rubric of feminism, though this social history is otherwise downplayed. Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* (aka "womb room"), first made for Womanhouse in Los Angeles in 1972, claims fiber as a feminist medium, instrumental because of its traditional association with "women's work." Yet this association is quickly complicated. Beryl Korot's installation *Text and Commentary* (1976-77) pairs five video screens of a woman's hands at a loom—the clamor of the shuttle filling the gallery—with tightly controlled geometric weavings and drawings. Here, Korot investigates weaving as a "text," drawing parallels to the linear encoding of information in both video and drawing. Josh Faught's sequined knit panel, Ernesto Neto's woven passageway and Rosemarie Trockel's mechanically latch-hooked bench all occupy this room as well. How do such remote works cohere to address feminism? They do not; in this case, a meaningful curatorial narrative is needed. Still, "Fiber" represents a major achievement, giving an under-recognized sculptural history its due. It is rare to find so many inventive, compelling works in one show, and it astounds that many are so little known. This in itself is an indictment of art history—no wall text necessary.