

THESIS

A FACILITY WITHOUT ITS OWN TERRITORY

Submitted by

Edwina Straub

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2011

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Thomas Lundberg

Patricia Coronel

Ajean Ryan

Diane Sparks

Copyright by Edwina Straub 2011

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

A FACILITY WITHOUT ITS OWN TERRITORY

Dipping into the reservoir of tacit knowledge, the phenomenon in art that is created through the “knowing of that” or embodied knowledge. The integration of experience and perception is where the motivations of my art making comes from. It is through the manipulation of fiber that I am able to transform its essence into something extraordinary. Through the process of dyeing, sewing and cutting I create patterns in space. Through the integration of their shadows into the artwork, I create the ephemeral character of my art. The hand-cut modules are sewn in a grid. Through the full integration of the grid into the artwork, in part as scaffold and in part as element of the artwork, I create a dynamic composition of movement.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 <i>Ripples</i> , 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread, 305 cm x 244 cm.....	10
Figure 2 <i>Ripples</i> (detail), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread.....	11
Figure 3 <i>Ripples</i> (details), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread.....	12
Figure 4 <i>Ripples</i> (details), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread.....	12
Figure 5 <i>Threaded Projections</i> (detail), 2009, dyed monofilament, hematite.	13
Figure 6 <i>Fractions</i> (detail), 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament.....	14
Figure 7 <i>Flow I</i> , 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament, 254 cm x 254 cm.....	15
Figure 8 <i>Flow II</i> , 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament, pins, hematite, 406 cm x 234 cm.	16
Figure 9 <i>Morphing</i> (detail), 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament, pins.....	17
Figure 10 <i>Abundance</i> (detail), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread, pins.	18
Figure 11 <i>Abundance</i> (detail), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread, pins.	18

I. INTRODUCTION

My earliest memories of making art go back to kindergarten; my excitement rose to unmatched levels each time the teacher would bring out the cutting-and-pasting box. I loved selecting images from a stack of magazines, cutting them up and putting them together in new and different ways. Positioning the cutouts together, according to my own perspective of the world, I created what I perceived as new, more interesting and more appealing realities.

My first formal body of work consisted of ten black-and-white photographs created for the final exhibition in applied arts during my last year of high school. Growing up in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney, Australia, I often sailed in the bays of Sydney harbor. I was inspired to photograph the old wooden moorings reflected in the water. These fleeting reflections fascinated me, along with the changes brought by each passing moment.

When I moved to Colorado in 2004, I attended my first art class since leaving high school. During the ensuing time at Naropa University, I enjoyed a scholarly introduction to Buddhist philosophies and Buddhist-inspired forms of art making. This period of my artistic exploration consisted of Eastern art practices, including *ikebana*, brushstroke and *thangka* painting. The founder of Naropa, Chogyam Trungpa, classified this form of art making as “dharma art,”¹ art that comes from the non-conceptual mind. It was only years later that I truly understood how much I had been helped by destiny to have had this guidance into art. The dharma-related Buddhist idea of emptiness found welcome reception by post-modern philosophers, with Michael Polanyi one of the most

prominent exponents. “Buddhism alone,” he writes, “applies directly to the creative arts. Since it analyzes both the making and the appreciation of art in visionary terms.”² And in fact it is thanks to these early approaches to art through the Buddhist practices that I have literally learnt to smile with the Buddha: “What both the creation and perception of art share with Buddhist meditation practice is that they allow us forget ourselves and thus realize ourselves. They are parallel practices.”³

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

a. Emptiness (the non-conceptual mind)

With an educational foundation in Buddhist art, I resonate with the concept of emptiness as a deep and essential source for my artistic inspiration. The idea of emptying myself of past experiences and future expectations, and to rest my constantly racing mind in the calmness and non-expectedness of the moment is essential to my process. Robert Irwin describes this form of art making as: “the almost simultaneous faculty of the unique individual to appropriate and mold reality as presented in perception into a systematic experience of cognizance.”⁴ With reaching the status of a master of fine arts, the “knowing of how”⁵ has come to a first level of virtuosity. However, with respect to the “knowing of that,”⁶ I have only started to embark on the search for an emptied awareness, allowing complete absorption by the qualities of fiber, archetypical shapes, colors and movement as sources for my work. Famously, Agnes Martin expressed her interpretation of the non-conceptual mind in the simple but deeply meaningful expression: “the manipulation of materials in art work is a result of this state of mind.”⁷

My creative sources are moments in which I experience a sense of non-duality. I would describe them as an aggregate, best represented by the idea of the non-conceptual

mind applied in my works *Flow I*, *Flow II* and *Morphing*. Agnes Martin calls these fleeting passages, which are very hard to hold on to, as “awareness of perfection within the mind.”⁸ It is my place of “nowness,” a state in which I am not aware of the past or future. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, this is the stage where one finds oneself in “flow,”⁹ with the mind completely immersed in the activity of the instant. These are also moments of solitude and quietness with no distractions; I look to Agnes Martin for help to explain that in order: “To discover the conscious mind in a world where intellect is held to be valuable requires solitude – quite a lot of solitude.”¹⁰ These “moments of perfection”¹¹ are the source and the essential fertile ground of my art—the making of a wonderful facility. This facility without its own territory, grounded in emptiness, provides me with the ability to see without the filter of adapted convictions, my upbringing, and my learnt or inherited value systems; it is “the conscious mind that is aware of perfection, happiness and the sublime.”¹²

b. Unconscious cognition

Tacit knowledge¹³ is a term pioneered by Michael Polanyi explaining the cognitive unconscious. The distinction between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge has been explained as knowing of that as opposed to knowing of how.¹⁴ The phenomenal in art is created through the knowing of that, or embodied knowledge where the artist’s reality is nobody else’s reality. Robert Irwin says: “All perceptual knowing is knowing in action (change) and the equivalent of the phenomenal.”¹⁵ My reality is founded in what I refer to as a facility without its own territory, the “knowing of how” solely dedicated to the “knowing of that,” grounded in emptiness and an ability to see without the filter of adapted convictions, my upbringing, and my learnt or inherited value systems. From

constructing new realities, first explored in kindergarten with the cutting-and-pasting box and with the ephemeral reflections of the moorings in Sydney harbor, to the state of mind and body required to create an *enzo*¹⁶ circle, the facility of tacit knowledge is my creative engine. Feeding from unconsciously accumulated sources, it is the emergence of something beautiful and appealing what keeps me exploring. My knowledge of “moments of perfection” makes me pursue and capture these ethereal moments of knowing without knowing, the stage of the non-conceptual mind.

The idea for *Ripples* has been born out of my fascination with the dye technique of ikat. I am most attracted to the effects created when a color of dyed yarn merges with another color, creating blended hues and values. It is some form of tacit knowledge that triggered this fascination with ikat, when I was first introduced to its various techniques for bringing color into woven cloth. With the improvement of my “knowing of how,” this sense of primordial familiarity with ikat only increased. The intensity and combinations of the colors in *Ripples* found their inspiration during a recent trip to India. But again, these are not learnt combinations, but were inspired through impressions of women in colorful saris crossing the streets, the color of Indian food, plants and the ever present color of gold. When I dyed the yarn, I did not have any predetermined color mixing in mind. I began using yellow dye first, on cotton yarn in its natural color. After that, it was whatever came naturally; something I cannot explain but can relate to my tacit knowledge. The outcome was a mix of warm-and-cool color combinations that give the work its push-and-pull effect.

c. The universal in art

Dipping into the reservoir of tacit knowledge, the phenomenon in art that is created through the “knowing of that” or embodied knowledge. The integration of experience and perception is where the motivations of my art making comes from Polanyi states: “It is the artist’s responsibility to not represent daily experiences and current problems but to universalize the artist’s experience and perceptions to create art that moves the viewer.”¹⁷ It is through the manipulation of fiber that I am able to transform its essence into something extraordinary. Through the process of dyeing, sewing and cutting I create patterns in space. Through the integration of their shadows into the artwork, I create the ephemeral character of my art. The hand-cut modules are sewn in a grid. Through the full integration of the grid into the artwork, in part as scaffold and in part as element of the artwork, I create a dynamic composition of movement. It is in the spirit of Agnes Martin and Polanyi that I consider my art as a facility without its own territory. In a world where everything needs to be classified, named and put into a category in order to be understood, I attempt to create “purposiveness without purposes.”¹⁸ The cited radical but essential statement of Agnes Martin further underlines the non-purposiveness in my art.

“It is not in the role of an artist to worry about life—to feel responsible for creating a better world. This is a very serious distraction. All your conditioning has been directed toward intellectual living. This is useless in artwork. All human knowledge is useless in artwork. Concepts, relationships, categories, classifications, deductions are distractions of mind that we wish to hold free for inspiration. Personal emotions and sentimentality are anti-art.”¹⁹

III. LANGUAGE

a. Elements

The grid structures in my works are both essential and representative. They are essential as a constructive element. They are the literal scaffolds for my artwork,

allowing the formal and sculptural composition of the stitched modules. However, as much as these grid structures contribute to the architectural needs of my work, they are at the same time a fully integrated part of the works' expression. Like Mondrian and Martin, I “view the grid as a staircase to the Universal.”²⁰ To me, grid structures represent liminal spaces, the spaces in between. As such, these structures express the very qualities that relate to their transitory function between the wall—the ground—and the floating space. Liminal space is the space of pure potentiality, a place where the mind falls into a state of non-duality or, according to Martin, a place providing “moments of perfection.” That said, it is of little interest to me whether the viewer focuses on the grid structure or not. What matters most is how the floating effect of the work impacts the viewer.

My first conscious use of a grid structure was in my early explorations of Buddhist *thangka* painting. There, as in medieval religious art, the grid is used as the juncture between the sacred and the secular.²¹ Invisible but essential to these works, the grid allows the viewer to experience the theme of the work heightened through the spatial illusions created by scale and balanced proportions.

The use of monofilament for the grid structures promotes the ethereal qualities of the work. The transparency of the grid lets the work float and keeps it in a suspended equilibrium; not on the wall nor in the ether, but capturing the space between, bringing it figuratively back to Chogyam Trungpa's description of “dharma art” as a place between heaven and earth.²²

“Fiber is the oldest material manipulated by human beings for practical and aesthetic purposes.”²³ Ikat, with its repetitive practices, is reputed to be the oldest resist-dyeing method applied to thread.²⁴ Repetition, a minimalist concept,²⁵ is fundamental to

my work. Stitching lines creating threaded modules is pure repetition. However, each line of each module features a unique embodiment of its form. Using contrasting threads of translucent monofilament and hand-dyed cotton yarn as an overlay creates positive and negative spaces. The repetitive grid structure, created with monofilament, and its spatial divisions provide geometric order. In direct opposition, the ikat-dyeing process introduces an element of randomness and unpredictability. Thread is a transient medium, heavily loaded with symbolic meaning of connectedness. With the recent evolution of my work, as manifested in *Ripples*, dye processes contribute their own aesthetic attributes. Featuring thread as an essential element of my art, I relate to artist Piper Shepard who states: “textile making is essentially about repetition, accumulation and perseverance.”²⁶

IV. PROCESS

“The making of a work of art...is a strange and risky business in which the maker never quite knows what he is making until he has actually made it; or to put it another way, it is a game of find-and-see in which the seeker is not sure what he is looking for until he has found it.”²⁷

Fiber is the predominant medium for my work. First and foremost it is the direct physical interaction with these materials that defines and establishes my role in the process. It all begins with the making of the elements (grid and colored thread) according to their own formula and requirements, defined through the creative process. The structure of the work is both pliable and transportable, and, like the mind, changeable and flexible; it is what El Anatsui calls a “nomadic aesthetic.”²⁸ Each time my work is reinstalled it will show slight variations and accordingly the shadows will project a different expression of these impermanent forms, as exemplified in the work *Fractions*.

My work is a series of additive and subtractive iterations. Water is an essential ingredient for many of these processes. For dyeing thread, water is a principal contributor. Dyeing is an additive process and constitutive for adding color to the work. Stitching and sewing are the follow-on additive steps. The subtractive aspect of the process involves dissolving the stabilizing structure into which I have sewn, leaving only the monofilament grid structure with floating modules. Water washout dissolves the base and leaves the fibers intact, giving the work texture, depth and translucency. It is through the dissolution of the stabilizing structure that the work is transformed into its ethereal nature. As a result, the creative process consists of complementary but opposed procedures: I form stitched grids, stitched lines or other modules from thread, but then I deconstruct their base using water to dissolve the original structure and creating transparency and translucency.

The work expresses both the ambiguity between figure and ground and the fluidity of visual impressions; colored modules and their darker shadows are exemplified in the work *Abundance*. Light is an integral element of the work, creating a sense of interconnectedness (grid and modules) and at the same time being a reminder of duality (shadows).

I consider my work to be installations. Though fluid, there is a suggested sculptural quality to the works. This plasticity is heightened by changes of lighting, first experimented within the work *Threaded Projections*. Different ways of lighting the work alter the effects of shadow and the viewer's experience; the interplay of solid and translucent shapes depend on where the viewer is standing. It is this relationship between the light and the shadows that brings individuality to each installation. *Ripples*, when

mounted a few inches from the wall, appears to be suspended in space. When illuminated in certain ways, these threaded sculptures produce captivating patterns of light and shadow.

The conscious use and integration of shadows express the ephemeral and constantly changing nature of life. The shadows, at times, look like a line drawing of the work and sometimes like an optical illusion, blurring what is real and what is an illusion. This is of interest not only as an optical sensation but also on the intellectual plane: the gained sensory depth represents the shadow within us and the shadow play is symbolic of human dualistic nature. The shadow world of the unconscious is not self-defining. The gold threads and bright color reflecting light in *Ripples* are the purpose and the cause, but below are the shadows—opening, deepening and increasing awareness. It is the installation quality and the size of the work that influences the viewer's experience—leading to what Anne Wilson defines so eloquently: “what is of ultimate value is our experience of the work of art in time and space.”²⁹

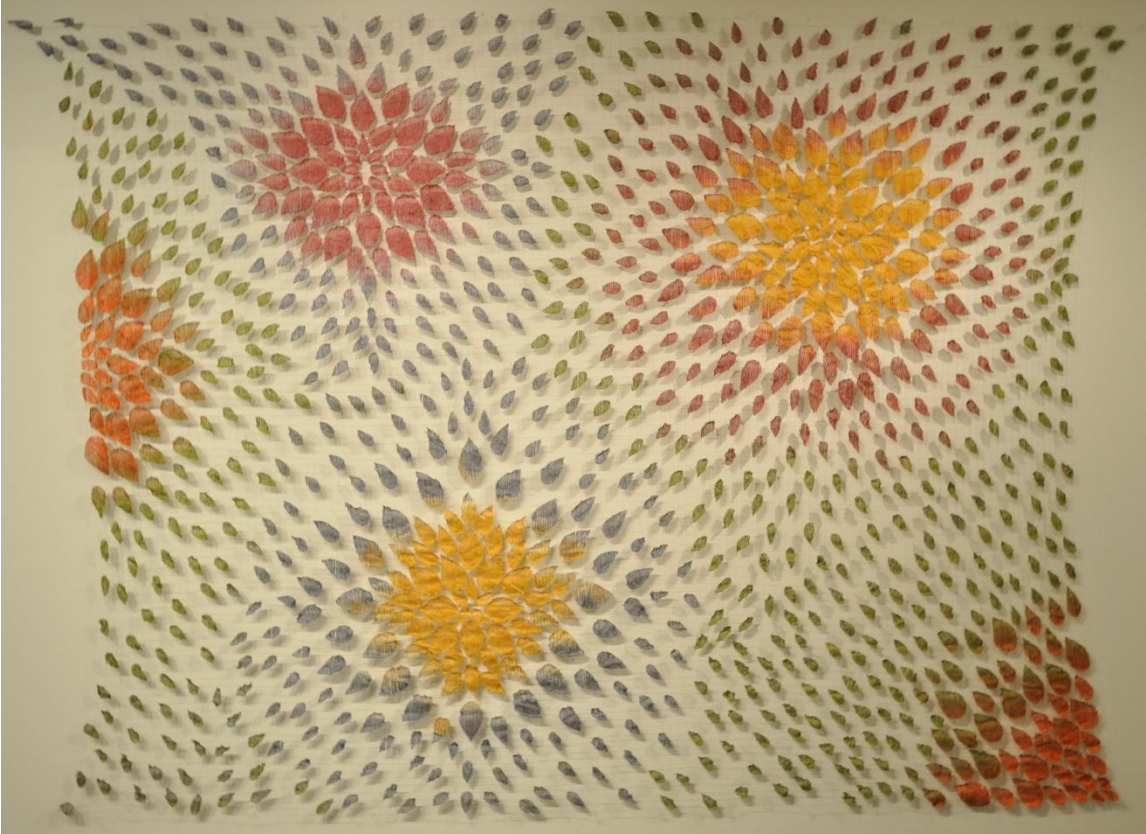


Figure 1 *Ripples*, 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread, 305 cm x 244 cm.



Figure 2 *Ripples* (detail), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread.



Figure 3 Ripples (details), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread.



Figure 4 Ripples (details), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread.

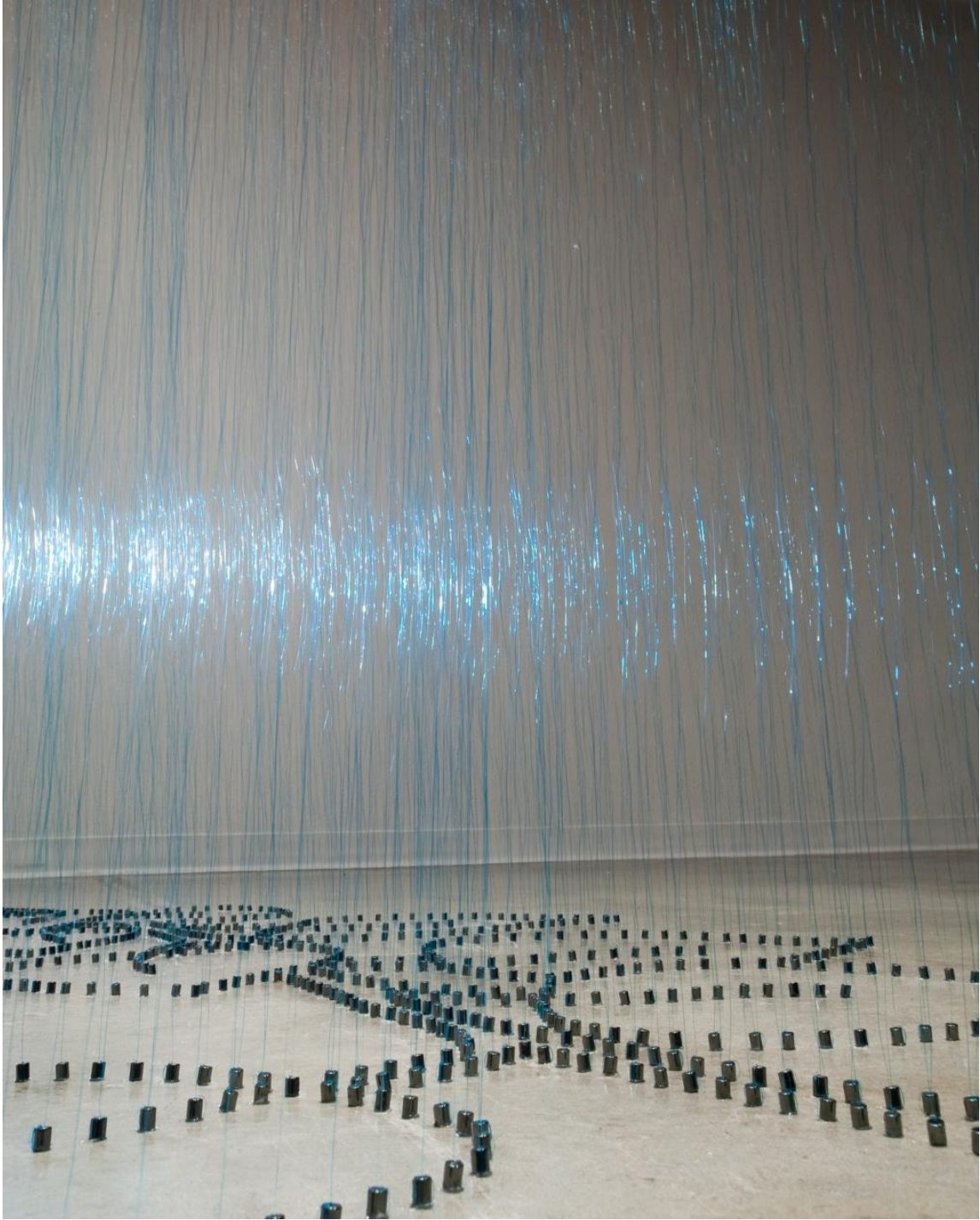


Figure 5 *Threaded Projections* (detail), 2009, dyed monofilament, hematite.



Figure 6 *Fractions* (detail), 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament



Figure 7 *Flow I*, 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament, 254 cm x 254 cm.



Figure 8 *Flow II*, 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament, pins, hematite, 406 cm x 234 cm.

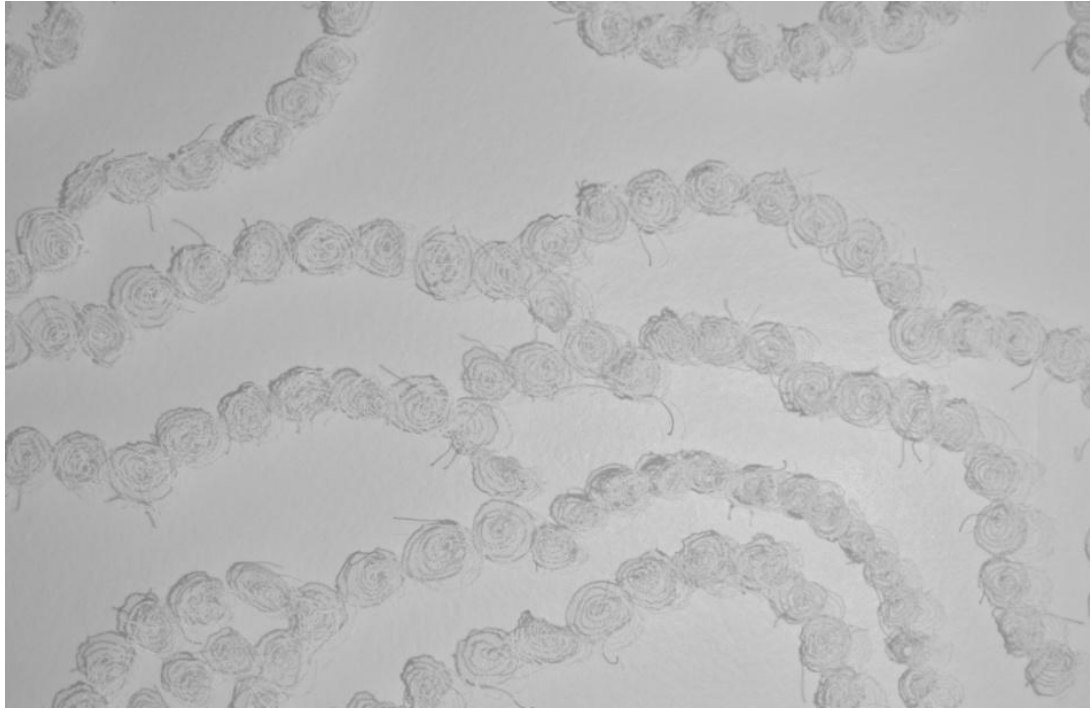


Figure 9 *Morphing* (detail), 2010, crochet yarn, netting, monofilament, pins.



Figure 10 Abundance (detail), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread, pins.



Figure 11 Abundance (detail), 2011, cotton yarn, fiber-reactive dye, netting, monofilament, thread, pins.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashton, Dore. *Twentieth-Century Artists on Art*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.
- Bass, Jacquelynn. *Smile of the Buddha*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- Bouleau, Charles. *The Painters Secret Geometry*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1963.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1997.
- Daftari, Fereshteh. *Without Boundary*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006.
- Gillow, John, & Bryan Sentance. *World Textiles: A Visual Guide to Traditional Techniques*. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1999.
- Hillman, James. *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics - The Practice of Beauty*. New York: Allworth Press, 1998.
- Irwin, Robert. *Robert Irwin: Primaries and Secondaries*. San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2008.
- Janson H. W. *History of Art*. New York: Harry N Abrams, 1962.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999.
- Martin, Agnes. *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics - Beauty is the Mystery of Life*. Edited by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro. New York: Allworth Press, 1998.
- Martin, Agnes. *Writings*. Ostfildern Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1991.
- McFadden, David R. *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery*. New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2007.
- McFadden, David R. *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting*. New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2007.
- Polanyi, Michael. *The Tacit Dimension*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967.

Polanyi, Michael, and Harry Prosch. *Meaning*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Seo, Audrey Yoshiko. *Enzo: Zen Circles of Enlightenment*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2007.

Trungpa, Chogyam. *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa*. Vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004.

Trungpa, Chogyam. *True Perception: The Path of Dharma Art*. Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 2008.

“Yokelist Manifesto 10: is the architecture against us?” In *The New England Journal of Aesthetic Research*. 28 April 2011. (1 June 2011).

<http://gregcookland.com/journal/2011/04/28/yokelist-manifesto-10-is-the-architecture-against-us/>

Endnotes

-
- ¹ Chogyam Trungpa, *True Perception: The Path of Dharma Art* (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 2008), 1.
- ² Michael Polanyi & Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 129.
- ³ Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11.
- ⁴ Robert Irwin, *Robert Irwin: Primaries and Secondaries* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2008), 153.
- ⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 25.
- ⁶ G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 25.
- ⁷ Dore Ashton, *Twentieth-Century Artists on Art* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 232.
- ⁸ Agnes Martin, *Writings* (Ostfildern Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1991), 71.
- ⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), 110.
- ¹⁰ A. Martin, *Writings*, 117.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 111.
- ¹³ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 9-11.
- ¹⁴ G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 25.
- ¹⁵ R. Irwin, *Robert Irwin: Primaries and Secondaries*, 172.
- ¹⁶ Audrey Yoshiko Seo, *Enzo: Zen Circles of Enlightenment* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2007), 1.
- ¹⁷ M. Polanyi & H. Prosch, *Meaning*, 109.
- ¹⁸ James Hillman, *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics -The Practice of Beauty* (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), 273.
- ¹⁹ Agnes Martin, *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics - Beauty is the Mystery of Life* (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), 400.
- ²⁰ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 10.
- ²¹ Charles Bouleau, *The Painters Secret Geometry* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1963), 255.
- ²² Chogyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa Vol 7* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004), 168.
- ²³ David R. Mc Fadden, *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery* (New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2007), 9.
- ²⁴ John Gillow, & Bryan Sentence, *World Textiles: A Visual Guide to Traditional Techniques* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1999), 140.
- ²⁵ Fereshteh Daftari, *Without Boundary* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 20.

²⁶ David R. Mc Fadden, *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting* (New York: Museum of Arts & Design, 2007), 16.

²⁷ H. W. Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Harry N Abrams, 1962), 11.

²⁸ The New England Journal of Aesthetic Research, “Yokelist Manifesto 10: is the architecture against us?” <http://gregcookland.com/journal/2011/04/28/yokelist-manifesto-10-is-the-architecture-against-us/>

²⁹ D.R. Mc Fadden, *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting*, 18.