

Phaidon Editors interview Anne Wilson in conjunction with "Vitamin T: Threads and Textiles in Contemporary Art," Phaidon Press, 2019

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Anne Wilson in the studio

Who are you and what's your relationship with/ connection to threads and textiles?

I'm an artist and professor of art. Although I work between sculpture, drawing, installation and performance, my work is always grounded in a textile language. In recent years, I've been creating material drawings using found cloth, thread, and human hair, alongside performing the infrastructure of textile production in durational public performances.

What part does the tactility of the material play in your desire to work with it rather than say paint?

The physicality of materials is essential to the content of my work. This physicality has tremendous ability to speak to issues of our own humanness in very direct ways -- there is meaning in the work through a haptic sensibility, knowing what something is through the memory of knowing how it feels. As well, the found materials I use - lace, bed sheets, table linen, human hair - bring material culture studies into the conceptual arena of contemporary art, acknowledging the embedded histories of these materials and ways of making as critical frames for artwork.

Why do you think there's an increased interest around textile art right now?

There is currently a renewed engagement with hand making and materiality in response to contemporary conditions -- the saturation of the digital (the omnipotence of screens), the environmental urgency of reuse, and the political position of personal agency in making everyday things. As well, the greater critical acknowledgement of contemporary artists from Africa, Asia, and South America, where hand making traditions have historically held deep cultural, spiritual, and visual meaning, has contributed to a wider field of inclusion. Textiles are carriers of cultural narratives globally: textiles can tell a story about class, about belief systems, about gender, about identity, about labor, about economics and trade. There is also greater understanding that analog and digital processes afford rich visual potentials in textiles that are not possible in other mediums. So the increased interest in contemporary textiles extends from multiple perspectives.

Everyone uses textiles in their daily life, does that help or hinder its standing as a fine art material?

The ubiquity of cloth, its close proximity to bodies, is both its great strength and great challenge. How does this close, sensory proximity contribute to intellectual and conceptual engagement? Through writing and current exhibitions, we are in a moment of rigorous critical re-examination about the significance of fiber and textiles within art history -- unpacking the semiotics of cloth and intersections between cloth, culture, and fine art platforms globally. We are in a moment of greater acknowledgement of the significant contributions of women, people of color and theories extending from feminist, queer, and non-conforming identities to the art world -- essentially re-thinking how art history is written and taught!

Whose textile art do you admire? Is there one piece, or series of pieces you return to, and think 'how did they do that?'

Artists Ritzi and Peter Jacobi were very important early mentors to me. *Romanica I* from 1978 (goathair, paint with graphite on paper) is a large tapestry installation, a conflation of image and object, of the ordinary -- dirt as image, finely woven at the bottom tapestry edges -- and the extraordinary impact of monumental scale. The consummate tapestry weaving skill exploits the tactile capabilities of textile, breaking from the pictorial tapestry tradition and asserting a new power of woven form. I often return to the the Jacobi's work for inspiration.

What's next for you, and what's next for threads and textile art?

My long-term goal is to continue to bring textile into my artwork in ways that contribute to a broad contemporary art and cultural discourse. I want to acknowledge both personal and cultural histories embedded in materiality and process, and to work freely across disciplinary boundaries, combining features of ancient handwork disciplines with what is most contemporary. My next solo exhibition will be with Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago.

What's next for threads and textile art is an evolving story! The field is incredibly full of potential with the contributions of diverse voices and intersections cross-culturally -- from artist makers, from art historians, from art and cultural theorists. I particularly welcome the multi-generational contributions and international exchanges between artists and writers, and the impact to the field of art history of current and upcoming major fiber exhibitions (Anni Albers and Magdalena Abakanowicz at Tate Modern, Lenore Tawney at Kohler, Triennials of Fiber Art in Hangzhou, China, among many others).