

Excavating the Surface:

An exhibition of Textiles by Pauline Verbeek-Cowart and Susan Lordi Marker

Amelia Ishmael

RHYTHEM: A Symphony in Cloth, Pauline Verbeek-Cowart and Susan Lordi Marker's first collaborative exhibition, hopes to guide viewers through a cornucopia of exploratory textiles rich in weavings and surface designs. Driven with the impetus and inspiration of nature's mysteries, both artists incorporate aspects of organic patterning into their works. Experimental and controlled, immense and intimate, Verbeek-Cowart and Lordi Marker present a coordination of pattern that seems to resonate with sound.

Previously exhibited textile works serve as the framework for *RHYTHEM*, which contains mostly artworks that were created specifically for this exhibition. Branching out from the traditional display methods, the works installed required high ceilings and room to breathe. Verbeek-Cowart explains, "Creating works for this exhibition has prompted me to consider placing a piece in space; it will be fairly large and encompasses many ideas that are all converging in one piece."

Although the works in this exhibition span up to eight feet in height and width, neither artist views the work as installations. The spatial relations between the body and the artwork of both artists, however, provide dynamic experiences for the viewer. "I want the whole to create impact for the viewer when they first encounter the piece," Susan Lordi Marker says. "Thus, the scale needs to be large." As their work evolved together, Verbeek-Cowart and Lordi Marker realized that they were no longer creating yardage; they wanted to exhibit their works in a non-traditional way to revisit how to let "cloth be cloth, and not force it onto a wall or simply hang it straight." Verbeek-Cowart discovered that "the idea of movement" in her work "expanded beyond the visual plane to the possibilities of having the work move away from the wall to allow for various perspectives." Her work in this exhibition is installed to allow viewers to walk completely around her weavings and experience her artworks as objects with depth instead of as two-dimensional images. "The most recent development," she says, "has been the idea of having planes intersect to evoke pattern and to engage the viewer in understanding the piece through different points of view."

Like macro photos captured by scientists, there is a moment of "what is it?" that occurs in many viewers as they look into Pauline's weavings. Her latest work, *Luna*, immediately draws to mind NASA's recent extraordinary pictures taken on Saturn's moons. Yet, the patterned

texture depicted in this weaving seems vaguely familiar ... like something ordinary. There is a dance that often occurs between her textile works as her viewers step back and forth ... toward and away. The panel draws you in until the image's resolution slowly breaks up into intercrossing lines. Of this vantage point she says, "As a weaving is constructed of intersecting horizontal and vertical threads, an image is not on the surface but in the structure."

Verbeek-Cowart's process is unique among many other fiber artists. She captures her source images through manipulated photographs and digital scans. She then processes her image through the interface of her Norwegian electronic Jacquard-loom, which translates her black-and-white image into a pattern of ones and zeros. "I weave because I am attracted to the process. Weaving engages both sides of my brain and technological advances constantly redefine what is possible in this medium," she says. "The computer interface allows for the correct lifting of each thread on the loom, but the weaver still has to throw the shuttle and advance the weave." Because the enhanced level of complexity of the loom is still fed by the subtle imperfection of the artist's hand the results of this process maintain a sense of the human touch. "The result is a perfect marriage of precise technology and the nature and unpredictability of the human hand and mind."

"The most interesting aspect of this process of translation is the questions that arise." Verbeek-Cowart writes about her own work. "What is the difference between a photograph and a weaving of the same image? What is unique about woven form? What happens to an image in translation? Is the content about the literal subject or the way the image was created? If it is not about the literal subject, how is that image chosen in the first place?"

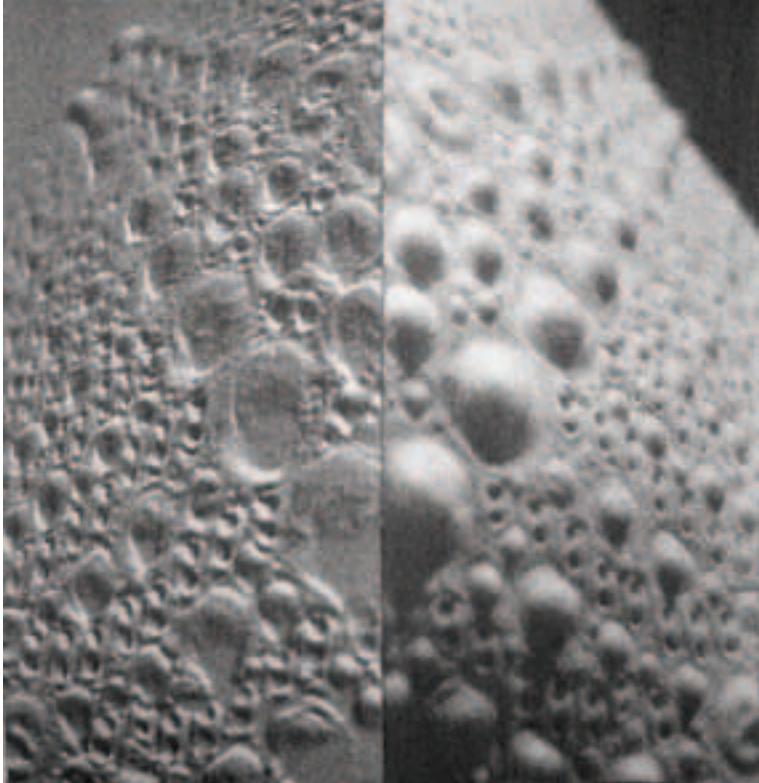
Counterbalancing Verbeek-Cowart's electronically integrated processes, Susan Lordi Marker's work consistently exhibits a search for new materials and techniques; from *Generations* to *Soulskin/Dragonfly*, her works are built completely by hand, using various chemicals and hand-stitching processes to achieve the desired effect. Repetitions in mark-making are created individually, instead of through mechanical printing methods. "It is the difference between grabbing a handful of dried grasses and forming a nest in one motion verses placing one blade of grass at a time: layering, tucking and working in each one individually to build up a nest over time." Such experimental, hands-on



Susan Lordi Marker, *Cricket* (detail), 2007, stitched organza and fiber reactive dyes.

processes are consistently exciting her interests in new materials from iron to gold leaf to polyester/linen blends. "There is a different visual result — I want the hand of the maker to be very evident and I know I can't fake it by speeding things up." Lordi Marker experiments with how chemicals react and alter her fibers causing the fabrics to suggest many other things: skin, earth, wings, paper. "I like the challenge of excavating the surface of the cloth," Lordi Marker admits. Using a technique known as *devoré*, she burns into fibers, she alters the color with a choice of dyes, she submerges cloth in a lye bath to shrink and tighten the fibers ... until the mark-making that she creates is no longer limited to a two-dimensional image that sits atop the image but has become "part of the permanent structure of the cloth." It is this quality that seems to characterize the works of both artists as they become further relatable as three dimensional objects rather than surface-based impressions.

To control the results, these processes used by Verbeek-Cowart and Lordi Marker involve time-intensive research and experimentation. "Knowing my materials and how to make full use of their potential is at the core of much of my research," Verbeek-Cowart says. "It usually takes time to get to know [my] materials. So, when I find something that works for me, I usually stick to it for a long time, and that's when the material starts suggesting new work or a different approach to using it." When choosing weft colors Verbeek-Cowart takes into account how the gallery lighting will reflect off of her strands to



Pauline Verbeek-Cowart, *Luna*, 2007, hand woven jacquard, cotton, sized Japanese silk 83" x 90". Photo courtesy the artist.



Susan Lordi Marker, *Soulskin: Sun, Lake, Dragonfly* (detail), 2000, linen blend fabric, dye, pigment gold leaf, 90" x 54". Photo courtesy Jason Harris.

emphasize horizontally stretched lengths: causing the vertical stretches of yarn in her weavings to appear less prominent. The finishing that is applied to the yarn before Verbeek-Cowart even begins working dictates how the final piece is finished — whether the final wash she traditionally uses will tear away the essential qualities of the fibers she uses or if that final wash is actually essential to bring out the qualities of the material that she desires to achieve. She understands that the nature of the material she uses controls how it is expanded, darkened, resisted and dissolved. By knowing the how her materials react she can add or remove its natural texture — even use its own idiosyncrasies to create a transparent quality in the fibers. "Often artists choose their materials based on color or texture," she says. "Much more important to me is their composition and structure, down to the molecular level."

Radiating from the work of both artists is a sense of inspiration drawn directly from observing nature. "We are passionate gardeners," Lordi Marker says, "and both [of us] believe in the benefits and rewards of restoring and preserving the natural world." Currently, Susan Lordi Marker is engaged in restoring a grass prairie, and Pauline Verbeek-Cowart is developing a living green roof. "This passionate involvement with our planting projects naturally is reflected in the work we are now making. You may see references in both of our work to organic forms, earth or water but with different scale, methods and materials between us," Verbeek-Cowart comments.

"What our work has in common is a reverence for the powers that shape our environment."

With such strong artistic connections, it is difficult to imagine that *RHYTHEM* represents the first show these artists have participated in together. They first began influencing each other 15 years ago as graduate students in University of Kansas's textile design department. As a fellow student, Verbeek-Cowart says, "I was immediately drawn to [Susan's] work ... the sources for her work reflected an interest and passion for many things I was attracted to ... I saw color choices and a sense of space and placement that related so strongly to my decision making that I knew instantly that we would become close friends." Often they had spoken about their interest in showing together, but it was not until *RHYTHEM* that this idea came into implementation.

"I spend a lot of time outdoors," Lordi Marker says. "These pieces reflect my fascination with the thousands of elements that surround me when I am immersed in that natural environment. Natural happenings inspire rhythmic patterning. For example, ethereal ripples on the pond surface, pieces of dried grass neatly woven and tucked in circles to form a nest, insect eaten paths on a tree trunk, passages and tracks in the mud (which I call mud-mapping) or perfectly ordered seed heads beginning to unfold and release themselves. I am fascinated by how these naturally occurring patterns gradually emerge, grow and change according to plan,

season after season. I enjoy observing these repetitions; and so, back in the studio, I am inspired to impose my own ordering of marks on cloth." This poetic translation of rhythm, offered in both artists' works, escapes from the rigid patterning found in mechanical quilting and surface design. Inspired by the mysteries of nature itself, organic repetitions in their works change: dynamically their paths detour, and quietly particular aspects in the textiles fade and emerge in unexpected manners. "In nature, there is an awareness of thousands of elements being coded — they fit together — and it is this orchestration that fascinates me."

Working with the theme of rhythm in mind inspired both artists to explore how the allocation of elements moving within a piece suggest an active or quiet section. Verbeek-Cowart said that as their concept for the exhibition progressed she became "more aware of the sounds or music that could be associated with the representation of marks and the directional quality." She began asking herself how the rhythm interacts to create different impacts: "Do you read it in a soft and gentle way or does it hit you in a big bang?"

During their routine meetings Verbeek-Cowart and Lordi Marker realized that the terms they had begun using to describe the visual elements in their work were often associated to musical terms. "We decided to create a symphony in cloth," says Lordi Marker. •