

Imagine Spider-Woman With a Crochet Hook

In “My Neighbor’s Garden,” an installation at Madison Square Park, Sheila Pepe uses the humble art of crochet to shape space and build community.



By Hilarie M. Sheets

June 22, 2023

“My favorite thing is crocheting 20 feet in the air,” the artist Sheila Pepe said at her studio in the Brooklyn Army Terminal. There across the floor last month she was laying out coils of vibrantly colored shoelaces, paracord, rope and garden hose, more than 15,000 yards’ worth, to be strung and spun into her first outdoor installation, opening on June 26 in Manhattan’s Madison Square Park.

“Up high, in my overalls and my crochet hook in hand, on top of a drivable scissor lift, it’s the funniest gender joke in the world for me,” said the 63-year-old artist, who identifies as lesbian. “Now you’re Grandma! Now you’re Uncle Joe!”

For more than two decades, Pepe has used the craft of crochet, which she learned as a child from her mother, as a way to “draw” in three dimensions and infiltrate architecture. Her handmade, unruly webs, which she attaches to museum walls and ceilings in large-scale ephemeral installations, soar and sag — challenging long-held ideas about monumentality in sculpture.

Using crochet in place of steel, Pepe has invited reconsideration of a humble craft done by generations of women and the painstaking labor that went into it. “I couldn’t grow up where I did,” she said, without recognizing the invisibility of unsung work by her own family, which immigrated from Italy in the early 20th century. Her grandfather ran a shoe repair shop in Brooklyn, and her parents owned a deli in Morristown, N.J.

Now, she is bringing her cheerfully subversive form of women’s work to a public park with her exhibition “My Neighbor’s Garden.”



In her happy place. Pepe at the site of her exhibition “My Neighbor’s Garden,” in Madison Square Park. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

At the northern end of Madison Square Park, Pepe has suspended strips of crocheted material, measuring as long as 95 feet, from the tops of eight existing lampposts and eight 20-foot-tall telephone poles newly planted around the lawn and walkways. She has built these festive gateways and canopies in a ravishing palette of pinks, oranges, reds and purples. Around each pole, vining flowers and vegetable plants are climbing toward the sun on cords strung from the pole tops, and are ultimately expected to entwine with Pepe's garlands of crochet fiber.

"I do have this fantasy that the plants overtake the crochet, that it just goes haywire," said Pepe, who drew inspiration from the gardens — some lush, some funky — sprouting from front yards, community plots and concrete slabs in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where she lives with her wife, the painter Carrie Moyer.

The sheer volume of material needed to make an impact outdoors required Pepe, who typically does all her own crocheting, to scale up her studio practice. "I never wanted an art factory," said Pepe, who instead has recruited and gathered small, lively groups of friends and strangers alike to crochet together to help produce the installation.



Pepe drew inspiration from the gardens — some lush, some funky — in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where she lives. Amir Hamja/The New York Times







Amir Hamja/The New York Times



"I do have this fantasy," Pepe said, "that the plants overtake the crochet, that it just goes haywire." Amir Hamja/The New York Times

"There is something about a crocheting circle, where stitches are shared," Pepe said — along with "information that might be useful."

This practice taps into the long history of women convening, under cover of creating craft, to talk about the issues of the day, said Brooke Kamin Rapaport, artistic director and chief curator at the Madison Square Park Conservancy. "These sewing circles and knitting clubs and quilting bees were forums to talk about women's rights, to propel the abolition of slavery, to create garments and blankets sold to provide income," Rapaport said. "That inspires Sheila."

Lauren Filipink, a high school history teacher at the Brooklyn Latin School, had never heard of Pepe when she responded to an Instagram post by Madison Square Park looking for crocheters of any gender or ability. She was one of 23 women ranging in age from their 20s to their 40s who showed up at the artist's studio across several Saturdays to crochet long chains of Day-Glo-colored shoelaces with oversize hooks. (Each was paid \$50 a day.)

"There was something sort of magical that happened as we were chatting away as we worked," Filipink said. Pepe gave basic parameters on the crochet stitch and length she wanted, and in the course of the afternoon a reporter witnessed, any initial reserve between participants quickly fell away. The communal freewheeling conversation barreled through topics from most embarrassing email addresses to disco naps.



“There was something sort of magical that happened as we were chatting away as we worked,” said Lauren Filipink, seated second from right, a high school history teacher and crocheter who helped with the project. Austin Ruffer



To help produce her installation, Pepe has convened crocheting circles, where stitches (and information) are shared. Austin Ruffer

Filipink, a prodigious crocheter who personally processed several thousand yards for the project, said she likes how it is a disruption — “taking a very indoor craft relegated to the women’s sphere and turning it outdoors.”

Pepe also enlisted the help of five friends from what she calls her “power queer group,” including the theater maker Moe Angelos. With “My Neighbor’s Garden,” Pepe is building community, Angelos said. “In a city, you have a little pea patch and the people next to you have their little pea patch and you talk across the fence,” she added. “Community is a very threadbare word right now, but the connection is real.”

Growing up within the confines of her traditional family, Pepe described the future her mother envisioned for her as one of limited options: bank teller, nurse, teacher, nun. Instead, Pepe opted for art, completing a degree in ceramics in 1983 at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. There, she also realized she was a lesbian. After graduation, she rejected the idea of a career in the art world — living for much of the next decade in a community of separatist feminists and working at a lesbian-run restaurant in Alston and later on a farm in western Massachusetts.



“People have different reactions, always visceral” to Pepe’s work, a curator explained. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

“I learned that being a separatist, like being in the Catholic Church, was way too dogmatic for me,” said Pepe, who eventually found her way back to art making, working first at the Smith College Museum of Art, and then getting her M.F.A., in 1995, at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts in Boston.

Initially, crochet was just part of her grab bag of media, which included ceramics, carved wood and found objects melded in sculptures that Pepe began exhibiting in the late 1990s. (She continues to make eclectic tabletop sculptures in her studio today.)

She mounted her first large-scale crocheted installation in 2001 at Grinnell College in Iowa, combining industrial-size rubber bands with men’s shoelaces, tied end to end, in homage to her grandfather’s shoemaking trade. “Then it just grew and grew,” said Pepe, who does not have gallery representation, accepting commissions directly from the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Des Moines Art Center, among other institutions.

In 2017, the curator Gilbert Vicario organized her midcareer survey at the Phoenix Art Museum, which he titled “Sheila Pepe: Hot Mess Formalism” — a reference to the simultaneous beauty and chaos of her installations. “When you first walk in, your eye goes all over the place,” said Vicario, who is now chief curator at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. “People have different reactions, always visceral.”

Earlier this week, mid-installation at Madison Square Park, Pepe was in her happy place. Up in the bucket of the scissor lift, she maneuvered through her huge cat’s cradle, cinching lines and crocheting them with larger stitched panels to create dense splashes of color among the trees.



Sheila Pepe. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

“Ninety-nine percent of the actual piece happens on site,” Pepe said, surveying the many months’ worth of chunky crocheted chains and shapes that resemble mandalas laid out on tarps over the grass. “It’s like three-dimensional chess.”

Over the course of the exhibition, which runs through Dec. 10, Pepe will convene makers informally under the big tent of “My Neighbor’s Garden” as part of the public programming.

While crochet, and craft generally, is no longer on the periphery of the art world, Pepe still finds the medium a useful way to initiate conversations on a spectrum of ideas — from marginalization to optimism, it’s all on the menu.

“Did I think I would be still doing this 20 years later? No,” she said. But when invited to the party, she brings her gifts. “It’s like my best Bundt cake.”

My Neighbor’s Garden

Through Dec. 10, Madison Square Park, 23rd Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues; madisonsquarepark.org.
A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 9 of the New York edition with the headline: Like Spider-Woman With a Crochet Hook

BROOKLYN RAIL

Sheila Pepe with Amanda Millet-Sorsa

SEPT 2023



Portrait of Sheila Pepe, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

New York

My Neighbor's Garden

Madison Square Park,

June 26 – December 10, 2023

Sheila Pepe lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and inaugurated her first major public sculpture for the exhibition *My Neighbor's Garden* at Madison Square Park, curated by Brooke Kamin Rapaport. We sat down for a conversation at ArtBuilt, which holds studios for artists at the Brooklyn Army Terminal in Sunset Park and where Pepe has had a studio for a number of years. Pepe's work

since the mid-1980s has entailed sculpture installations, tabletop and furniture-type objects, drawings, and fiber as paintings. *Sheila Pepe: Hot Mess Formalism*, curated by Gilbert Vicario for the Phoenix Art Museum in 2017–2018 was the first mid-career survey of Pepe's work, which utilizes craft traditions mixed with feminist, lesbian, queer, and twentieth-century aesthetics to challenge patriarchal forms of art making and the interior architecture her work is made and exhibited in. Originally from Morristown, NJ from a Roman Catholic Italian American immigrant community, Pepe makes work that engages parts of her personal narrative, specifically in the use of crochet, a tradition she learned from her mother in the 1960s and which remains the main medium for her ephemeral work.



Installation view: *Sheila Pepe: My Neighbor's Garden*, Madison Square Park, New York, 2023. Wooden poles, rigging hardware, nylon string, shoelaces, paracord, rubber bands, garden hose, polyester arborist rope, weed-wacker line, plant materials, dimensions variable. © Sheila Pepe. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein/Madison Square Park Conservancy.

Amanda Millet-Sorsa (Rail): Your first outdoor public commission at Madison Square Park is fabulous! What were some of the leading stages for this commission to come into light?

Pepe: The most beautiful thing about it was the experience. The timing was perfect because I was needing a big challenge to make a sculptural statement that wasn't contingent on architecture, and which I hoped would give me a kind of fulcrum to bring the work to a place that wasn't just about crocheting. My first thought was to connect to the trees, to which Brooke, the curator, and the arborists, responded that it's a conservation space. I then had to create my own structure, which pushed it further into sculpture.

It's also what the title conveys, because they are objects I might see in a neighbor's garden. Those domes reminded me of the little domes on some people's bird feeders to keep the squirrels out. The telephone poles are just something from my suburban childhood where they're everywhere. When you're a kid, you kind of play, putting fake or real signs on them. When we sited the posts, there was a rule that I had never encountered before, which is: you can't put a post in where there are roots. That's so cosmic! I had to sit with it for a while.



Installation view: *Sheila Pepe: My Neighbor's Garden*, Madison Square Park, New York, 2023. Wooden poles, rigging hardware, nylon string, shoelaces, paracord, rubber bands, garden hose, polyester arborist rope, weed-wacker line, plant materials, dimensions variable. © Sheila Pepe. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein/Madison Square Park Conservancy.

Rail: Why is it different from the conversations you've previously had with architecture indoors?

Pepe: It's more beautiful outdoors! Some things are alive, so you can't go everywhere. It places the artist in an interesting place, it just can't be what you want it to be. You must adapt. This is a lot of what public sculpture is, if you're willing to negotiate and have a conversation with the space. Brooke provided a lot of guidance, and she brought me into the conversation of public sculpture—asking me questions that made me clarify in new ways. That was exciting! I was learning new things along the way. I spoke with the horticulture team to bring their expertise to the beds and onto the structures where things could climb up. It was also different in that I wasn't going to make everything—for example, the poles and the metal parts. And even though it's part of my sculpture, I knew that I wouldn't be able to crochet everything alone, as I have mostly done all of these years. It's just too much material.

Rail: What was it like to mobilize people to get engaged at that level of installation?

Pepe: The plan evolved in a way that a lot of my work evolves, but it required a lot more communication, a lot more delegation, and a lot more administration. The crochet teams were first organized by Truth Murray-Cole from the MSPC curatorial team. I gave the crocheters two colors and two materials and two spools, this long measurement, and said, go for it! They do their thing. The horticulturalist came up with these beautiful bed designs based on this color scheme they all had. The plants would be climbers, and that is something I hadn't quite imagined would happen. I also gave everyone different colors of material samples, while I tested materials outside for their durability and how they would change with light exposure. It's not that I didn't want things to change, it's more to have additional information on how they might change. There would be forces that I couldn't control, nor should control, in my mind. At the very end of the installation, in the last ten days, is the part where I performed that action of drawing/building with the fiber elements, using an accumulation of years of experience of various kinds, and sensitivity to sculptural languages. It gives me incredible satisfaction to be another worker "on the floor"—or in this case, in the air.

Rail: Aside from scaling up in your work, which was new territory to engage with such a large team, did you, in this case, have sketches that you worked with?



Installation view: *Sheila Pepe: My Neighbor's Garden*, Madison Square Park, New York, 2023. Wooden poles, rigging hardware, nylon string, shoelaces, paracord, rubber bands, garden hose, polyester arborist rope, weed-wacker line, plant materials, dimensions variable. © Sheila Pepe. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein/Madison Square Park Conservancy.

Pepe: I had a few drawings, some maps, but not really. I don't want to make the drawing before it happens. Then it would just be copying something and I don't want to do that—it's really in the moment. It's having to negotiate spaces that I can't know completely. There was the longest 4-inch band, 35–40 foot crochet material that most of the team made, and I knew there were a lot of those to be used, as well as a few 60–90 foot-long stretches. The two long ones were the first that went in the longest path, because I needed to know what space the poll placement had made. I just needed to feel the flex in my hands, to have some sense of what they could withstand and load them up with other materials and see how well they did through a course of a couple of days.

Rail: In your sculpture, I was taken by how you mentioned that you have an improvisational approach to crocheting. You likened it to jazz, to salsa, to klezmer music. Could you elaborate on that approach?

Pepe: In crochet there are lots of loops on themselves accumulating, and then crocheting is particular in that it will let you know immediately if it's structurally sound or not. My only rule is it has to be structurally sound. I don't necessarily care which hole you put your crochet hook in. Now, most of the crocheters that we brought together to do this project in the park are real crocheters. For some it was fun for them to not have those rules. For others, they were sort of

like, “really?... Tell me more!” And I would indicate just this long and this wide. There’s a kind of syncopation of the movement just because of the way you hold that tension. You can go forward and backward and forward and backward and build up something. You can build up dimension.

Rail: Your work has taken this monumental scale both inside and outside. There is a conversation with interior architecture or in this case the trees in the park. How do you begin? Can you take us through your process?

Pepe: Years ago, in the beginning, I asked for a copy or jpeg of the floor plan and elevation. I would photocopy a ton of those drawings of the plan and make scribble drawings on them in regular ballpoint pen. My friend Jenn Joy likened it to choreography: I’ll go here, and then I’ll go over here, and then I’ll go back and forth. Then I’d erase, or I would just do the next one. And I would just try out means of visualizing the space. As time passed, I would get a lot of jpegs. And then in other cases, if there was a budget and time, I would do a site visit.

Rail: You’re responding to the space and the structure?

Pepe: I’m responding to the space as the white box, and whatever quirks there are, in that iteration of the white box: the ceiling or weird things on the wall or pipes or whatever it is. I try to draw attention to that and do things like wrap around a piece of ceiling so the audience can tell, you’re never going to get it out of there without cutting it out. I’m hoping for that question. I’m showing you, it’s got to be cut out, because now it’s one solid thing. In that way, I’m telling you, it’s not about the object in that way, it’s about this experience that I’ve provided, through object, and as captured vistas of drawings. A dynamic modernist drawing made out of crochet, which is in itself, you know, funny. They become mutable objects. The installations, and the ones that are in the catalogue, *Hot Mess Formalism*, are precisely ones that, afterwards, went away completely.

Rail: They’re meant to be destroyed?

Pepe: Yes, and they’re cannibalized for next pieces. So that’s why you see certain color schemes pop up again, because it’s the same materials.

Rail: You feed from the previous work, the beginnings of new work?

Pepe: I used to call it sourdough, like a starter. Food is ubiquitous and it’s a good analogy engine. Someone is making something out of chocolate and I’m making this monumental abstract drawing in space out of yarn and shoelaces and rope and just stuff you can get wherever.



Installation view: *Sheila Pepe: My Neighbor's Garden*, Madison Square Park, New York, 2023. Wooden poles, rigging hardware, nylon string, shoelaces, paracord, rubber bands, garden hose, polyester arborist rope, weed-wacker line, plant materials, dimensions variable. © Sheila Pepe. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein/Madison Square Park Conservancy.

Rail: You've also made a lot of drawings?

Pepe: The drawings are separate. I've tried different patterns of moving through the space, in those drawings. After the first five years, those kinds of drawings go away, because I can just do it in my head as I've done it so many times. Now I trust that when I get there, I walk around, and then drive around in a scissor lift, putting dots on the walls to mark and to connect them.

Just connecting all the dots (as hardware), and then another one crocheted, and then tying pieces together and crocheting pieces together. And then sculpting the space and the image, walking through and basically making it on site. Sometimes I'll get a form or a line, and it's too long or too volumetric. And with crocheting, you can erase, with a combination of crochet and shoelaces, you can go anywhere, and then untie a set of shoelaces and just pull. It's this grand eraser. There were some things about the mechanics of the chosen materials that made it good as a drawing material. And there's joy in that for me. I think of them as big drawings in space. I was thinking of myself as a painter who was using crochet. I wasn't thinking of it as a craft. I was adopted by the craft and fiber people, which was sweet, but-most crafts come under this other rubric/mind aimed at production, governed by designed use, not as a signifier of domestic crafts.

Rail: You grew up in a community in Morristown, New Jersey that was very much centered around labor, where your parents owned a deli and you worked in it. I've heard you mention that the handmade and your hand in the making is very crucial to your work. What is it about the handmade that is so essential?

Pepe: It's a position. The thing I made most when I was at the Museum School at Tufts (SMFA) was video, because it was a fast way to get a lot of ideas out. When I came out into the art world as an exhibiting artist, I wanted to hand-make stuff, because there was already a lot of video around. I wanted to learn what was really going on and what the conversation was, and what to speak back—because I was talking back to the values around me. That's what I think making art is—it's a conversation. It's knowing oneself and knowing one's position, vis-à-vis what's going on in the world.

To talk back directly to the other artists, those are my first audience, and then other people who are looking at art, and then just other people who might enjoy it. I'm going to keep everybody in the tent. So the labor part of it was that I could see this digital thing was going to be heavy. In the late nineties, the internet was there, email was coming, but there would be TV reports revealing the earliest self-check-out scanners at a supermarket, and signifying "this is the way of the future... don't worry, experts say none of this will ever take your job away." And I remember thinking they were so full of shit. Hand-making things keeps you closer to other people. You have to order your materials from someone and have a discussion with somebody that is across the country. You will not agree about almost anything but the stuff at hand. It takes me outside the art bubble.



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Rail: Where do you source your materials from?

Pepe: A lot in the Midwest. And there are some people down south who were selling rope on eBay, and for the smaller, handmade works, like the smaller crocheted works, there's a woman down in Louisiana that has a stash of vintage material that I love. If there's anything really great about the internet, it's that. I can start having these relationships with people who are in different places and economic situations where business is still pretty much at a rural scale, which is, you know, a big part of what I learned about living in Western Mass. I was eventually working for farmers out there and this relationship between people and their generations of doing things. When I came back to New York, I wanted to stay close in some way to the generations of Pepees before me, who worked to get me here. But who, because of issues of education, would never in a million-fucking-years understand what I was up to, and why. Until my work started to become more public, it was a mystery to them, what I was doing.

Rail: The hand-making was something they could connect with. And you could connect with them.

Pepe: Yeah. The earlier work, for instance, when I moved to primarily crocheting installations, the first one was similar to my earlier work in the "Doppelgänger" series, *Josephine* (1999). There were shadows and drawings on the wall; it was installed at the old Thread Waxing Space in Soho. It seemed to be a test of taste, I could say now. But also, and this has to do with the hand labor, more laborious, for no particular reason except for honoring the act of labor. I was very keen to know what the class implications were, because I lived in those class implications—of labor. My grandmother, my mother's mother, did incredibly beautiful, fancy lace work. It's Italian lace with cotton thread. It's a few weights up from real lace and she made decorative doilies, huge tablecloths, and my sister's clothes.

Rail: This kind of craft really tied you to what you saw in your family community. What were the class issues?

Pepe: The class and ethnicity issues for the children and grandchildren of southern Italians are always the same. If you're Italian, you're low class. There aren't many options, mostly because you're working with your hands. Those are the jobs you get, the kind of work you do when you need to survive. It's hard to get at that in art. When I'm first addressing this thing about taste, it's hard to get people on board because it looks tasteless. [Laughs] You know what I mean?

Rail: The crochet?

Pepe: Yeah, so I alter it. I'm using mid-century modernist aesthetics to resolve the overall composition as I'm having to assimilate it up. And at times, I get a little frilly or make things that look like vines. In the beginning it was all cheap yarn and then shoelaces. It had many literal meanings: my grandfather had a shoe repair shop. It's nice to be able to tell that story and it connotes some family history and leaves the associations with that in the gutter of the work.

I haven't been in the art world for five generations and I went to a small Catholic school. There are a bunch of us coming up through this organization here called Art and we're looking to see ourselves. We're looking to see ourselves as gay people. As lesbians. As women. As Italians. I was a huge fan of Arte Povera! I just thought, freaking brilliant, and I even met Michelangelo Pistoletto before he died. He's Papa, better than the Pope. I mean, I just think he was a genius artist.

Rail: Why do you think there is a tradition of this hand-making within aunts, mothers, and sisters?

Pepe: There was a time, and I can tell you, it was in my mother's time, and definitely in my grandmother's life, when they simply did not have the money to buy something extravagant looking. They had to make it. There are people who are still living that life. The hand is also something that I think persists as a value. It's everybody's hands. People working with their hands whose work is rarely honored, or even seen. Seen is the big one. Crocheting has been like that. It's your aunt, cousin, godmother, your mother or grandmother. They're not famous artists. They're just ladies.

A lot of things that artists do are things that had a real unparalleled purpose. The forms in sculpture are all historically part of architecture. That's my biggest peeve in the art world is that people don't understand how to read sculpture. Because of that we still have this very muddy conversation about art and craft, or painting and craft, or any one of the arts and craft. I think Glenn Adamson has done a lot to make that better, but I think that there's still a willingness to call a lot of craft "art." I'm sorry, it's not. There's a language to be learned, in sculpture especially, many languages, because there are so many traditions it's pulling from.

Rail: I understand your personal history has shaped a lot of the materials that you use in your work. From learning how to crochet, which is something that your mother taught you, and then using shoelaces, which as you said, ties you to your grandfather, who was a cobbler. At what point did crochet become a core part of your practice?

Pepe: What prompted the kind of focus on the crocheting, and my autobiographical tale, is this: I moved back to the New York area, from Boston, where I went to school—afterwards I lived in a lesbian community, etc. I became acquainted with the places where the Pepe side of my family lived, where they worked in mostly Brooklyn and Manhattan, and that they came through Ellis Island. Suddenly, everything felt oddly autobiographical. But most of all, because there were women artists in my generation making very similar kinds of bricolage work with junk drawer sensibility. On a grand scale, more often, all the references these artists were making were to male artists and there was a generation of women that were getting skipped over again, and it pissed me off.

I realized that feminism was being preserved, but only in this way that was about jumping over women that had come before. The nineties also felt easier for me because there was an ability to say some things about identity and multiple identities. There was a kind of expectation of multi-valence in our world as a queer, Italian, lesbian... Harvard University Art Gallery owns one of my early works in the "Doppelgänger" series made when I still lived in Cambridge, that has all this plaster and one shoelace. There were these cues in the early work, so once I moved to New York, I had these things around me.

Rail: The "Doppelgänger" series" (1994–ongoing) were your first works started in New England?

Pepe: My work got noticed by Roberta Smith in a couple of good and important group shows from that era, one at the ICA in Boston, called *Gothic*. These works are still an open-ended practice called the "Doppelgänger" series where I made, and still make, little objects, tabletop size objects, and attach them to the wall with wire or a shelf and then cast a little focused light on them with electricity. They're cobbled together by things I got either from Home Depot or RadioShack. The focal part of the work was this juxtaposition of an abstract object in the language of bricolage next to its shadow, and a quick and immediate drawing in pencil, gouache, or watercolor drawn into the shadow and negative space of that object on the wall. The conversation between representation and abstraction of the pieces was tied to each other by the phenomenon of light, and the entire operation was plugged into the socio-economic and electrical infrastructure of wherever it was. If you unplugged it, it was gone. There was always this embedded sense of simple work.

Rail: Was crochet simply something that you saw in your surroundings?

Pepe: It was one of the things I could do. But when I crocheted a little bit, I saw I could crochet a lot. I can make these little blue crocheted things that I was seeing as a kind of projection field for imageries. That was very much like the photogram drawings, these poppy pattern-y blue and white fields where you could collapse space and investigate it. I'd draw in and out of those images, the photographic images in blue, and it was really trying to arrest the image, arrest the shadow.

Rail: Was there work at that time being made with crochet?

Pepe: No.

Rail: I understand you are one of the first generations in your family from Morristown, after your cousins and siblings, to go to college and receive an education. Having gone from a place where your life was largely centered around labor, and then suddenly being immersed in working on your mind, in New England, during your experience in undergrad and graduate studies, were there some critical professors or mentors who had an effect on you and contributed to your growth?

Pepe: The beginning of the life of the mind was when I was at Albertus Magnus College and the Dominican Sisters, like Sister Joan, who taught philosophy classes, and other teachers in the liberal arts, contributed to my understanding of possibility. I got a lot by observing and listening. When I got to college, I began to know how to make an argument for and against something. We found out about the *Malleus Maleficarum* or, in English, "The Hammer of Witches." I would later learn—when I was at Mass Art, I came out as a lesbian and got politicized—that that text was written by Dominican priests! Suddenly I got it: the family, the academy, the church, the government, the whole thing—it's a system. Once you blow that open, and you begin to understand all of that and see it in parallax, then you get angry, and you start doing shit.



Installation view: *Sheila Pepe: My Neighbor's Garden*, Madison Square Park, New York, 2023. Wooden poles, rigging hardware, nylon string, shoelaces, paracord, rubber bands, garden hose, polyester arborist rope, weed-wacker line, plant materials, dimensions variable. © Sheila Pepe. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein/Madison Square Park Conservancy.

Rail: When you came out as a lesbian, and you got involved in the feminist movement, were there certain writers or pieces of writing that moved you or changed your worldview?

Pepe: There were always books around. Kitchen Table Press was a big thing and we saw Audre Lorde speak. It was amazing. It was New England, and there were all these colleges—these women were constantly coming up to lecture. I would read parts of books, then we would get together and people would read out loud to each other. It was mostly oral, going and listening to them speak, and getting a drift of what they were saying. Then eventually, I was also critical of what they were saying. Mary Daly was the person we all followed in Boston. A bunch of us were Catholics or former Catholics, and she was doing something with language we hadn't experienced before called "reversing the reversals." It was this idea that you would just listen to everything the patriarchy says, and know the opposite of that is the truth, and other tools that she would give us with language. Big women-only crowds that were getting this kind of point of view for the first time. Andrea Dworkin! Amazing, fierce, and fabulous. Sonia Johnson. Some of these women were professional feminists in a way that would not allow self-criticism. I had already by that time understood that being an artist meant knowing yourself and looking into your own identity and what we would now call the construction of your identity and the world you live in. Self-criticism was a natural part of analyzing in this way.

Rail: And how did you come to that understanding of what an artist is?

Pepe: First, Sister Thoma taught us—we read Ben Shahn’s “The Education of an Artist.” As Ben Shahn would say, part of the education of the artist: you do everything; you get a job, you filter all of life, you study, you read, you draw a lot, you take in the world and consider yourself in that world and make work. And I knew as a young person, having been shown his work, that he was political—I loved and still love his work. And he wasn’t the kind of artist that I eventually wanted to be in 1995 because I was fused with other ideas about what feminist work looked like. There was a show at the Rose Art Museum on Post-Minimalism, with Lynda Benglis, Michelle Stuart, and Nancy Graves, curated by Susan L. Stoops called *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*. It was basically the premise that Post-Minimalism was a feminist movement, which we now acknowledge that of course it was.

Rail: So how did you come to realize that these artists that you just mentioned, and others like Nancy Spero—became influential?

Pepe: I met Spero when I was working at the Smith College Museum of Art. I had already moved on to another job at the Springfield Art Museum, but I had been a curatorial intern when her work was scheduled, so I would hang out there after work while they were printing on the wall. She wrote in for me for grad school, and I interviewed her for this feminist magazine.

Rail: Why was this group of feminist artists the ones that spoke to you the most? I remember you also saying that you were looking for someone that you could find a model in? There were no Italian-American women artists at all.

Pepe: I think when you’re young, you think, who like me has done this? I think, looking where I was, I was looking for models—can I have this life? Will people pay attention to me? Have they paid attention to people like me? Earlier in my education, when I went back to grad school, I realized that you had to be able to speak in a visual and verbal language that people understood. If they didn’t quite understand it, you had to teach them how you were using the language we shared, and just emotionally I needed to think, “other women have done this.”

I met Benglis, and I thought, “Oh my God, she’s a hot chick.” [*Laughter*] And a brainiac! But they’re all straight women. Then there were gay men my age, peers, who were out there doing very well, and had grown up in the New York art world. When I was at Skowhegan, I was the oldest person there at thirty-two years. Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt came up and spoke to us, and it was 1994. It was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall. He started to tell us the story: “Oh, all those educated white boys took it over, but it was drag queens and Black people who made Stonewall happen!”

He came up to my studio and pointed out “What about this? Put this on this.” He has a sensibility that’s really queer—provisional materials and these kinds of common things that you can get in the dime or five and ten cents store, or you find on the street and mix it into something fabulous. My sensibility is similar, since for part of the work, when I first started, I bought Red Heart yarn skeins from Woolworths.

Rail: Did you call that an improvisational sensibility? Why is that a queer sensibility?

Pepe: It’s kind of improvisational, performative, provisional—I’ve got no money and I need to make something cool. In the queer community, there was often the sense of, I can do a lot with nothing, and it will be fabulous. It was also a lesbian feminist thing. Let’s have a potluck. How are we going to pay for it? Some people will use their money, some people will pay at the door, more if you can, less if you can’t. That kind of frugality—maybe it was New England frugality? Organizing to just spend time together.

Rail: You have this very rich autobiography that you’ve held with you your whole life, fought for, and discovered different things about yourself. Your family background is that you’re from a

Roman Catholic, Italian American immigrant family living in New Jersey. Why is it that your family autobiography has become such a seminal part of developing your work?

Pepe: The influences and references are so diverse and, maybe unfortunately, my generation of teachers thought it was important to bring your personal story to bear because we were told we could not as students. We were not allowed. Before us you could not say anything personal about your work. It was completely formal. Weirdly formal, with male teachers saying “a woman made that because there are circles in it.” I’ve always had this question of, “How did I get here?” How do you negotiate a cultural rift so deep with your family? There is so much about my life as an artist and lesbian that is nothing like my parents’ life and nothing they would recognize and probably approve of. I never came out to my parents. Eventually I came out to my father because he was curious.

Rail: Your personal story also includes coming out as a lesbian, and you were involved in the feminist movement. Why is that important to your work?

Pepe: I’d already made a life and become empowered as a lesbian. I even forgot that I was a lesbian, which is the nicest thing that could happen. Because you’re not worried. And I forgot I had a mustache. You just are who you are and you’re doing your thing. You’re speaking your truth, and you’re teaching and you’re laughing, and you’re listening to other people’s stories and trying to make a connection through your own experience. That’s my hope for everyone—that we could kind of forget it. Until recently, because of what’s happening in the world. Now we must all remember it. We have to be cautious again. But I’ve made a point to say it over and over over the years because there are always young people who are coming and need to hear it and see it outloud.

The market will use whatever it has to offer—whatever story I have to offer you, I could’ve marketed all my work if I had chosen to not make it ephemeral on the story that I’m telling you. One of the biggest things I wanted to say is: art is not a commodity, it’s an experience. It’s a way of making meaning. I wanted some visibility, not just as a lesbian and a feminist.

For me, the importance was that the story I’m telling you, and the things that I’m making, that either align with that story or don’t align with that story, are propositions that I want to put out in the world. That’s my bully pulpit that comes with the space I’m taking. I’m taking the space and I’m making it fun, weird, familiar, because it’s crocheting, and making it something different for whoever enters. I’m taking the space a second time by telling this story.

Contributor

~~Amanda Millet-Sorsa~~

Amanda Millet-Sorsa is an artist and contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

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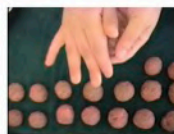
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Sheila Pepe

By Faye Hirsch

February 1, 2019 10:30am



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5 Images

Sheila Pepe (<https://www.artnews.com/t/sheila-pepe/>) is a maker, as she herself puts it, but the things she makes are frequently unmade. The ephemerality and shape-shifting propensities of her art may be one reason her thirty-year career is less well known than it should be; the other is its rootedness in **craft-based women's practices** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/craft-based-womens-practices/>). Pepe's main medium is fiber, although as the traveling survey "Sheila Pepe: Hot Mess Formalism," here at its final venue, testifies, she has also created mixed-medium sculptures, videos, and **works on paper** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/works-on-paper/>). Consisting of knotted and crocheted shoelaces, nautical rope, parachute cords, and yarn, among other industrial and natural materials, her most ambitious installations vault and dangle their way through spacious galleries, atria, and courtyards, and change according to the site. That these installations are sometimes fabricated with help from locals, who arrive to crochet them into existence, and deconstructed in similar fashion, with such collaborators unraveling them at the end of the exhibition run, provides an intriguing variable to the work of this artist, who has produced the pieces all over the world.

"Hot Mess Formalism" can be seen as more a sampling than a survey per se—not least because of the aforementioned **ephemeral** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/ephemeral/>) quality of some of her work. The five large-scale installations in the exhibition are not of that sort, but have been loaned from various collections. The earliest piece on view dates to 1983, and the latest, *91 BCE* 🕒 *Not So Good for Emperors*, was commissioned by the Phoenix Museum of Art for the show's debut in fall 2017. Displayed on big tables are dozens of Pepe's "Votive Moderns" (1994–): engaging little assemblages, each with a distinct personality, that combine art materials and industrial castoffs. Throughout the show, in works large and small, Pepe combines architectural nerve, material dexterity, and an appealing, awkward choreography.

Beginning as a thin trickle of blue cord in a stairwell, *91 BCE* rises into a corridor and two rooms on the second floor, morphing into stretches of metal chain mail and tan-colored crocheted patches. Some portions rest against walls; others proliferate into a room-blocking chaos of stuttering lines and shapes. Such works feel like drawings in space, as much sketched as constructed—an intentional effect; and a large group of gouaches (wonky geometric abstractions alluding to urban infrastructure) offers a pictorial counterpart to these three-dimensional acrobatics. In a documentary **video** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/video/>) playing at the show, Pepe discusses some of the ideas behind *91 BCE*. In the title year, as alluded to by the chain mail in the work, violent uprisings against ruling powers occurred in both Italy and China. The work demonstrates Pepe's typical tough attitude, itself a form of resistance: deeply feminist and queer in sensibility, she challenges the dominance of monumental form with patient, accretive labor.

A veneration of women's work has undergirded Pepe's structures from the start. In *Women Are Bricks: Mobile Bricks* (1983), triangular bricks mounted on ceramic rollers are arranged in a grid on a stretch of found carpet. They could almost be toys, but for the rough, industrial quality of the brick and the rigor of seriality and gridding. Here we see Pepe's origins as a ceramist and a devotee of the Post-Minimalists, particularly Eva Hesse. Pepe speaks often of her post-Vatican II Catholic childhood, and of being raised by industrious Italian American parents, who owned a restaurant in New Jersey; we see homages to these milieux in the imposing *Second Vatican Council Wrap* (2013), a quasi-figurative installation incorporating metallic thread and a fragile baldachin, and in a video showing her hands rolling meatballs and placing them in a grid. The ubiquitous shoelaces refer to her cobbler grandfather, the crocheting to her mother's craft. Still, Pepe pushes her tributes to an extreme, her obsessive energy transforming the most ordinary materials into the great "hot mess" that is their strength and appeal.



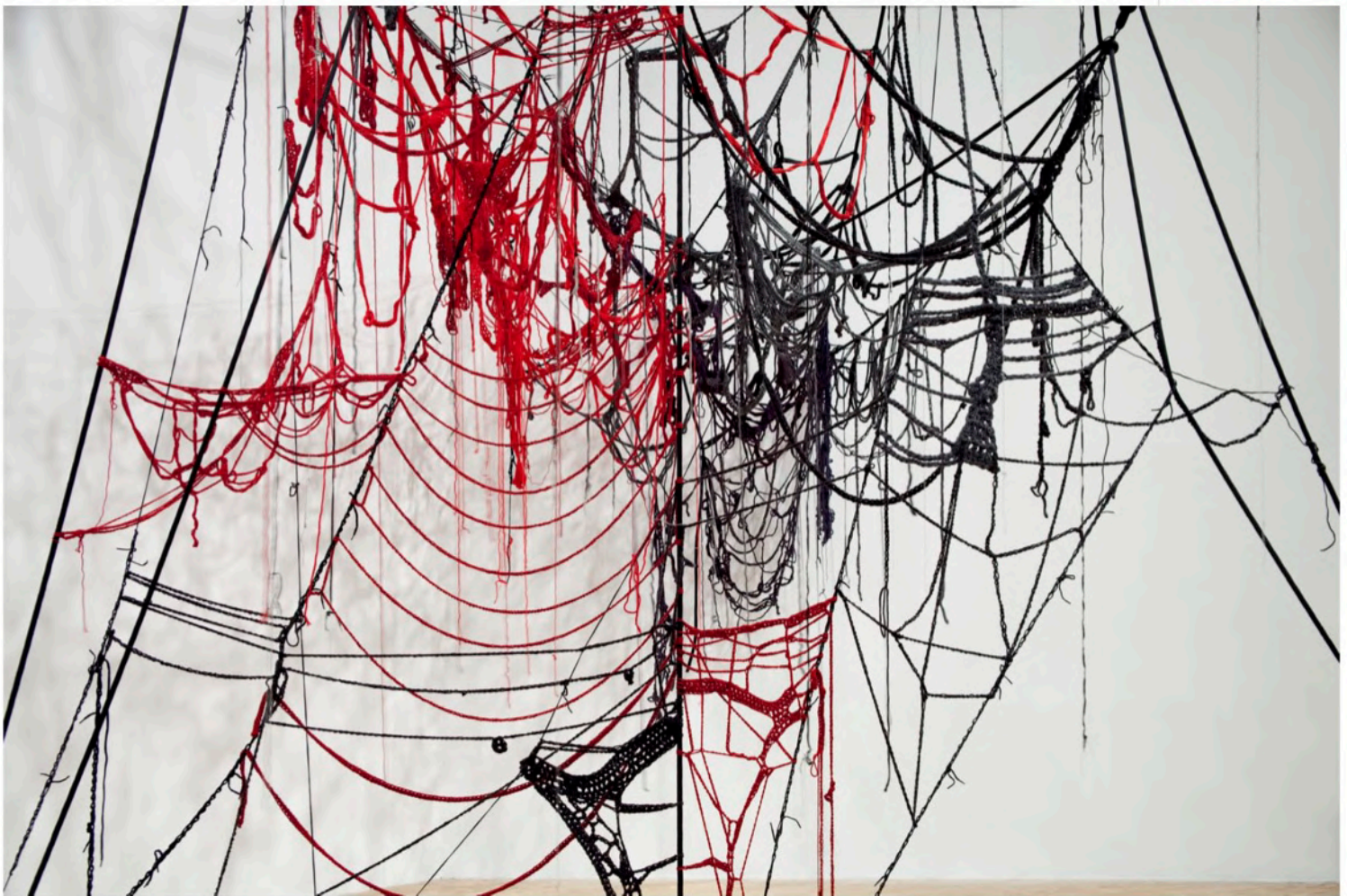
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Sheila Pepe's 'Hot Mess Formalism' Coolly And Tidily Defies Categories

October 18, 2018

By [Pamela Reynolds](#)

Sheila Pepe's "Common Sense II." (Courtesy of the artist)

This article is more than 5 years old.

Looking at Sheila Pepe's work, the complexity sneaks up on you. You're always looking at two or more categories of art-making at once.

Her sprawling crochet yarn pieces, spun from the ceiling like a spider's lacey web, are not just fibrous installations. They are sculptures in space and also drawings in space. Or take her smaller-scale objects and sculptures. They can be simultaneously ready-made and handmade. They can be fashioned from most anything at all — fabric, metal, wood, wire. In some exhibitions, Pepe lights them to cast shadows on nearby walls and draws pencil sketches into the shadows, informing and completing the work. There is layer upon layer of form, meaning and context, a web of contrasts, implications and allusions that, in the end, point out how little point there is in drawing up categories to begin with.

“I've always seen the world through having to negotiate, as a really young person, many identities and changing identities,” says Pepe. “No one is reducible to one thing.”

And certainly not Sheila Pepe nor Sheila Pepe's work.

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In “Hot Mess Formalism,” Pepe's mid-career retrospective opening Oct. 19 at the deCordova Museum, Pepe's work straddles and stretches through and around its architectural environment, creating ever-changing volumes, lines and spaces. It also straddles mediums — there is drawing, video, ready-made assemblages and handmade sculpture — while reaching beyond classifications of artistic practice, sex and class. Here, things overlap. You can simply look and enjoy what you see, mesmerized by the vast, fishing-net nature of some of her large crochet pieces. How the heck did she get up there?



Sheila Pepe's "Put Me Down Gently." (Courtesy of the artist)

Don't those blue hanging cords recall a waterfall? Or you can think about the implications of what she's done by bringing crochet, an activity largely regarded as domestic women's "craft," into the halls of fine art where the big boys play. Here, "women's work" is exalted for just one moment, making a statement, perhaps, about museums as institutions of the patriarchy, where art gets codified and historicized for the ages, and where women often get left out of the discussion. And since this work shifts constantly between the formal and conceptual, it says something, too, about art designations. Who says formal art, concerned as it is with the visual look of a piece, is "lower" and less worthy than conceptual "high art," caught up with grand ideas?

The strength of what Pepe does, says deCordova curator Sarah Montross, is "the degree to which her work calls attention to in-betweenness, whether it's in-between different materials or in-between spaces and things. The fact that it's mutable, the fact that it's flexible."

"Hot Mess Formalism" traces Pepe's art over the course of more than 30 years, from the time she lived in Boston as an art student (graduating with a BFA in ceramics from MassArt in 1983 and with an MFA from the Museum School in 1995) all the way up through today, as a successful artist living in Brooklyn with wife Carrie Moyer, a successful abstract artist in her own right. This is the fourth iteration of the exhibit, curated by Gilbert Vicario and first shown at the Phoenix Art Museum in October 2017 (followed by the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, in the spring and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska, last summer).

The exhibit includes more than 70 pieces and meanders between multiple galleries on two floors, crawling down and around walls and through stairwells. The high-impact pieces tend to be Pepe's large-scale crochet work from more recent years, (pieces like "Put Me Down, Gently" created in 2014 and "Red Hook at Bedford Terrace" created in 2008) incorporating materials with both domestic and industrial associations such as yarn, parachute cord, nautical tow line and shoelaces. But the exhibit also includes pieces like "Women are Bricks," made in 1983 when Pepe was still at MassArt, as well as a series of what Pepe calls "modern votives" that are smaller scale works combining materials like plaster, fabric, wood, leather and wire.

Pepe's early work, "Women are Bricks" sets the tone, in many ways, for the years of art practice to follow. That piece is a collection of handmade bricks set on cement rollers

sitting on a found rug. The triangular shape of the bricks recalls the outlines of a house, and the grouping and repetition of the bricks recalls a miniature Levittown-like subdivision. The floral carpet places this piece firmly in the domestic realm where somehow the decorative lives incongruously alongside industrial minimalism. In just this one piece, you find neatly summarized the lifetime themes of Pepe's work — domesticity, fiber, ceramics, craft. The title of the work alludes to women who are mobile, part of all nations but belonging to none.

If this interpretation has a slightly dark edge, rest assured that there is plenty of humor and quirkiness too. Pepe's "thing" of 1999 is an oil can topped by rubber bands, wires and springs. It exudes a certain whimsical elan. Her "Sewn Hands" of 2005 have a playful feel. Her "Second Vatican Council Wrap" of 2013, a crocheted purple vestment of the sort a pope might wear, is drolly defiant.

Much of her work is intensely autobiographical, so much so that Pepe says that she herself looks to her work for clues about who she is and what she feels.

"At a certain point I learned to read the work," says Pepe of her pieces. "I could know more things about myself. The work could bring me to new places but also allow a certain kind of reflection."



Sheila Pepe's "Red Hook." (Courtesy of the artist)



Sheila Pepe's "Second Vatican Council Wrap." (Courtesy of the artist)

Growing up in New Jersey in an Italian Catholic family in the '60s and '70s, Pepe says she realized early on that she lived outside the categories and parameters that had been set forth for her.

“I was raised in a very small environment at home,” she says. “It was very Catholic and very structured, and my days were very structured. My world was my family and my school... I grew up at a time when you got bussed to New York, so you saw some parts of the world through a school bus window that were radically different from your own. And then you went back to your cozy little 1960s and '70s community and life went on.”

Pepe says her family went to Mass every Sunday and confession every Friday night. She went to a Catholic high school and then a Catholic college before attending MassArt. It was expected that she would assimilate into the broader middle-class culture and that she would marry another Catholic. Meanwhile, she says, “I always had a hunch that something else was going on. I was shown another way as I grew older, a way out of roles that were prescribed for me but that I couldn't manage and I didn't know why.”

In college, she found an answer to one problem she had faced in high school. She knew she didn't like boys because “they were kind of boring.” She could be lesbian. Finally, she had a better understanding of where she fit in the world. In those years, watching John Waters' movies, reveling in her “otherness,” she felt increasingly liberated from the confines of her strict Catholic upbringing.

Pieces like “Women are Bricks” reflect her developing feminist perspective. After MassArt, Pepe moved into “a house full of lesbians in Allston” and worked in a diner called Beetle's Lunch, which defined itself as a “lesbian separatist” restaurant. Increasingly, she found herself angry about categories and barriers erected in the arts.

“Art didn't like Ceramics and Ceramics only liked Clay. And neither liked, or looked like me,” she recounts in the monograph that accompanies the exhibit.

After moving to western Massachusetts and taking a break from art-making, Pepe began to tire of a very different type of dogmatism she was encountering. Growing up,

it had been Catholicism. Now, it was rules constructed by lesbian separatists who were themselves critical of Catholic dogma. Their dictums called for eschewing mainstream art, and particularly art shown in patriarchal museums. But Pepe discovered she missed looking at art. And furthermore, she missed making it. She found her way back to art-making, but she also settled on a way of working that would consciously subvert the very institutions showing her work.

The title of the show, “Hot Mess Formalism,” is, according to Pepe, “an homage to my gay brethren.” Woven inextricably as the yarn into Pepe’s work, are ideas about queerness, gender and identity. The title gives a sly nod to an expression common in the black and gay communities referring to something (or someone) who is such a discombobulated wreck they are look absolutely fantastic, too.

Happily, “Hot Mess Formalism” lives up to its name.



Sheila Pepe's "Short Stack." (Courtesy of the artist)

“Hot Mess Formalism” is on view at the deCordova Museum from Oct. 19 through March 20, 2019. A curator-led tour will be held Nov. 8 at noon, Pepe will speak at a “Conversation with Sheila Pepe and Nancy Bauer on Thursday Nov. 29 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. deCordova is open Wed-Fri, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sat. and Sun., 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$14 for adults, \$12 for seniors, \$10 for students ages 13 and up and free for children 12 and under.

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ArtSeen

Sheila Pepe: *Hot Mess Formalism*

SEPT 2018

By *Anthony Hawley*



Sheila Pepe, *Common Sense II*, 2010. Crocheted baby and worsted weight yarns, rope, and community participation. Installation view, *Hand + Made: The Performative Impulse in Art & Craft*, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, Texas.

Syracuse, NY

Everson Museum of Art

February 14 – May 13, 2018

Omaha, NE

Bemis Center For Contemporary Arts

June 28 – September 15, 2018

It's good to be reminded of our own impermanence. Even better when it's done with grace and sorcery. The term "hot mess" has that effect, calling to mind the fact that we can be at once ravishingly beautiful and totally disheveled. Google's online dictionary defines the term "hot mess" as "a person or thing that is spectacularly unsuccessful or disordered, especially one that is a source of peculiar fascination." The online Urban Dictionary defines it as follows: "when one's thoughts or appearance are in a state of disarray but they maintain an undeniable attractiveness or beauty."

For decades, American artist Sheila Pepe has constructed seemingly magical maps out of unostentatious industrial materials to remind us of the fleeting nature of all our constructions be they architectural, political, philosophical, or art historical. An architect of everyday cosmologies, Pepe fashions playful arrangements of ropes, shoelaces, chainmail, knit and crocheted yarn to adapt to each new architectural space in which the work is presented. Her massive fiber-based installations are very much the best sort of "hot mess." These often read more like a cunning constellation pulled from inside the guts of the building—the colorful coordinates that we would find coughed up from inside all the hard-edged geometry of our docile structures—than they do a work of art announcing itself as such. Her vast catalogue of miniature sculptures, *Votive Moderns*, do similar work in being at once light-hearted, unassuming, thrown-together and full of pathos. Her array of drawings build configurations with a slightly different grammar. Gouache, ink, and graphite on constructed paper articulate architectural assemblages out of imaginary ducts, poles, scaffolding, bridges and more. I can't help but think that "Hot Mess Formalism" is going to guide us through to the future. Could we envision a large-scale ritual in which our long-standing models, laws, institutions get carefully disassembled, though not erased, to provide us with the opportunity to reinterpret our own materials and intentions to invent new blueprints? *Honey, we need your hot mess formalism.*

In the large fiber-based installations, it's all about the sag, the push, the pull, the pressure put on the building. These sculptures wrestle with the architectural plan of the building, or as if they're trying to ingest the architecture into the "hot mess." They are site-specific in that they respond in situ to the space—and change *from* space to space—but constant in that they perform a particular ceremony of unraveling whichever space they are in. Take a piece like *Put Me Down Gently* (2014). At the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, this enormous work hangs web-like across the humungous high-ceilinged atrium of I.M. Pei's first museum. Clusters of blues, greens, and purples extend down from the ceiling in open loops and horseshoe shapes, stretching across the air to connect ceiling and wall. Some lines are clean and taught, others frayed, fuzzy, and sagging. Loops, clumps, knots, bunches, strands mingle with larger knit and crocheted sections. Given the trajectory of the space, one's eye is drawn up and across to the open air between, rather than to the density of the materials. It's also drawn to the play between the perfectly angular I.M. Pei and this massive growth on it. Something brand new emerges from the union; something like a reincarnated version of both the architectural setting and the industrial materials Pepe uses to shape her works *Honey, we need your hot mess formalism.*

To be a "hot mess" is to be a bit of trickster—disheveled sure, but there's a sly adaptability to being a hot mess. While most people won't get to see Pepe's exhibition at all of its different locations, one of the most

exciting attributes of her large sculptures is their various lives. At the Bemis Center in Omaha, the same sculpture described above had a completely new appearance in space. Whereas at the Everson it opened up to its full expanse, breathing fully, while at the Bemis, Pepe wrapped it tightly around a huge light blue column in the center of the back gallery. Parachute chords, lace, and yarn hugged the column. All the loops and strands that carried the eye across an open atrium here kept it moving endlessly around this large blue column. Usually an architectural eyesore in the back gallery, it was transformed into some kind of wooly mammoth with all the materials strung around it. At the Everson, *Put Me Down* called to mind a more web-like apparatus—a network, a scaffolding; at the Bemis, it had the appearance of some moth-eaten, worn-out article of clothing being exuded from inside the building's depths only to affix itself to the surface like a moss. While materials remain the same from one venue to the next, they get recast in an entirely fresh way. *Honey, we need your hot mess formalism.*

While seeing this exhibition in different settings, I kept thinking about Italo Calvino's 1972 book *Invisible Cities*. Framed as an ongoing conversation between Marco Polo and Kubla Kahn, the hybrid work weaves together fifty-five prose poems, each a portrait or vignette of an imaginary city in Kahn's vast empire that Polo claims to have visited. The wildly imaginative glimpses feature cities with underground doubles, cities whose blueprints lay inside giant carpets, as well as cities whose inhabitants abandon their city to start fresh, among many others. Though entertained with Polo's tales describing the vast reaches of his kingdom, Kahn grows frustrated with his inability to capture and categorize the entirety of his empire. No static inventory makes itself known. Reading the book itself is not unlike being inside one of Calvino's fantastic cities: the reader experiences the text like some ever-shifting map, a living entity expanding, contracting, rearranging itself in the vein of a live maze.



Sheila Pepe, *Oversewn Object with Different Things Underneath*, 2015. Fabric over accumulated object armature. Collection of the artist.

By the time this piece is published, Pepe's show at the Bemis will already be undone. It will be collapsed, boxed-up, and on its way to its fourth iteration at the de Cordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts. Who knows what new world awaits, what new collaboration will emerge reminding us of the impermanence of our architectural settings. It's a rare treat to see work that so generously invites us to recalibrate the coordinates of what we believe to be our long-standing, permanent structures and ideas. These could be the secret blueprints for future places after all our cities disappear. *Honey, 2018 could use more than just a little of your hot mess formalism.*

CONTRIBUTOR

Anthony..Hawley

Anthony Hawley is a NYC-based multidisciplinary artist and writer. Recent solo projects and films have been presented by Residency Unlimited, the Salina Art Center and the Guggenheim Museum's Works & Process series. He is the author of two full-length collections of poetry and the forthcoming artist book *dear donald...* published by

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UNCATEGORIZED

Revitalization by contamination: OBJECT'hood at Lesley Heller

August 2, 2015 7:35 pm



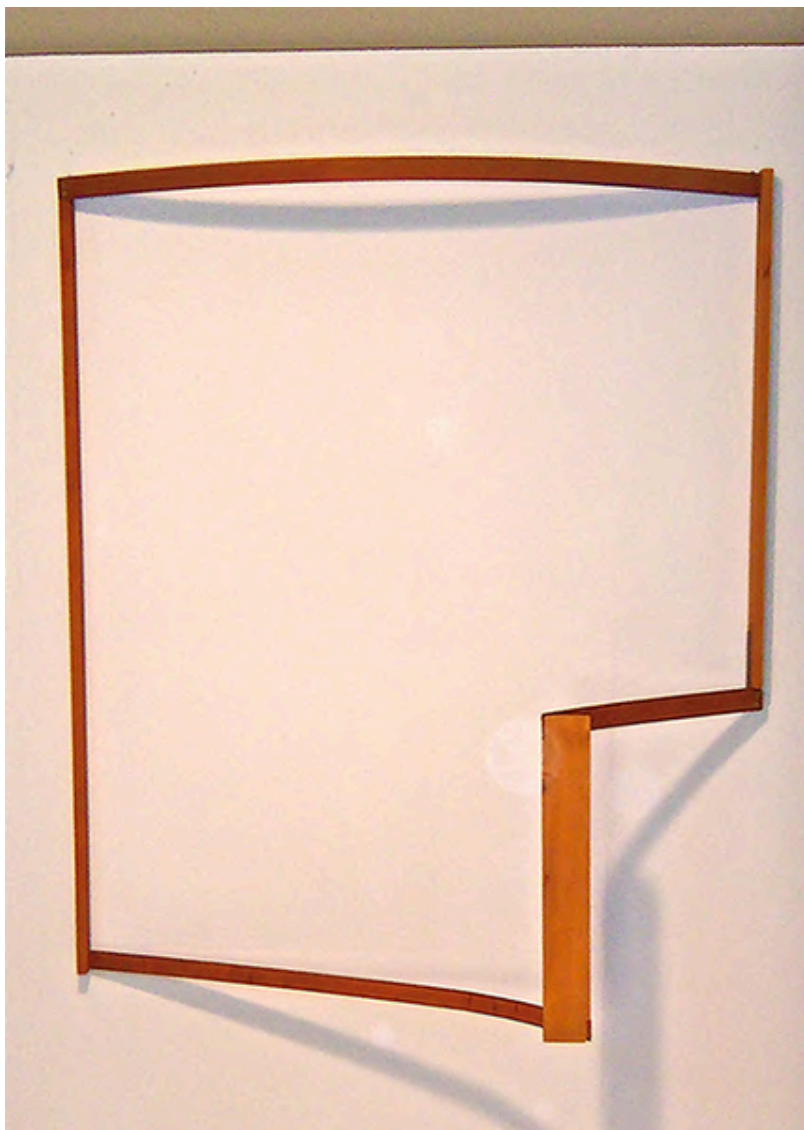
Contributed by **Jonathan Stevenson** / The premise of **OBJECT^{hood}**, a group exhibition at Lesley Heller Workspace curated by **Inna Babaeva** and **Gelah Penn**, is that sculpture, though less celebrated than painting, is enjoying a stealthy resurgence. Fueling what they impishly call this **revitalization by contamination** is the willingness of its practitioners to draw on a wide range of other artistic disciplines to generate art in three dimensions.

[Image at top: Nicole Cherubini, *The Great Disruption*, 2014, pine , earthenware, paint, glaze, 28 x 24 x 4.5 inches. Image courtesy of artist and Tracy Williams Ltd.]



Chris Joy, Untitled, 2013, oil on canvas, 13 x 24 inches.

The curators duly recognize the organic connection between painting and sculpture, and between sculpture and installation. **Christopher Joy**'s untitled little abstract piece acts as a clever meta-check on the exhibition's expansive theme, featuring chunky support and a graphic 3-D style suggestive of sculpture while clearly remaining a painting. In turn, **Harry E. Leigh**'s spare wood geometric frame, gently warped, moves into the realm of sculpture but only by a delicate **Sandbackian** increment.



Harry E. Leigh, Untitled, 2007-14, wood, 64 x 54 7/8 x 17 3/4 inches.

From that foundation, the show's breadth and depth make the curators' case for sculpture's eclectic versatility, while supplying high-voltage jolts of savvy socio-political comment. ^{hood}OBJECT^{hood} leads seductively with **Rachel Beach**'s *Leda*, a deceptively simple plywood geometric structure painted with branch-like strands of bright color. The title references Zeus's lover and the mother of Helen of Troy, Clytemnestra, and Castor & Pollux in Greek myth. By comprehensively exploiting space it draws attention equally to its surface, its interior, and something unknown beyond its diamond-shaped opening this sublime piece evokes *Leda*'s beauty and fecundity but also the risks of presuming to cavort with the gods.



Rachel Beach, *Leda*, 2014, oil on plywood, 91 x 18 x 15 inches. Image courtesy of artist and Blackston Gallery



Don Porcaro, *Sentinel #9*, 2011, concrete, stone, metal, paint, 44 x 14 x 12 inches.

Don Porcaro's *Sentinel #9*, comprising four intelligently conceived and exquisitely crafted components made from several materials, is more resolutely ominous. The base is a bell-like structure on insectile legs, supporting a concrete fuselage from which a multi-colored gooseneck extends to a red sphere with three protrusions that either point to the sky (like missiles) or extend back to the bell (like ringing handles). For all its complexity and calculated ambiguity, the piece stands as a clear and compelling post-Cold War memorandum re: threat and warning. **Peter Dudek**'s foreboding mock-brutalist cardboard sculpture of a prison-like structure titled *Who Goes There* and **Matthew Deleget**'s hauntingly reductive black plastic installation *Failed State* are fitting segues to an evolved obsession with security.



Peter Dudek, *Who Goes There*, 2014-2015, MDF, aluminum, cardboard, Masonite, plaster, 25 x 26 x 21 inches. Arguably that preoccupation has marginalized the challenge of environmental and urban decay. See, for example, **Judy Pfaff**'s acidly sardonic *Sing Like the Birds Sing* (featuring horrifically melted plastic), **Joy Curtis**'s austere and distressed *Solaris Relic*, the casual violence of **Kate Gilmore**'s installation *Come Around* and **Letha Wilson**'s *Rock Hole Punch (Kona Lava)*, and **Nicole Cherubini**'s obtusely presented *The Great Disruption*. And decay is partly a function of human obliviousness or culpability. Witness **Isidro Blasco**'s archly shambolic *Shanghai Planet* and **Don Gummer**'s blithely hopeless *Darwin* *Map #4*.



Sheila Pepe, *Shoelace Drawing*, 2015, sewn shoelaces with fabric lining, 21 x 8 inches.

Martha Clippinger's wood-and-acrylic *Antsy*, **Doreen McCarthy**'s inflated vinyl *Squirm*, **Katie Bell**'s mordant wall sculpture *Lone*, and **Daniel Wiener**'s snidely creepy *Submerged in a Polished Sideboard* seem glum intimations that any awareness of these problems is rudimentary and unserious. **Elise Siegel**'s bereft ceramic portrait bust, **Shelia Pepe**'s *Shoelace Drawing* personifying inert genitalia with a Munch-esque scream, **Elisa Lendvay**'s coldly empty *Days End*, and **Kirk Stoller**'s *Untitled (squiggle)* hinting at a straight razor suggest domesticated resignation.



Lisa Hoke, *Improbable Nostalgia*, 2005, paper cups and plastic ties, 36 x 36 x 24 inches. Image courtesy of artist and Pavel Zoubok.

More playfully, though perhaps with tacit ruefulness, **Lisa Hoke**'s circular wall sculpture *Improbable Nostalgia*, composed of concentrically arrayed interlocking Disneyland paper cups and plastic ties, suggests a spectrum of influences from Warhol to El Anatsui. The piece elegantly registers the paradoxically permanent infiltration of commercial or utilitarian ephemera into culture (as did, more elaborately, Hoke's bravura **recent solo show** at Pavel Zoubok Gallery). In a conceptually related vein are **Mike Hein**'s Plexiglas-encased piece of found foam and **Elana Herzog**'s staple-mounted textile remnants and metal scraps.

With unusual substantive oomph in several directions, OBJECThood confirms sculpture's extraordinary formal adaptability.

"**OBJECThood**," curated by Inna Babaeva and Gelah Penn, Lesley Heller Workspace, LES, New York, NY. Through August 21, 2015.

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May 21, 2015

Jenelle Porter, ed.

Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present

Exh. cat. Boston and New York: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston in association with Prestel, 2014. 256 pp.; 125 color ills.; 40 b/w ills. Cloth \$60.00 (97837913538521)

Exhibition schedule: Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, October 1, 2014–January 4, 2015; Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, January 30–April 5, 2015; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, May 8–August 2, 2015

Marin R. Sullivan

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Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present.
Installation view. Image courtesy
Institute of Contemporary Art,
Boston.

Before even reaching the five main galleries dedicated to *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (ICA), visitors encounter the tangled mass of neon-green and sea-blue crocheted strands of Sheila Pepe's "site-responsive" sculpture, *Put Me Down Gently* (2014), cascading down the atrium walls. The work extends to the elevator shaft, where more parachute cords, laces, and yarn become visible through the glass of the car as it ascends the length of the building. Though not covering every surface, the fiber envelops the space, its inherent materiality challenging the hard, clean architecture of the Diller Scofidio + Renfro-designed structure. *Put Me Down Gently* serves as a powerful opening salvo for an exhibition presenting the complex, overlooked history of fiber art

since 1960, through approximately fifty works by thirty-three artists, including Magdalena Abakanowicz, Sheila Hicks, Eva Hesse, Ernesto Neto, Lenore Tawney, Rosemarie Trockel, and Claire Zeisler.

The work in *Fiber* emerged from the tradition of textiles, utilizing fibrous materials and the processes of weaving, knotting, and knitting. *Fiber*, as the ICA's website attests, may be "the first exhibition in 40 years to examine the development of abstraction and dimensionality in fiber art from the mid-twentieth century through to the present," but it also speaks to a broader interest in this type of work evidenced by recent curatorial and scholarly projects, including Elissa Auther's *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) (click here for review); *Thread Lines*, a group exhibition curated by Joanna Kleinberg Romanow at the Drawing Center in New York (2014); and Richard Tuttle's installation *I Don't Know. The Weave of Textile Language* in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall (2014–15). Even the market has taken notice, with Sotheby's London location opening its Autumn 2014 season with *Stitched Up*, an exhibition of contemporary textiles, and fiber-based work by Alighiero Boetti, Gerhard Richter, and Trockel beating auction estimates over the past year.

Fiber makes a significant contribution to this greater discourse, and fortunately does so by being more than just a product of good timing. As Jenelle Porter, the Mannion Family Senior Curator at the ICA and organizer of *Fiber*, suggests, one of the intended goals of the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue is to present new approaches and develop alternative methodologies with which to examine the history of contemporary fiber art, and perhaps in the process, revise some of that history altogether. She writes in "The Materialists," her introductory essay to the accompanying catalogue:

Fiber seeks to revise entrenched histories by assembling significant works by artists who have been essential to transforming the material definitions of fiber. . . . By turning to the works themselves to explore process and extrapolate meaning, this exhibition aligns with current critical trends toward disconnecting medium from discussions of art or craft, gendered limitations, and hierarchical summaries. The works in *Fiber* interrogate their own logic, materiality, and medial indeterminacy, and at the same time question their historically ambivalent reception by artists, viewers, and critics. (11)

These are noble, ambitious goals, especially in regard to a medium that, like ceramics for example, is all too often marginalized within the histories of art. While it may seem ridiculous to still have to address any perceived divisions between fine art and craft or fine art and design, it remains necessary. The artists themselves were, and continue to be, profoundly aware of such issues. As Hicks succinctly remarks, “There are no contradictions or separations in my thinking when creating textiles, tapestries, socks, wall hangings, hammocks, sweaters, wigs, bags, rugs or other thread-things” (155). *Fiber* avoids simply recapitulating these debates, while exploiting the inherent status of fiber as a liminal or hybrid medium.

The exhibition is divided into five galleries, each of which is meant to examine how artists from the 1960s onward have created “thread-things” and transformed “the material definitions of fiber.” With the exception of a modest introductory room, occupied by ethereal, dramatically lit hanging works by Tawney and Kay Sekimachi, each of these spaces are loosely organized by theme: “Fiber and Color,” “Fiber and the Grid,” “Fiber and Gravity,” and “Fiber and Feminism,” with Pepe’s work in the atrium assigned “Fiber and Architecture.” These galleries, like the themes themselves, are largely organized along formal lines. More contemporary pieces are interspersed throughout, though are primarily concentrated within the “Fiber and the Grid” and “Fiber and Feminism” sections.

Work created in the 1960s and 1970s, however, dominates the exhibition as a whole. Based on the sheer amount of material included in *Fiber* from these two decades, as well as the content of both Porter’s introductory essay and her fascinating chronology of exhibitions related to the fiber art movement between 1962 and 1972, the exhibition emphasizes the pervasive use of fiber and asserts the unfortunate fact that many fiber artists have been excised from the history of vanguard art during this period. The 1960s have become the formative touchstone within contemporary art-historical narratives; and because of the overlap with the most active years of fiber art, such an emphasis is not surprising. What is more curious is the prominent inclusion of “sculpture” in the subtitle of the exhibition. The interrogation of the medium underlined much of the art and critical debates of the period, which involved the emergence of a dominant sculptural tendency characterized by new modes of display, an emphasis on process, and the use of nontraditional, malleable, and fibrous materials. There are clear formal connections between much of the work included in *Fiber* and sculpture that became associated with the unsatisfying labels of antiformal, process art, and Postminimalism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the section entitled “Fiber and Gravity.”

This grouping of work is conceptually and physically at the center of *Fiber*, and is by far the strongest of the exhibition. Hesse’s *Ennead* (1966), with its drooping strings extending outward from its black plastic grid; Abakanowicz’s *Yellow Abakan* (1967–68), with its soft, free form and rough, raw texture; and Hicks’s *Banisteriopsis II* (1965–66/ 2010), with its sheer mass of piled wool and linen, recall the oozing and materially unstable works of artists like Joseph Beuys, Richard Serra, and the conspicuously absent Robert Morris—who lurks like a specter throughout the catalogue and exhibition. Françoise Grossen’s *Inchworm* (1971) or Jean Stamsta’s *Orange Twist* (ca. 1970), included in the nearby “Fiber and Color” gallery, further recall the exploration of horizontality and the process of manipulating specific materials so prevalent in late 1960s sculpture.

If this is an exhibition about fiber as artistic material in the sculptural work of the 1960s and early 1970s, however, then *Fiber* misses an opportunity to think expansively about what diverse work could be included—not only the woven hanging constructions of Jagoda Buić, but Beuys’s felt, Yayoi Kusama’s sewn protuberances, Marisa Merz’s delicate nylon, Morris’s threadwaste, Robert Rauschenberg’s bed sheets, Fred Sandback’s yarn, Tuttle’s canvas, among many other examples. If, on the other hand—and as the work included in the exhibition suggests—*Fiber* is an exhibition that seeks to examine the materiality of fiber not simply as material but as a *medium*, then why even bother with the designation “sculpture,” which here becomes a limiting category? Porter justifies the inclusion by stating that the most radical moves within fiber practice in the 1960s concerned volume and space, noting Stamsta’s assertion that “fiber itself is a three-dimensional object” (13), but at a fundamental level—and the risk of veering too close to the dogma of Greenbergian medium specificity—a large majority of the work included in *Fiber*, especially those pieces in the “color” and “grids” sections, have little to do with sculpture and do not gain much by being discussed as such.

Fiber is both a material and a medium, and too often throughout *Fiber* such a distinction is muddled. As Porter notes in her introductory essay, Zeisler stated that she felt a greater affinity with artists like Hesse and Morris who escaped the category of craft, but that for her, “fiber still comes first” (11). Fiber is defined not just by its materials, but also by a set of techniques and processes, bound up with its own specific medial baggage. Porter follows Zeisler’s quote by coopting and destabilizing Donald Judd’s neither painting/nor sculpture proposition outlined in his essay “Specific Objects” (1965). She writes, “Why not consider fiber as painting *and* sculpture, drawing *and* sculpture, installation *and* painting, and most problematically art *and* craft? This ‘both/and’ condition positions fiber more firmly proximate to the explorations that have propelled art since the 1960s” (11–12; emphasis in original). Much of the work in the exhibition, regardless of its exploration of materiality or the boundaries between image and object, has very different concerns from those expressed in the work of Morris or even Hesse. In the 1960s, fiber artists—weavers, knitters, and those working out of the traditions of textiles—began to focus on the properties of their material, exploring the processes of hooking, twisting, and knotting as well as the possibilities of scale, process, display, and space in radically new ways. This is a history, however, more parallel to, than a part of, that of sculpture.

The catalogue for *Fiber* should become a key resource on the topic for years to come, not only because of its extensive color illustrations of both the work on view and other related works by included artists as well as its solidly written artist biographies (with bibliographies) by Sarah Parrish, but because its essays suggest possible new methodological avenues for assessing fiber art, not as sculpture, craft, or anything else, but on its own terms. Glenn Adamson, the recently appointed

director of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City and one of the leading scholars on the discourses of craft, focuses his theoretically driven, thoughtful, and delightfully humorous essay, "Soft Power," on the inherently material quality of fiber, namely flaccidness. The presence of humor is important here because the exhibition sometimes seems particularly intent on framing fiber art in serious, monumental terms, often at the cost of the unique, effective blend of whimsy and ridiculousness expressed by some of the included works. Adamson begins his essay with a discussion of the presence, or lack thereof, of limp penises in the history of art, which cleverly enables him to address issues of gender, sex, and critical bias, without getting mired in the well-worn debates often applied to fiber art. As in Porter's essays, Lucy Lippard's 1966 exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* figures heavily here. Adamson remarks that what the critics missed in regard to Lippard's curatorial project was the "soft dimension she had isolated in the work—the sympathy, the pathos, the humor" (148). Adamson continues: "The ongoing provocative value of fiber art from this time period—whatever the social and institutional context of its production—is entirely bound up with its flaccidity, which is to say, its unembarrassed embrace of an everyday materialism. Artists of the late 1960s working in fiber delighted in the loose, somewhat unpredictable shifts that occur when their material was massed together rather than seeking to control it" (148).

Besides the well-articulated emphasis throughout the catalogue and the exhibition on the materiality of fiber, *Fiber* also suggests an alternative history of the medium read through the lens of place and site. Toward the end of her essay, almost in passing, Porter evocatively suggests that geography has been a major contributing factor to the marginalized status of fiber art within the histories of contemporary art. Many of the artists working with fibrous materials or processes were not based in New York City, but dispersed in cities across not just the United States, but also the world. Save for perhaps the section "Fiber and Feminism," context—whether social, geographical, or political—does not play an overt role in *Fiber*, but it does provide a possible new and exciting critical apparatus in which to examine the history of fiber art, especially in regard to more global manifestations.

As Porter declares in "The Materialists," "Therefore, in its organization and presentation, *Fiber* seeks to question this ambivalence [between the critical reception of fiber arts and its continued prevalence among contemporary art] and refresh the critical apparatus. It is time to consider the work as art, releasing it from stale categories and outmoded theories" (20). The catalogue essays of *Fiber* provide possible new avenues for talking about fiber art on its own terms, and the work included in the exhibition demands further investigation. Despite some of its critical contradictions and categorical confusions, *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–present*, both exhibition and catalogue, suggests that there remains a tremendous amount of ground to cover and work to accomplish in regard to this rich, tangled topic.

Marin R. Sullivan
Independent Scholar



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MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

These threads are queer

March 6, 2014 10:49 pm



Let the threads be articulate.◆◆ Anni Albers



Guest Contributor **Clarity Haynes** / The wall text at the portal to the exhibition “Queer Threads,” currently at the Leslie-Lohman Museum in Manhattan, bluntly states, “Is this work gay? You bet.” The show, with its confluence of queer and feminist sensibilities, is the perfect subversive, fuzzy, neon, rainbow, glittery storm. Transgression has never felt so friendly.

[Image at top: Larry Krone, *Then and Now (Rainbow Order)*; 2008; yarn, wood, and hanging hardware; 44 x 39 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and Pierogi Gallery, New York]



Jai Andrew Carrillo, *Queer Martyred by a Gay Culture: A Self-Portrait as Saint Sebastian*, 2008, denim, cotton thread, needles, and lace, 36 x 26 inches. Courtesy of the Artist.

Queer people have always existed in realms between and outside of codified gender norms, behaviors and culture, and as such have a special relationship to feminism. This exhibition, like much of contemporary art, walks a path paved by the feminist art movement of the 1970s, which introduced the use of fabric and other materials historically associated with women's crafts to the realm of fine art.

Curator **John Chaich** organized the show in sections addressing themes of pride, sexuality, and public/private space, and the show occupies the museum's segmented yet open floor plan elegantly. In keeping with a philosophy of queerness, each area visually exceeds its boundaries. Artworks are perceived simultaneously; they overlap their borders; they seep from wall to floor, from one partitioned area into another. Fabric is soft and malleable and could function as a way to keep warm at night. It is, in some ways, like water, snaking around the place.

Entering the gallery, one is greeted by a pink-painted wall on the left, and straight ahead, a white wall with rainbow-colored fabric draped around it — front, back and side — which cascades into a luxuriant mound on the floor (*Accumulated Pride*, by **Liz Collins**). A neon-yellow, telescopic, macramé mobile by **Jesse Harrod** hangs from the ceiling, and just beyond it, one glimpses a glittering, king-sized quilt by **L.J. Roberts**. This rich piece, lent by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, is a heavy fabric mosaic blossoming with text, gold lamé and pink fabric triangles. It spills from the wall onto the floor in a multicolored, irreverent train of goofy, tubular tendrils.



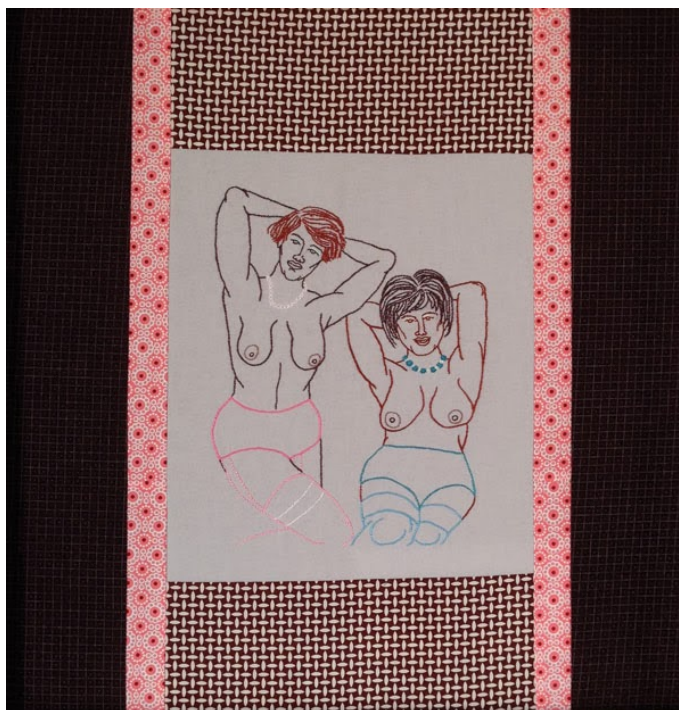
◆Nathan Vincent, *Locker Room*, 2011, Lion Brand yarn over Styrofoam and wood substructure
144 x 228 inches (variable). Courtesy of the artist

In the back of the museum, one section hosts a life-sized, entirely crocheted locker room by **Nathan Vincent**. The lockers are cute, with their yarn combination locks, but the soft urinals that line one wall evoke Duchamp and Gober with a kind of snug, art-historical hug of brotherhood. The piece reminds us that queer sensibilities and content have existed as subtexts throughout art history.



Sheila Pepe◆s larger-than-life, crocheted *Your Granny's Not Square*◆s (pictured above) is the strangest and most complex piece in the show. It is unapologetically purple (a color long beloved in lesbian feminist culture). It feels wedded to the work of sculptors Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, and Nikki de Saint Phalle; yet it belongs very much in

the 21st century. The looping, dangling web, humorously trailing shoelaces, is decidedly genderqueer in its femininity. Phallic protuberances poke and sag, just as indentations and mandala-like sections radiate. It is replete with twists and turns, contradictions and complexities; in its spatial unpredictability and inventiveness it embodies queerness in the most tangible sense of the word.



Rebecca Levi, *Two Ladies*, 2007, Cotton floss and cotton fabric, 19.75 x 19.75 x .25 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Portraiture plays an emotive role here, through picturing and honoring LGBT relationships. An embroidered, beaded portrait of a male couple with their dachshund in a tropical setting, by Argentinian artists **Chiachio & Giannone**, enchants. *Two Ladies*, by **Rebecca Levi**, presents two embroidered female figures side by side, their arms raised above their heads, their breasts lovingly realistic in their shape and honesty. The oldest work in the show is a 1955 needlepoint of two reclining nude men by Allen Porter. It looks like a double portrait, not just a figure study; one of the men is reading a book, his leg crossed unselfconsciously. This piece foreshadows the work of contemporary artist **Patricia Cronin**, who has utilized neoclassical forms to pay homage to her relationship with her wife, artist **Deborah Kass**. The use of the traditionally feminine medium of needlepoint by a male artist at that time in history demonstrates the way in which queerness often complicates gender roles, and queer lives have existed outside of prescribed norms. This quiet, poignant piece is one of the most potent in the exhibition.



Another salient characteristic of this show is the ubiquity of text as strategy. There is the bright blue towel embroidered with the red yarn words *Cum On Everybody* by Sonny Schneider; the needlepoint *Fuck Positive Women* by Allyson Mitchell and Jessica Whitebread; the L.J. Roberts quilt stitched with the words ♦the queer houses of brooklyn♦; the fabric magazine cover sporting titles like *Locker Jock* by Aaron McIntosh; and the old-fashioned, flowery quilt embroidered with phrases like ♦old maid, ♦ ♦femme, ♦ ♦dyke♦ and other queer identity markers, by Melanie Braverman. The most eye-catching text-based work is Allyson Mitchell♦s purple-hued, striped knit panel. The size and shape of a political rally sign, it was used in a 2011 Toronto Pride march to protest the organization♦s censorship of the group Queers Against Israeli Apartheid. The incisive critique *Un-Queer Nation* is woven across the panel in black capital letters, reminding us that the seeming unity of the LGBT community can often be deceptive.

The preponderance of text in the exhibition speaks to the history of text in needlepoint and embroidery, such as the samplers made by women in early American history. But it also illuminates the importance of text in the history of LGBT activism. Words hold extra weight in marginalized cultures, and they play an especially transformative role in the liberation of a people whose particular oppression has taken the form of hiding and silence.

Queer Threads involves the work of artists from all over the world, and curator John Chaich has spent two years putting it together. It packs a powerful punch, containing the complexities of love, humor, resilience, irreverent beauty, anger, sex, history and grief. Formally, it is homey and sweet ♦ like a big, bright, soft hug. But it is the force of the content that makes this exhibition transcendent.

“**Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community**,” curated by John Chaich. ♦ Leslie-Lohman Museum, Soho, New York, NY. Through March 16, 2014.

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13.7 Cosmos & Culture

OPINION CULTURE

When Art Is Queer

MARCH 13, 2014 · 3:12 PM ET

By Barbara J. King

On Tuesday I visited a small public space in New York City, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. I went there to see an exhibit called *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* and to seek an answer to a question I'd pondered ever since first hearing of the museum the week before:

Is there such a thing as gay and lesbian art?

At the museum, I wandered the exhibit, curated by artist John Chaich. *Queer Threads* is small enough for a visitor to take in each piece fully and think about the accompanying texts. Representing the works of 24 artists from around the world, the focus is on crochet, embroidery, knitting, macramé and sewing.

The threads in these crafts, the introductory panel explains, "[parallel] the potential for connectivity in our lives as same-gender-loving and gender-non-conforming peoples. Our commonalities may be as thick as a knot or as thin as a string. As individuals we are strands; as communities we are interwoven. Both can be broken or braided."

I like that sensibility, yet wondered: Doesn't it parallel the potential for connectivity in *all* our lives, regardless of sexual identities?

An answer came to me in the exhibit notes, provided in a pamphlet handed out by the museum staff, and in the artworks themselves.

"All of the featured artists are LGBTQ-identified," writes curator Chaich in the notes. "But not all of the content explicitly is — and that's perfectly queer in this context. ... Queerness embraces diversity and even discrepancy."

Sheila Pepe's "Your Granny's Not Square," made from shoelaces, yarn and hanging hardware, struck me as an excellent illustration of Chaich's point about the show sometimes veering away from an explicit focus on gayness. I learned that Pepe's grandfather had been a shoemaker and her grandmother and mother crafters. Even as Pepe honors her past, though, she subverts it: The traditional granny square becomes, in her hands, something quite novel, a beautiful, airy purple-and-green web that allows light to shoot through it.



Sheila Pepe, *Your Granny's Not Square*, 2008, Crocheted shoelaces and yarn, 84 x 144 x 48 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Chaich himself, however, *does* see explicit gayness in this work's "crevices and shadows." With art, what I love most is that there is no right (or wrong) interpretation.

Some pieces in *Queer Threads* are in-your-face sexual. The explanatory text with a piece by Sonny Schneider proclaims that the artist "uses bold humor and vibrant color to address the urgency of the gay male sex drive and the absurdity of gay pride slogans." A visitor's attention is arrested here!



Melanie Braverman, *Queer*, 1999-2000 , Antique fabric quilt patches, cotton thread, and silk ribbon, 64 x 49 in.
Collection of Hunter O'Hanian and Jeffry George

My favorite piece in the show was Melanie Braverman's *Queer*, a patch quilt crafted with cotton thread and silk ribbon. I was first drawn to the soft pink-and-white colors, seeing a thing of beauty and comfort. But then I saw the ugly words

on the quilt: fairy, poofster and even nastier epithets. I felt destabilized and soon realized that that was Braverman's intent. The text accompanying the work said:

"The harshness of the words contrasts against the softness of the fabric, disrupting the perceived comfort of the quilt just as bullying disrupts the daily social comfort of a queer person."

Yes, there is such a thing as gay and lesbian art.

In the end, for me the primary guiding principle for recognizing this art as gay — even more important than analysis of the works' meaning — turned out to be the artists' self-identification. It's the same principle at work as in art museums dedicated to gender, such as Washington, D.C.'s National Museum of Women in the Arts, or to ethnicity, such as the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, Calif.

In the Leslie-Lohman museum, I felt it in the air a bracing sense that I was a visitor to a proud queer space. It's a space meant to celebrate gay creativity and, yes, connectivity, in the way all art celebrates connectivity in our human community.

Barbara's most recent book on animals will be released in paperback in April. You can keep up with what she is thinking on Twitter: @bjkingape

sonny schneider melanie braverman sheila pepe john chaich leslie-lohman museum of gay and lesbian art



Institute of Contemporary Art's Fiber Sculptures

The new show aims to spotlight a plush and passionate world of fiber sculptures

By Greg Wayland • Published October 2, 2014 • Updated on October 2, 2014 at 8:40 pm



The new show aims to spotlight a plush and passionate world of fiber sculptures.

Welcome to the plush world of fiber sculptures, all knit, woven and crocheted from wool, rope, linen, the works.



In a new show at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, fiber hangs or cascades from the ceiling, flops on the floor and dangles down the elevator shaft.

"Ideas about form, about gravity, about scale, color is very important here," exhibit curator Jenelle Porter said.

They're calling this show "Hooked and Twisted;" I got hooked on the colors.

"And there's no such thing as colors not going together. All colors go together," fiber artist Sheila Hicks said.

Thirty-three fiber artists are displaying 50 works on and off the walls.

"There had been this great legacy of work beginning in the 1960s," Porter said.

The ICA sits by Boston Harbor, so fiber sculptor Pepe crocheted her high-flying exhibit from sea-colored yarn, working aloft by the ICA'S glassy elevator. A feminist, elevating women's work - literally!

"Getting it tall and monumental," she said, "this piece in particular, working from very small fibers and building them up."

Porter is passionate about fiber art and artists.

"A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to work with Sheila Hicks, one of the artists in this exhibition," she said.

Hicks stood me before her cascading "pillar of inquiry," a wild tangle of multi-colored yarn, thick and thin, curled and straight. I "inquired" about the colors. She answered with an inquiry.



"Look and say, well, which one's my favorite one? See how hard it gets," she said.

But it was a joy to blend, as any knitter knows.

"Get the brain, the hands and the eyes moving together -- it's a very big, explosive, emotional experience. In fact, you knitters and weavers, accustomed only to crafting things to be worn or walked on, this exhibit is for you," Hicks said.

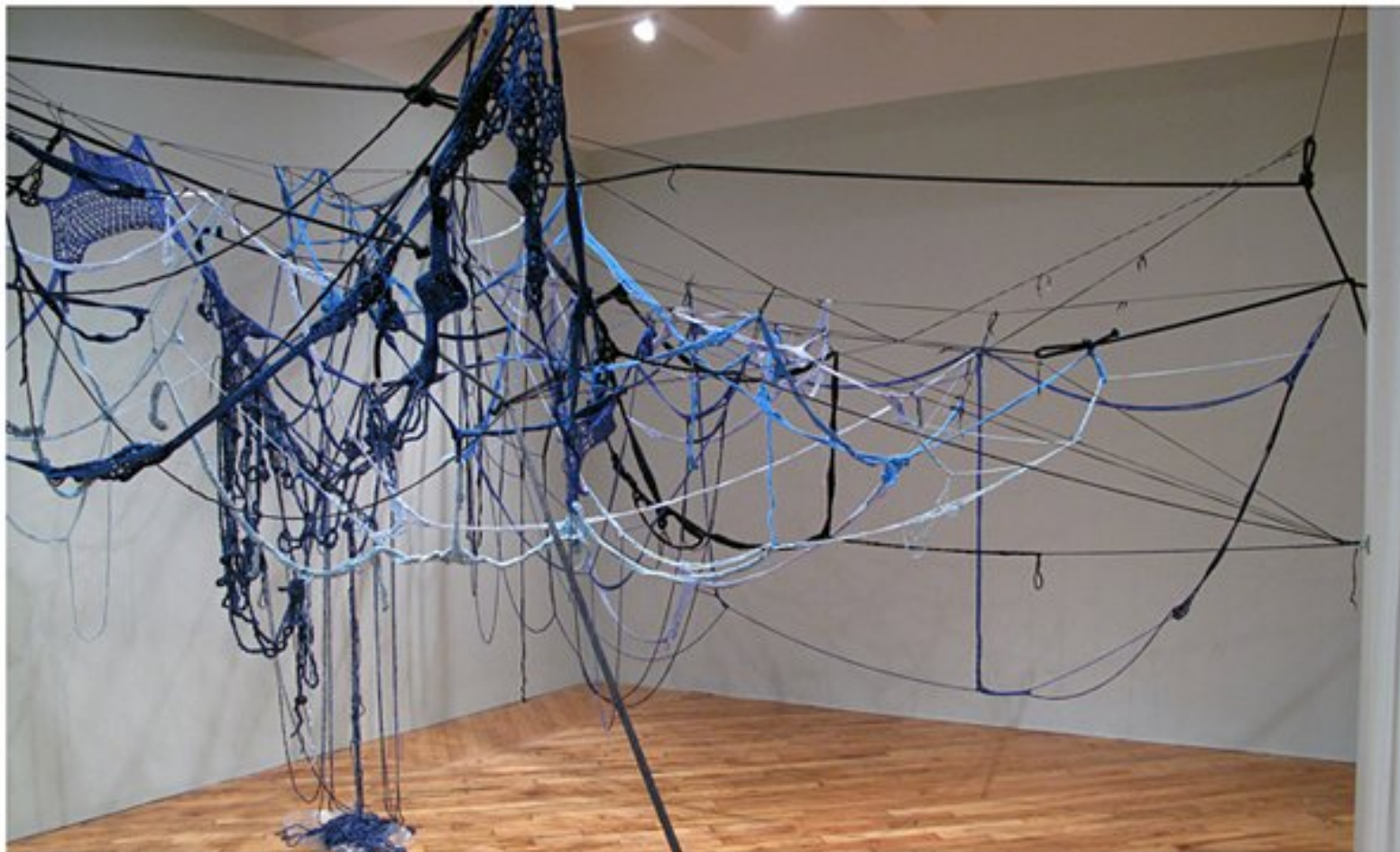
"They are going to see that handwork that they do at home but they're going to see it deployed by artists in ways where the scale is huge, where they're putting things on the floor where you shouldn't put soft, you know, pliable things," Porter said.

Because it's art and sculpture, pure and simple, soft and bright.

And until Jan. 4, you'll find it at the ICA.

arts | wednesday

Strings, attached and removed



Top: Sheila Pepe's "Common Sense in Boston" invites public additions to it.

Sheila Pepe lets public join in

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The yarn in Sheila Pepe's latest installation at Carroll and Sons is loopy and droopy, crocheted, knit, or just hanging in shades of blue, forming a three-dimensional handicraft abstract expressionist work that fills the gallery space. Pepe started with an armature of black cord and black shoelaces, and then draped and knotted her yarn pieces over, onto, and around it.

If you knit or crochet, come on down. Pepe encourages hook and needle workers to either add to the exhibit with their own handiwork, or start their own

project with Pepe's yarn and take it on home.

"Our goal is to leave just the black shoelaces and cords," said gallery owner Joseph Carroll in an interview.

So get there early, before too much of the piece has departed the gallery, because it's worth seeing in its most elaborate state. Called "Common Sense in Boston," it is soft and domestic, yet also exuberant, splashy, and occasionally creepy. It's impossible to pass through without encountering strands hanging like cobwebs. The work blends the dramatic gestures of abstract expressionism, associated at its height with a particular masculine bravado, with techniques and materials associated with women's work.

The call to knitters also seems traditionally feminine, as if Pepe's hosting a knitting bee. At a commercial gallery, art is a commodity. Objects have a weighty value that isn't merely monetary; they have been carefully crafted for nuance and beauty, and so it's rare that part of the process is to give it away, bit by bit, until it's nearly gone. Here, too, Pepe makes an improbable conflation — between a canny conceptual conceit and warmhearted community outreach.

For good measure, she has some small sculptures on view, pieces that are both gaudy and deliberately homely. "Pink Shoelace Drawing #1," made of sewn shoelaces, looks like a fleshy organ. The aglets in the shoelace drawings are impertinent, pro-

truding here and there, more defiant than fringe. "Grey thing with dangly bit on chain," made of painted fabric, metal, and wood, looks to me like a professorial slug with a cherry-red head, giving a demonstration with a large splinter of wood hanging on a chain. Ridiculous yet dignified.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at cmcq@speakeasy.net.

SHEILA PEPE: Common Sense and Other Things

At: Carroll and Sons,
450 Harrison Ave., through
Feb. 19. 617-482-2477,
www.carrollandsons.net

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Review: Sheila Pepe/He Said She Said

BY JASON FOUMBERG | APRIL 25, 2011

RECOMMENDED

In what has turned out to be domestic art space He Said She Said's last exhibition, Sheila Pepe presents the ongoing project "Common Sense." In it Pepe exhibits an especially sensitive intervention into the living space. Her work suspends looping strands of crochet and shoelace from the living room, entryway and dining room. The low-hanging web physically connects the spaces with its languid gesture. In her recent projects, the artist has involved the participants in the creation of the work. For He Said She Said, part of the looping installation links up with a collection of playful art objects created by the child of the house.

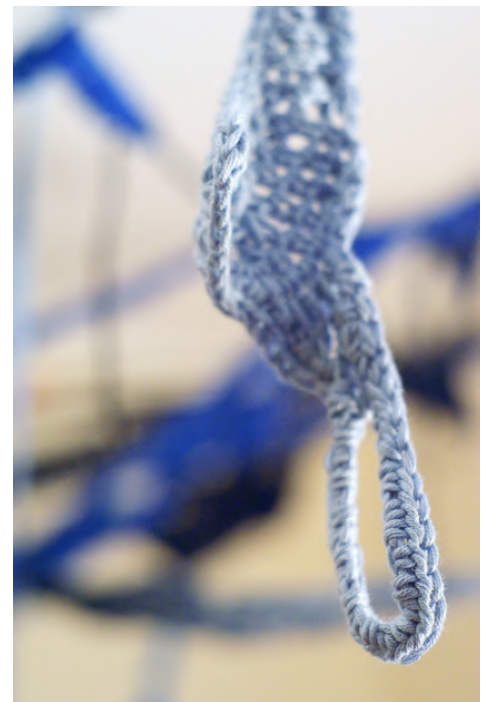


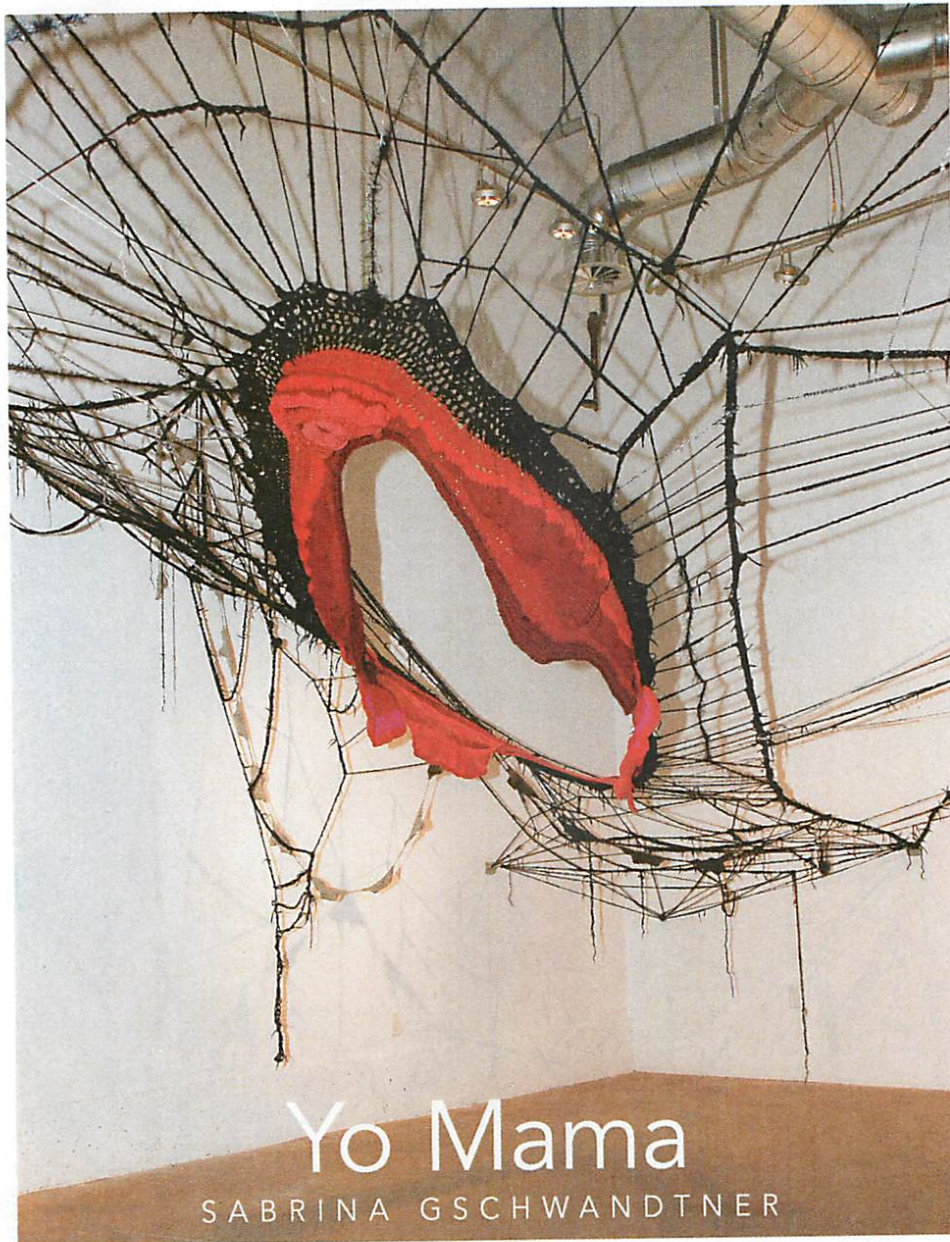
photo by Paul Germanos

Elsewhere, the shoelace and crochet intersect in connections that support, uphold and create the structure of the form. These connections are frequently tied in ways similar to shoes, where it is apparent that a single pull would release the tension and collapse the shape. As such, there is an air of contingency in the work, aside from its corporeal, weighted quality. Adding to this transient feeling, Pepe encourages participants at the end of each installation of “Common Sense” to unravel part of the work and take away the material for their own purposes.

Drawing significant inspiration from an artistic matrilineage that includes works like Faith Wilding’s crocheted environments, Sheila Pepe’s architectural intervention updates and extends their concerns. Here the notion of communal connectivity, of material poised sympathetically amongst spaces inhabited by living bodies, yet without the rising to the coercive force of solidified architecture, is posited as an ideal. What better way to celebrate (though perhaps unintentionally on the artist’s part) the life of an exhibition and conversation space that was itself temporary, inhabited and bred new forms of connectivity across disciplinary boundaries. (Dan Gunn)

Through May 14 at He Said She Said, 216 North Harvey, Oak Park. Open by appointment.

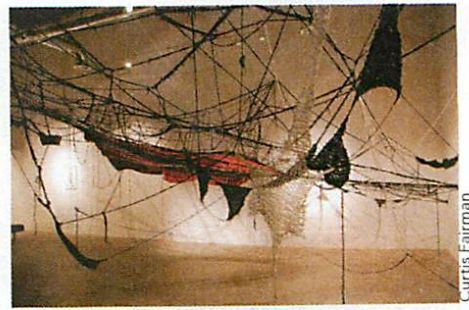
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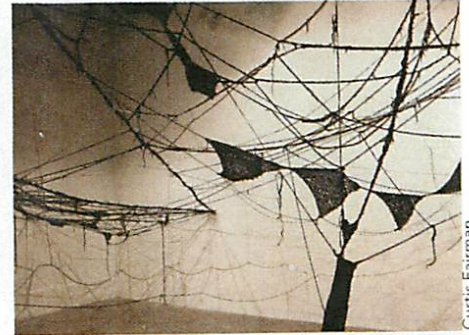
Yo Mama

SABRINA GSCHWANDTNER

Curtis Fairman



Curtis Fairman



Curtis Fairman



J. K. Lewis - Curtis Fairman

Top: "Large needle, thin silver" in foreground by knitter Martha Cedarholm. Middle: Darker triangular repeat is by artist and knitter Sara Saltzman. Bottom: Pepe with artist and knitter Venessa Chow.

When artist Sheila Pepe hung a large pink, red, and purple oval-shaped textile in the gallery at Naomi Arin Contemporary Art in Las Vegas, the form actually astonished residents of Sin City, where images of naked women are commonplace. "Is that what I think it is?" the artist was continually asked. Her reply was always the same: "Yes, it's a big vagina."

Well-known for creating handmade feminist installations, Pepe crafted her exhibition, titled *Yo Mama*, as a way of "bringing old Vegas back . . . you know, the grungy." Choosing crocheted and knitted yarn to provoke questions about eroticism, sexuality, culture, and women's history, Pepe wanted to connect her work to both feminist art and hobby craft. In a nod to Judy Chicago's iconic collaborative work *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), Pepe invited knitters across the country to participate. She invented a stitch-count code through which knitters could embed their names and the names of their mothers and grandmothers into knitted lengths. These matrilineal symbols were crocheted into the installation, and when the show closed, they were returned to the knitters.

For another exhibition, at an experimental art space test site in Austin, Texas, Pepe pursued a different kind of fiber participation. She invited people to undo her massive crocheted installation and use the yarn to knit items for their own use. And for an upcoming show at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Pepe will offer gallery-goers a similar "knitting away" experience. Though her work will be physically dismantled, her themes of community and connection will be re-created in new forms.

For more information about *Sheila Pepe*, please visit www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/sheila_pepe.php.

Studio visit: Sheila Pepe



LINES OF THE TIMES
Artist Sheila Pepe at rest
(above). *Red Hook At Bedford Terrace* (below)

TONY drops in on the artist at work.

By T.J. Carlin

You're known for your crocheted installations, and in July, you completed a major site-specific piece for the Smith College Art Museum. How did that come about?

Twenty years ago I worked there, first as a guard, then as a curatorial intern. Two years ago I was commissioned to make the work in honor of Ann Johnson, a retiring staff member who was my boss for awhile. So it was really perfect, because my big crocheted projects have this theme of celebrating work, and working there as a preparator, with that collection, shaped the art I make. The piece is called *Red Hook at Bedford Terrace*—a conjunction of my address and the museum's.



What's going on in your studio now?

I'm getting ready for a show at David Krut Projects in Chelsea, in mid-January. So the place is filled with all sorts of stuff that I've created over the past 30 years; I always use old work as the gene pool for the new. I'm working with [independent curator] Dean Daderko and I've asked him to really jump into my process and shake things up, which I love. I have no idea what's going to come out of it.

You've spent a lot of your career teaching, and not long ago, you

assumed an administrative post. How do you divide your time?

I'm going into my third year as the assistant chair of Fine Arts at Pratt Institute, so yeah, it's pretty wild. It seems like I work almost 24/7—either in my studio, in my office, or teaching. I'm pretty awed by the conceptual feed of ideas from my administrative role to my work as an artist. There's always been a correlation between making art and teaching, but having this third aspect in the mix has been really great.

What advice would you give to young artists entering the art scene today?

How much time do you have? [Laughs] Don't forget to get out of the city to look at your world, your work and yourself through a

different lens. And whatever you end up doing, patience and stamina will likely be more valuable to you in the end than you think. Cultivate those attributes.

What do you love most about being an artist in New York?

The rents! [Laughs].

But seriously... What do you like best about the city?

The MTA! Last weekend my girlfriend took me to the Transit Museum, and she had to wait until I got my turn to "drive" the bus they have there. I had a good 35 years on everyone else in line.

See Sheila Pepe's *Red Hook at Bedford Terrace* at smith.edu/artmuseum/exhibitions/pepe/index.htm.

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID ROSENBERG; COURTESY THE ARTIST

Warm Up and Chill Out in Queens

By Peggy Roalf Thursday, June 28, 2007

On Saturday, [P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center](#), in Queens, launches New York's longest running dance party. *Warm Up*, as the series of live music and DJ acts is known, has attracted thousands of visitors to the museum's courtyard for 11 summers running.



This year, the space has been transformed by *Liquid Sky*, an installation created by Ball-Nogues Studio of Los Angeles. Described by the architects as an "event design," six 30-foot-high tripods support tent-like shelters made of shimmering mylar petals that create a carnivalesque atmosphere. From atop the tripods, sprinklers timed to operate in synch with the music scatter cooling drops of water onto the crowd below.

In the adjacent outdoor gallery, two colossal gravity-operated tip buckets offer visitors a total drenching, accompanied by raucous sonic effects reminiscent of, say, a dragon roaring in his cave. Between the drench towers, *Droopscape*, another net of luminous mylar petals, rustles in the wind.

The highly interactive multi-sensory environment is the result of a collaboration between the architects, Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues; structural engineer Paul Endres; water feature designer Jenna Didier; and [Sheila Pepe](#), who sculpted the hammock-like seating out of cargo nets and ship anchor line. [Ball-Nogues Studio](#) was selected by MoMA/P.S. 1 as the winner of this year's Young Architects Program.

At the preview last night, Benjamin Ball pointed toward the turnbuckles and nautical line that pull the tents into their final form and said, "What was so enjoyable about developing this project was that we used very sophisticated digital media to design and test the models for *Liquid Sky*. But in the end, the way we built it is based on a simple technology that's used in rigging sailboats."

Warm Up kicks off Saturday, June 30, 3:00 - 9:00 pm and runs through September 1. Please check the [P.S.1 website](#) for details. *Photograph by Wendy Byrne.*

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

New Jersey Section, page 11



Photographs by Marko Georgiev for The New York Times

Sheila Pepe's installation "Tunnel," at the Jersey City Museum, pays homage to her family, including her uncle, who helped build the Holland Tunnel.

A Family Portrait, in Crochet and Shoelaces

By MARGO NASH

WHISTLER painted his mother in oil. Rodin did a bust of his father in bronze. Sheila Pepe, an artist from Morristown, created a family portrait in shoelaces and nautical tow line.

Her installation, "Tunnel," is symbolic. Made from 24 feet of crocheted shoelaces attached to a 13-foot tow line, it is connected by hooks to the ceiling and walls of the atrium at the Jersey City Museum, and resembles a tunnel as well as a ferry about to dock.

"This is my way of giving homage to my family," said Ms. Pepe, 46, who lives in New York City. She teaches at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence.

The shoelaces, she said, are for her grandfather Carmine Pepe, an Italian immigrant who settled in Morristown and opened a shoe repair shop there. The crochet work is for all the women in her family who crocheted. The tunnel is for her uncle, Augustine Nigro, who helped build the Holland Tunnel, and the ferry is for his wife, Eleanor, who traveled across the Hudson River by ferry to a Manhattan slipper factory until she became a mother.

"When I think of all the hard work they did, they put us all to shame," Ms. Pepe said.



"They worked without much complaint, actually with a lot of joy. They got up every morning and did their job, and the next generation lives through that legacy to do something more."

Ms. Pepe has done more with crocheting and shoelaces, often combining them with other elements to create works that have been displayed in solo exhibitions in New York; San Francisco; Turin, Italy, and elsewhere. Her work is in the collections of the Fogg Museum at Harvard, Goldman Sachs in New York and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, among others.

There was a time when Ms. Pepe did not consider crocheting worthy of inclusion in her work. "I was one of those young people who got on a bus from New Jersey and went to MOMA in awe of what was possible," she said. "I aspired to New York Modernism

and high art."

After graduating from Bayley-Ellard High School in Madison, she earned a B.A. from Albertus Magnus College in New Haven, a B.F.A. from the Massachusetts College of Art and an M.F.A. from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

"I pursued what I thought at the time were higher aims," Ms. Pepe said, yet she kept putting bits of crocheted materials in her assemblages. After a while, she said, "I realized I had to pay more attention to it."

And she did. Some of her crocheted pieces, which are combined with other structural elements, have been as large as 80 feet by 35 feet. She has also made crocheted memorials to her mother, Josephine (who taught her to crochet), and her father, Frank, who owned a deli in Morristown. His included drawings of the meatballs her mother made helping out in the deli.

Though her personal history helped inspire "Tunnel," Ms. Pepe said she also wanted to honor the new immigrants trying to establish themselves, just as her family did.

"One of the greatest things about being in New Jersey and New York is the constant arrival of people who have dreams," she said.

"Tunnel" is on view at the Jersey City Museum, at 350 Montgomery Street, through Oct. 23. Information: (201) 413-0303 or www.jerseycitymuseum.org.

Art in America

December 2004



View of the show "Two Women: Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe," 2004; at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art.

PALM BEACH

Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe at the Palm Beach ICA

Was it a coincidence that upon setting off to view the exhibition "Two Women: Carrie Moyer and Sheila Pepe" at the PBICA, which featured work by artists then unknown to me, I slipped a newly purchased, original cast recording of *Hair* (1968) into the CD player of my car? Or was it something in the air—the current political situation, war in Iraq, and the general state of society—that has made the counterculture sensibility of the late '60s ripe for nostalgia and revival?

Carrie Moyer is a painter who intermingles motifs derived from the graphics of radical political and social movements, and rock and pop posters, with hard-edge and flatly rendered or lush, organic and textured painted passages (stained and poured) rooted in the art of the '60s. Sheila Pepe is a sculptor who produces site-specific installations consisting essentially of macramé, the hand-knotted lace omnipresent in the hippie era, taken to monumental scale. Moyer and Pepe, who are in their mid-40s and live together as partners, both look back to the late '60s in their work, but they do so in highly individual ways that accord with personal experience.

Extending from floor to ceiling and from one end to the other in the museum's large ground-floor gallery was Pepe's *Gowanus* (2004). Like a number of her pre-

vious installations, it mainly consists of thousands of shoelaces knotted and crocheted together in different configurations. Black shoelaces create a giant spiderweb or net replete with large gaping holes. Great swaths of red shoelaces swiftly traverse the space, at one point coming together to form a loose, airy grid that counterpoints the more orderly geometric grill of a bright red shopping cart anchored high on the wall. The artist has explained that shoelaces hold a personal significance: her grandfather repaired shoes after he immigrated to New York from Italy, and her mother taught her to crochet when she was a child. She finds the labor-intensive nature of her enterprise appealing as a means of honoring handicraft and women's work. Except for their focus on handspun materials her installations recall the work of artists ranging from Eva Hesse to Judy Pfaff, Jessica Stockholder and Sarah Sze, and carry crochet from the domestic sphere into the realm of architecture.

New in *Gowanus* is braided tugboat towrope in a gorgeous shade of blue. The rope sweeps gracefully across the room, falling in heaps upon the floor at various points and forming wave or ripple patterns upon the ceiling at others. The ceiling formations suggest that the viewer is at the bottom of the sea looking up, an interpretation reinforced by other watery allusions, among them the use of nautical rope and the title, which refers to the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, near the artist's studio. Columns of white shoelaces intimate a

cascade or a shaft of sunlight penetrating a body of water (according to this interpretation, the shopping cart would be floating on the surface). Moving through the space, the spectator meets with constantly changing views as the piece unfolds in transparent layers.

Sharing the same gallery and infusing it with bursts of color were Moyer's paintings, which also exploit layering, transparency and textural play. Most are characterized by a sense of things hanging and dripping, byproducts of the artist's pour techniques, and provoke a kinesthetic response in the viewer similar to that experienced in relation to Pepe's three-dimensional art.

It is supremely relevant to Moyer's art that she was the daughter of nomadic hippies who raised her on communes in the Northwest. Schooled from a young age in radical politics, Moyer is today an activist, co-founder with photographer Sue Schaffner of Dyke Action Machine, a collaboration agitating for lesbian culture. Among the signs and symbols found in Moyer's paintings are those related to gay pride, Communism (a portrait of Emma Goldman, Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*) and Buddhism. Images include the raised fist of the Black Panther Party, a detail from a 1968 French student rebellion poster, the Grateful Dead's skull logo and the peace sign. Other motifs were unrecognized by this writer, for Moyer often selects obscure vignettes from radical propaganda that she finds on the Internet.

Moyer's bold graphic motifs are combined with all manner of painted marks and touches, from subtle washes and ethereal passages dusted with glitter to areas of stain in vivid colors and opaque, shiny passages so thick as to be cracking. In *Amerika* (2000), *Feverie* (2001), *Affiche #6 (Avenger)*, 2002, and other works featuring female imagery are smeared and clotted with passages of blood red, demonstrating that the artist's activist agenda involves a highly feminized world view.

While the title of the exhibition, "Two Women," seemed odd at first (would the curators, Michael Rush and Dominique

Nahas, ever have thought to call a show "Two Men?"), the fact that these artists are not only women but gay women is highly relevant to their artistic production and to the way their work is intended to be experienced and received. Like their art, the title is both a throwback and an assertion of the present.

—Roni Feinstein

Sheila Pepe: Risking Reference, Allowing Allusion

by Dinah Ryan

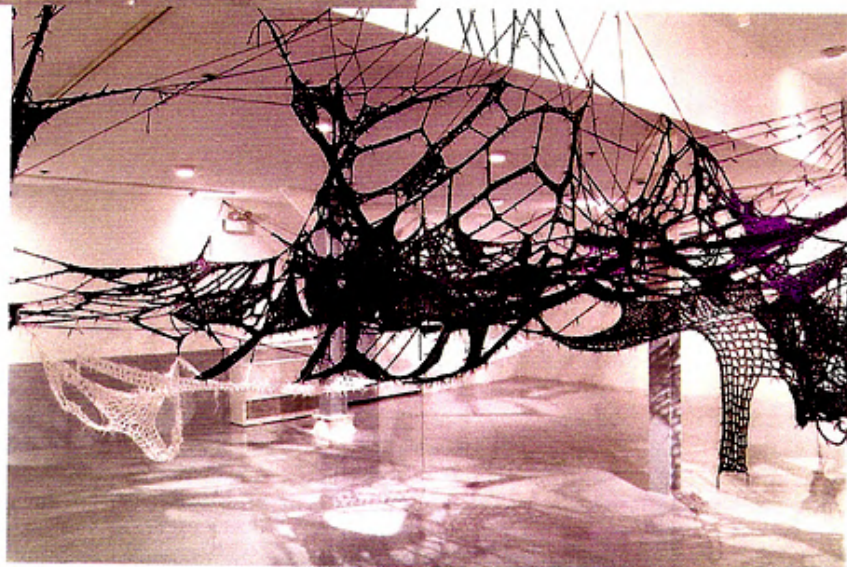


The fundamental unit of Sheila Pepe's current work is the crocheted stitch, a single loop of a single strand. The strands are the work's larger units, primarily shoelaces but also string and industrial rubber bands, which coalesce through a working method Pepe calls "improvisational crochet" into intricate systems based in this one repetitive but accumulative knotted gesture. The essential humility of the process lies not only in its domestic associations, but also in the way the work proceeds primarily from the space of the body, the lap and the length of the arm from the elbow to the tip of the fingers. Yet, within it, the "mark" of New York Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s and '60s is reiterated, gestures that accrued into the webs of a Jackson Pollock or the brawny calligraphies of a Franz Kline and characterized an incipiently masculine vocabulary that tended to subsume (at least temporarily) those female artists who also practiced it, but which was, itself, subsequently appropriated, resisted, transformed, and transcended.

Pepe's adroitness at locating her work in various reference points without resorting to open representation or specific allusion results in a kind of multivalent language and function. The crocheting, standing in for the feminist platform underlying Pepe's work, provides her with an adaptable increment that allows reverberation between abstract, non-objective, and representational wavelengths. She refers to her location in New York City, to its physical aura as well as to its function, as an iconic site of American art. Simultaneously, she explores the passing down and transformation of skills, a multi-generational legacy that she also examined by curating "My Mother is an Artist," an exhibition of the work of contemporary artists and their mothers, for the Education Alliance in 2003. And, she encourages the viewer to engage in a kind of allusive riffing.

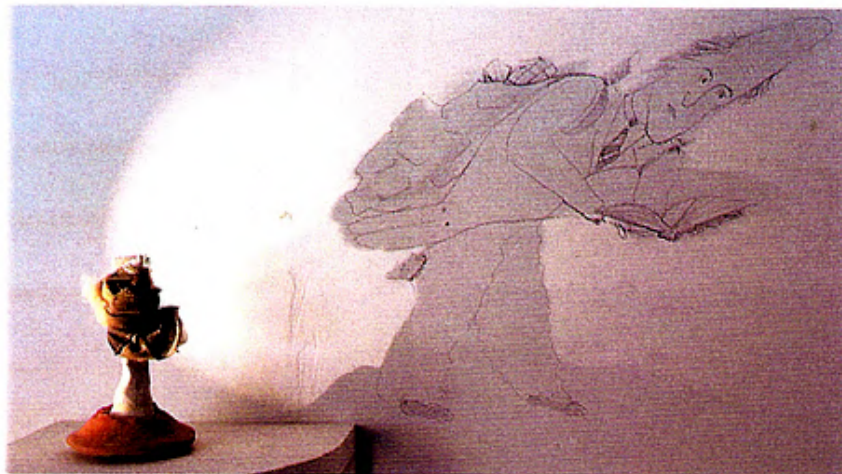
Pepe's 2003 installation *Under the F & G* illustrates this point. It began the way a great river begins, with single strands linking and spreading into a meandering system through chains of crocheted knots. Its gathering of white, black, and purple shoestrings radiated inward from tidy configurations of D-rings secured at asymmetrical points around the walls of the Hand Workshop Art Center's two galleries in Richmond, Virginia. The result was a sweeping, webbed canopy that dripped and dangled overhead, pooling in some places and trailing off in others.

Under the F & G was patterned and patternless, enlarging and unraveling, unitary yet studded with shiny aglets where the shoelaces had been tied off within the webbing. The installation bristled with these plastic tips so that it seemed beaded, thorny, or covered with spiky hairs as if the whole thing were



Under the F & G, 2003. Shoelaces. Two details of installation at the Hand Workshop Art Center.

Right: *Untitled (fuzz and books)*, from the "Doppelgänger Series," 1994. Object, light, and drawing, 17 x 15 x 10 in. Below: *From Delancey and Clinton*, 2003. Shoelaces, rubber bands, and string, 20 x 15 x 20 ft. Detail of installation at the Contemporary Arts Forum.



an epidermis. A delicate filigree materialized in places, patterns of traditional doilies or afghans, but these patterns were disrupted by dropped stitches and clumping snarls. Some areas developed three-dimensional configurations like the snares of funnel-web spiders.

Increasingly, Pepe is on the cusp of creating forms in space within the crocheted constructions, as attested by the installation *From Delancey and Clinton* (2003) at the Contemporary Arts Forum in Santa Barbara, California. The 20-foot work, occupying a cul-de-sac gallery about 15 feet deep, extended into the space in front of the gallery. Looking into the gallery, the overlaid nets of black and red shoelaces collapsed into flattened abstraction, but, walking into the space, the massed coagulations hanging in its webbing or running like pipes along certain courses became apparent, contributing to a sense of architectural reference.

One of the most interesting aspects of Pepe's work is that it is an open secret. It is a simple combination of elements: the spliced webbing tied tautly to order-

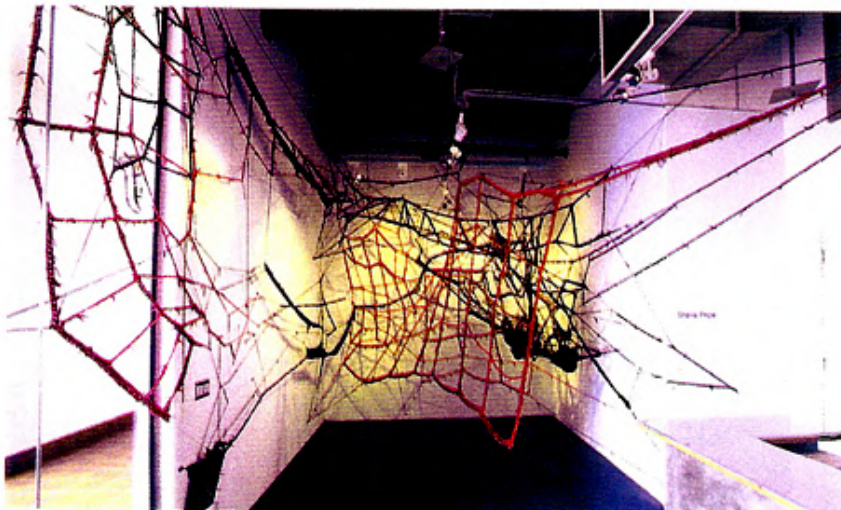
ly phalanxes of D-rings; the irregular white, black, or gray grids established by gallery walls, ceilings, and floors; the play of substance and shadow under the gallery lights. Still, something surprising happens because Pepe's work functions as protean visual metaphor.

Riding the edges of the abstract with its referential interactions, the work is by design capable of summoning subjective interpretations that uncoil from its discursive locality. Its suggestions—cobwebs, torn fishnet stockings, childhood's improvised tents and tattered security blankets, the unruly proliferations of suburban sprawl, the pipes and wires that snake through walls, the chains of lights seen from an airplane, the circus tent, the canopy of dark trees, and so on—seem to evolve endlessly. The artist invites these allusions through a self-reflexive but tacit visual subtext, which considers the family dynamics of her childhood and her development as an artist along a path that recalls and disrupts Modernist restraint and inherits the discursive corporeality of both Eva Hesse and Judy Chicago.

In part, this evocative subtext emerges from one of the work's specific influences—the elevated tracks of the subway visible from Pepe's Brooklyn studio. Collages created from abstract drawings of New York City trestles, girders, grating, fencing, tracks, and ironwork, such as *SkyHigh.1* (2003), have in their interlocking spaces a kind of Rube-Goldberg-meets-Stuart-Davis sensibility in which a rudimentary but disrupted perspective suggests the possibility of tracing absurd intersections. Pepe says that she seeks "an organic configuration that puts the industrial at risk," but she also celebrates the mechanical and is willing to venture into the kind of urban clowning that Red Grooms played with in *Ruckus Manhattan*.

Earlier works forecast Pepe's play of non-representational form and abstract reference, as well her sense of concurrent internal and external conversations. In "The Doppelgänger Series" from the mid-1990s, bright spotlights illuminated small non-objective sculptures so that the objects cast dramatic, sweeping shadows. Into these shadows, Pepe drew strange figures, recognizable but idiosyncratic like the images in dreams or delirium. By using the term "doppelgänger" to title these works, she called attention to the twinning of subject and object, form and reference, the thing and its associations in her work. Her tolerance for manifold connections in source, formation, and interpretation—particularly through an ingenious, multifarious adaptation of a single gesture—suggests that reference remains a fertile neighborhood.

Dinah Ryan, an assistant professor of English at Principia College, has been a contributing editor for *Art Papers* magazine since 1992.



TOP: DAN STOPER / BOTTOM: WAYNE MCCALL

The World's Leading Art Magazine

Flash Art

SHEILA PEPE

Morristown, New Jersey, 1959.

Lives and works in New York.

Sheila Pepe has been drawing for a while. As there is no defining term that applies to her work as a whole, its description becomes that of imprecise affinities. This set of likenesses encompasses functional and formal relationships, the social connotations of material choices, and the cumulative effect of maneuvering between disparate operations... Things build upon each other. The intelligence of one work is innately carried to the next — its significance to be extrapolated later.

(Lia Gangitano from Josephine cat., Thread Waxing Space, New York 2000)

Represented by: Susan Inglett, New York.

Josephine (detail), 1999. Installation view at Thread Waxing Space, New York. Crocheted yarn, lights, shadows and wall drawing. Dimensions variable.



Art in America

APRIL 2000

Planning for Impermanence

What does the future hold for today's art works that employ ephemeral materials or rapidly obsolescent components? Below, an overview of the ways that artists, collectors and museums are rethinking the idea of longevity.

BY MARTHA BUSKIRK

Sheila Pepe: Flexible Projection Field #2 with Fixed and Ambiguous Pictures, 1997, industrial rubber bands, dimensions variable. Collection Kenneth L. Freed, Boston. Photo Dan Soper.



New York-based Sheila Pepe. Freed has acquired two of her works, which utilize sculptural elements and wall drawings inspired by the shapes that she discovers in the shadows cast by the objects. Pepe's *Flexible Projection Field #2 with Fixed and Ambiguous Pictures* (1997) started out as an elaborate rubber-band installation at the Gramercy Art Fair. Freed felt that he had a perfect space for the work in a small closet next to the entrance to his apartment. But Pepe, who had not expected to sell the piece, didn't want to give him a work employing those particular rubber bands, which she knew wouldn't last much more than a year. A bit of research turned up some industrial rubber bands that should have a significantly longer life span. "The great thing about them is they happen to be black, and they're beautiful," says Pepe, who went back to Freed with the information and subsequently re-created the work for him. But Pepe realizes that potential impermanence might not be for everyone: "It's important for the artist to understand what they're asking people to get involved in. There are a lot of artists who didn't know when they started that they would have a long relationship with conservators." Says Freed, "Sheila tried to find the most archival kind of rubber band that she could find. But she doesn't know, and I don't know, how long it will really last, and I'm willing to live with that, I guess, up to a point."



John Roloff *Slump (Orchard)*, studio layout, 1997. Black-and-white photograph and wood, 8 x 23 x 10 feet. Courtesy of Lance Fung Gallery.



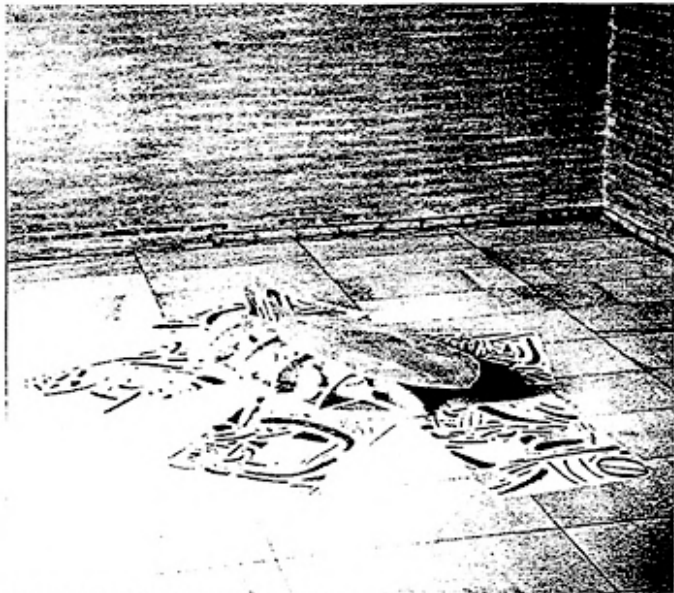
Shu-Min Lin *On first opening my eyes under the water I fall deeply in love with my other self standing at the water's edge. Until I jump into the water never to re-emerge.* 1993. Reflection hologram. Courtesy of The Alternative Museum.

John Roloff's New York debut exhibition is being held at the Lance Fung Gallery. Mr. Roloff is better known in California, where he has lived and worked for most of his forty-odd years. His work addresses environmental concerns and natural process as exemplified in this indoor exhibition. He sets up circumstances for natural processes to interact with his creations, which are usually outdoors. Here he has used black-and-white photo-murals of individual trees and orchards to overwhelm the gallery's three-dimensional actual space. The images have been subtly altered or stretched, abstracting the subjects into patterns of leaves and branches, yet the presentation brings the focus into real space. *Slump (Orchard)* covers the largest wall at an angle, tilting back as it gets higher, and also carpets a major section of the floor. We are encouraged to walk all over it and let it get wrecked. The decomposition of the work over the stay of his show is all part of the theme of decay and renewal. *Spruce* features a lone Spruce tree growing up a wall between windows and continuing onto the ceiling. There is just enough room left for a couple of other arboreal images to be displayed in unusual configurations.

The Dorsky Gallery first opened its doors in 1963, specializing in works by nineteenth- and twentieth-century masters, with an occasional contemporary show thrown in for spice. By the time that the gallery moved from Broadway to its present location on West Broadway in 1990, Daddy Dorsky was getting on in years and wasn't up to continuing the grueling schedule of monthly exhibitions with only his daughter Karen to help. So for the nineties it has been essentially a private dealership. When he passed away in 1994 brothers David and Noah along with their sister inherited the family business and set about revamping the agenda. They reopened to the public this past

November with a policy of mounting extended exhibitions organized by independent curators. This month's exhibit is co-curated by Jennifer Gross, curator of contemporary art at Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Susan Harris, who is currently working on a forthcoming project for the Whitney Museum of American Art. It is the second half of a two-part undertaking. The first, titled *Drawing the Conclusion* featured drawings juxtaposed with the better-known work of their famous creators. *Drawing the Question*, up now, examines aspects of drawing directly incorporated into complete works. The titles seem to be in reverse of the natural order, but the content makes sense of the chronology. The present display includes pieces by six artists: The immediacy of Dan Asher's squishy clay sculptures has drawing-like tendencies when viewed in terms of line and form; Sheila Pepe draws with projected light on sculptural objects; Richard Tuttle scatters drawings on paper about the floor around a three dimensional effort; Eva Hesse consolidates two- and three-dimensional elements in an arrangement of boxes; Ree Morton operates along similar lines as Hesse, combining elements of drawing and sculpture; and Sol LeWitt contributes one of his classic wall drawings.

Taiwanese artist Shu-Min Lin's first solo show in New York is at The Alternative Museum. When the viewer first enters the space, there is a small room to the left of the entrance. Go in it and a very eerie thing occurs. Holograms of people pop-up out of the tiled floor, pushing their way into reality in a decidedly unsettling fashion. Around the corner step through a curtain into a darkened installation which ventures into the time-space continuum with a poem by the artist inscribed on the wall in both English and his native tongue. More human holograms people the main area of the



Richard Tuttle *There's No Reason a Good Man Is Hard To Find, VI*, 1988. Chip board, wood, latex, enamel and tissue paper surrounded by five drawings. Charcoal, colored pencil, and pastel on paper, 21 5/8 x 57 7/8 x 21 5/8 inches. Courtesy of Dorsky Gallery

museum, projecting out of shards of glass, a fish tank with live fish, and glass plates on the walls. The work alludes to Buddhism and Asian mythology in addition to the overall weirdness of the hallucinogenic effects, however content is largely eclipsed by illusionism.

In order to fully appreciate Doris Salcedo's provocative exhibition at the New Museum it is necessary to read the accompanying text by the senior curator, Dan Cameron. The exhibition is comprised of three old, wooden, four-legged tables, which are rebuilt with components from other tables, along with a few other ominous ingredients. Upon closer inspection we notice that fine gauze has been delicately stretched across them. As objects they are lovely, and thoroughly obscure. Their sublime emotive power cries out for an explanation. Mr. Cameron's essay explains that the elements included in the make up of the work symbolize the plight of the artist's oppressed people. Ms. Salcedo succeeds in bringing attention to suffering Colombia. These heart-breaking pieces impart a lingering redolence. Understanding the intent behind the work adds additional resonance to this extremely subtle sculpture.

—Christopher Chambers

John Roloff, May 8th to June 6th, at Lance Fung Gallery, 537 Broadway (212) 334-6242.

Drawing the Question, curated by Susan Harris and Jennifer R. Gross, includes: Dan Asher, Eva Hesse, Ree Morton, Sol LeWitt, Sheila Pepe, Richard Tuttle, April 29th to June 20th, Dorsky Gallery, 379 West Broadway (212) 966-6170.

Shu-Min Lin *Sun Gazing*, March 14th through May 23rd, at The Alternative Museum, 594 Broadway.

Doris Salcedo *Unland*, March 19th to May 31st, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 583 Broadway (212) 219-1222.