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Textile trailblazers receive long-overdue recognition

A series of exhibitions highlights artists from the 1960s to today

Barbara Levittoux-Swiderska (1933-2019) with one of her groundbreaking large-scale works © Richard Saltoun Gallery London, Rome; copyright of the estate of the artist

At her Warsaw home, Maria Katarzyna Krętowska is surrounded by memories of her grandmother — the Polish artist Barbara Levittoux-Swiderska (1933-2019). Her former studio remains dotted with collages and paintings, as well as small examples of the textile pieces she started making in the 1960s — sculptural, nature-inspired and often large-scale forms that at the time were groundbreaking.

“Her works can be so minimalistic and yet have huge impact,” says Katarzyna Krętowska, recalling how the dramatic, draping netlike structures were “made loop by loop with natural sisal”, and how dying the yarns was a “tricky, tricky process”, carried out in the kitchen sink. “She was a very active artist, she had exhibitions all over the world and won some awards, but it didn’t make her famous.”

Now, however, Levittoux-Swiderska’s work is being highlighted by Richard Saltoun gallery in *Textile Pioneers,* a booth at the Brafa art fair (January 28-February 4) in Brussels, dedicated to the women artists who made bold statements with traditional tapestry techniques in the 1960s and 1970s. “They are finally getting some well-deserved visibility,” says the show’s curator Sonja Teszler.

As well as pieces by fellow Polish trailblazers Ewa Pachucka (1936-2020) and Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) — whose bold woven sculptures were the subject of last year’s Tate Modern exhibition *Every Tangle of Thread and Rope* — there are several works by Croatian artist Jagoda Buić (1930-2022). A highlight is the off-white, woven wall-hanging “White Reflections” (1970-75) — “a beautiful example of the artist’s monumental textiles inspired by the movement of the sea outside her studio in Croatia”, says Teszler.

Two of Richard Saltoun’s featured artists are now in their nineties and still working: Bologna-based Greta Schödl — whose “signature vocabulary of repetitive letters and symbols,” says Teszler, will feature in the upcoming Venice Biennale — and Colombian artist Olga de Amaral. The latter’s work can be densely woven — the wall hanging on show at Brafa is a brawny, flame-coloured interlacing of wool and horsehair — or delicate and diaphanous, hanging in strands from the ceiling or coated in gold leaf.

Levittoux-Swiderska's 'Drops' (1974), sisal and wool © Benjamin Westoby/Richard Saltoun Gallery London, Rome

'Whitewashed in Laca Azul' by Olga de Amaral (1979), wool and horsehair © Copyright the artist/Richard Saltoun Gallery

"At 91 years old, Olga has created remarkable sculptures for the past seven decades, and is still a dynamic and creative force," says Kaeli Deane, a director at Lisson Gallery, which has shown her work in its New York, Hamptons and London spaces. Her retrospective *To Weave a Rock* — shown at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and Detroit's Cranbrook Art Museum in 2021 — will be followed by a solo exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris this autumn.

"The art world is increasingly shining a light on artists working in the realm of fibre art", says Deane, highlighting the recent exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art titled *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*.

At the Turner Contemporary in Margate, textile work is a key component of *Beyond Form: Lines of Abstraction, 1950-1970 (*February 3-May 6), a group exhibition of more than 50 women artists. It spans sculptural work by US artists Sheila Hicks and Lenore Tawney (1907-2007); the subtly subversive work of Polish artists Maria Teresa Chojnacka (1931-2023) and Pachucka; and the vibrant wall hangings of Indian weaver and craft activist Nelly Sethna (1932-92).

But while the 1960s were a hotbed of textile talent, today a new generation has been making a significant mark on the medium — from queer South African artist Igshaan Adams's vast beaded tapestries (recently shown at Thomas Dane's London gallery) to Billie Zangewa's intimate stitched silk collages (at Glasgow's Tramway until Jan 28).

Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) at her loom, 1966 © Magdalena Abakanowicz Foundation Photo © Jan Michalewski

Textile art is undoubtedly trending. “It is on the same path as ceramics,” suggests Beatrix Bourdon, managing director of the Brafa art fair. “Textiles offer an incredible diversity of artistic expression, and increasingly explore themes related to social justice, feminism and identity.”

For Wells Fray-Smith, the curator of the Barbican’s upcoming exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art* (February 13-May 26), textiles are inherently “a social fabric, embedded with ideas about gender, class, race, labour, production”, she says. “In this political moment, textiles have been extraordinarily fertile.”

The wide-ranging survey will feature some 50 global, intergenerational artists. Abakanowicz, for instance, is represented by “Vêtement Noir” (1968) — “one of her massive, enveloping Abakan sculptures”, says Fray-Smith. “It looks almost like a lung: a huge, folded, living, breathing mass.” Installations by Hicks and Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña will accompany pieces by Tracey Emin, Louise Bourgeois and Jeffrey Gibson.

“Contemporary artists don’t need to defend textiles any more,” says Fray-Smith, whose selection of up-and-coming talent includes the striking, hand-sewn soft sculptures of 31-year-old Canadian artist Tau Lewis as well as Adams’s mesmerising beadwork.

'Untitled' by Nelly Sethna (c1970), fabric and wood © Tia Collection, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA. Image courtesy of Sotheby's, Inc

'Vêtement Noir' (Black Garment), by Magdalena Abakanowicz (1968) © Harold Strak, courtesy the Abakanowicz Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation

"Textile art has appealed through the ages as a means of enhancing living spaces; now we are seeing a deeper consideration of international heritage and cultural and personal identity," says Isobel Dennis, the director of London's Collect craft fair, who has noticed a rise in textile pieces being shown over the past few years. At the next edition (March 1-3), more than 25 textile makers will be represented. Examples such as Colombian-born Juan Arango Palacios's vibrantly woven memories and fantasies and British-Iranian Batool Showghi's stitched collages contain "some powerful narratives", adds Dennis. "They are certainly pushing the boundaries of their craft."

brafa.art; January 28-February 4

VOGUE

ARTS

In London, a Spotlight on the Dreamlike Vision of Artist Olga de Amaral

BY SALOMÉ GÓMEZ-UPEGUI

September 22, 2022

Olga de Amaral, *Bruma 1*, 2014. Acrylic, gesso, and cotton on wood. 74 3/4 x 35 3/8 x 75 5/8 in. © Olga de Amaral, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

For more than six decades, Olga de Amaral has blurred the lines between fiber art and fine art, carefully coloring, knotting, collaging, and alchemizing threads and textiles into paintings, sculptures, and majestic installations that play with texture and light.

Born in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1932, de Amaral studied architectural drafting at the Colegio Mayor de Cundinamarca in her hometown before being introduced to fiber as a medium in 1954, when she apprenticed with Finnish-American designer and textile connoisseur Marianne Strengell at the Cranbrook Academy of Art on the outskirts of Detroit, Michigan. Since then, de Amaral has developed an oeuvre considered among the most important examples of post-war Latin American abstraction. In 1973, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship; she participated in the 1986 Venice Biennale; and her works are in the permanent collections of institutions including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Tate Collection in London. And now, at 90 years old, de Amaral's creations are as current as ever.

Olga de Amaral, *Lienzo E*, 2015. Linen, gesso and acrylic. 78 3/4 x 39 3/8 x 2 3/4 in. © Olga de Amaral, Courtesy Lisson Gallery

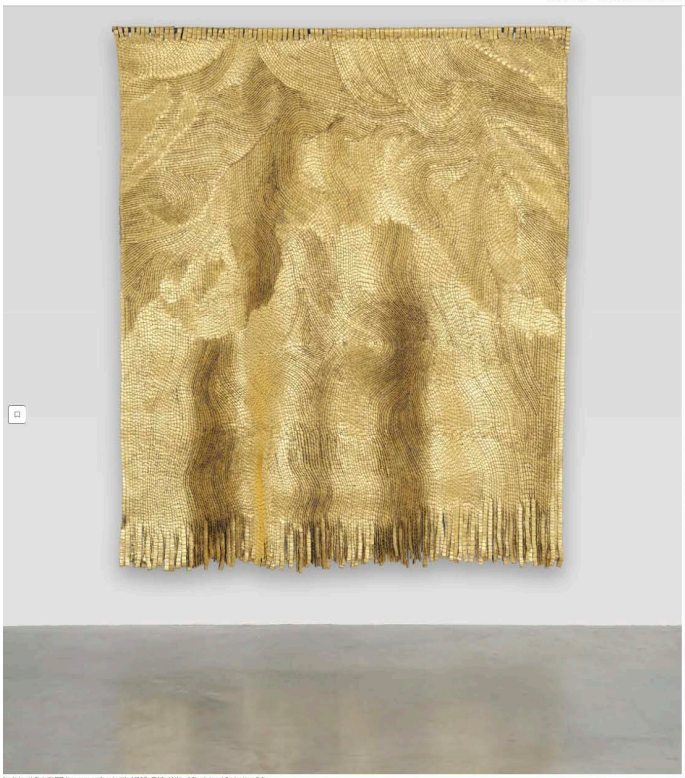
On view at Lisson Gallery from September 23 to October 29, "Olga de Amaral" is the Colombian artist's first solo show in London since 2015. Highlighting seminal works from the past two decades of her trailblazing career, the exhibition features iconic tapestries mingled with gesso, gold leaf, and palladium, as well as an array of oneiric three-dimensional installations de Amaral masterfully builds from thread.

Olga de Amaral, *Luz blanca*, 1969/1982/2010, Polyethylene, 157 3/4 x 61 x 3 7/8 in. © Olga de Amaral. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Luz blanca (detail). © Olga de Amaral. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Still, de Amaral's international travels between the 1950s and 1970s greatly informed her artistic practice. In one visit to the studio of British ceramicist Lucie Rie in 1970, for instance, the South American artist was charmed by the Japanese practice of *kintsugi*—the art of reassembling broken pottery with gold. That fascination translated into her work *Fragmentos Completos* (Complete Fragments), one of the first instances in which she introduced gold leaf into her hand-woven creations.

Indeed, if de Amaral has become renowned for one thing, it's the intervention of unexpected materials in her fiber art. In some earlier pieces, such as *Adherencia Natural* (Natural Adherence, 1973) and *Riscos* (Cliffs, 1987), she famously used wool and horsehair to create intricate wall hangings with a unique texture. Meanwhile, in a standout piece from her upcoming London show, *Luz Blanca* (White Light, 1969/2010), the artist assembled sheets of translucent plastic into a large (137-by-61-inch) tapestry that seems to take the form of a luminescent cataract.

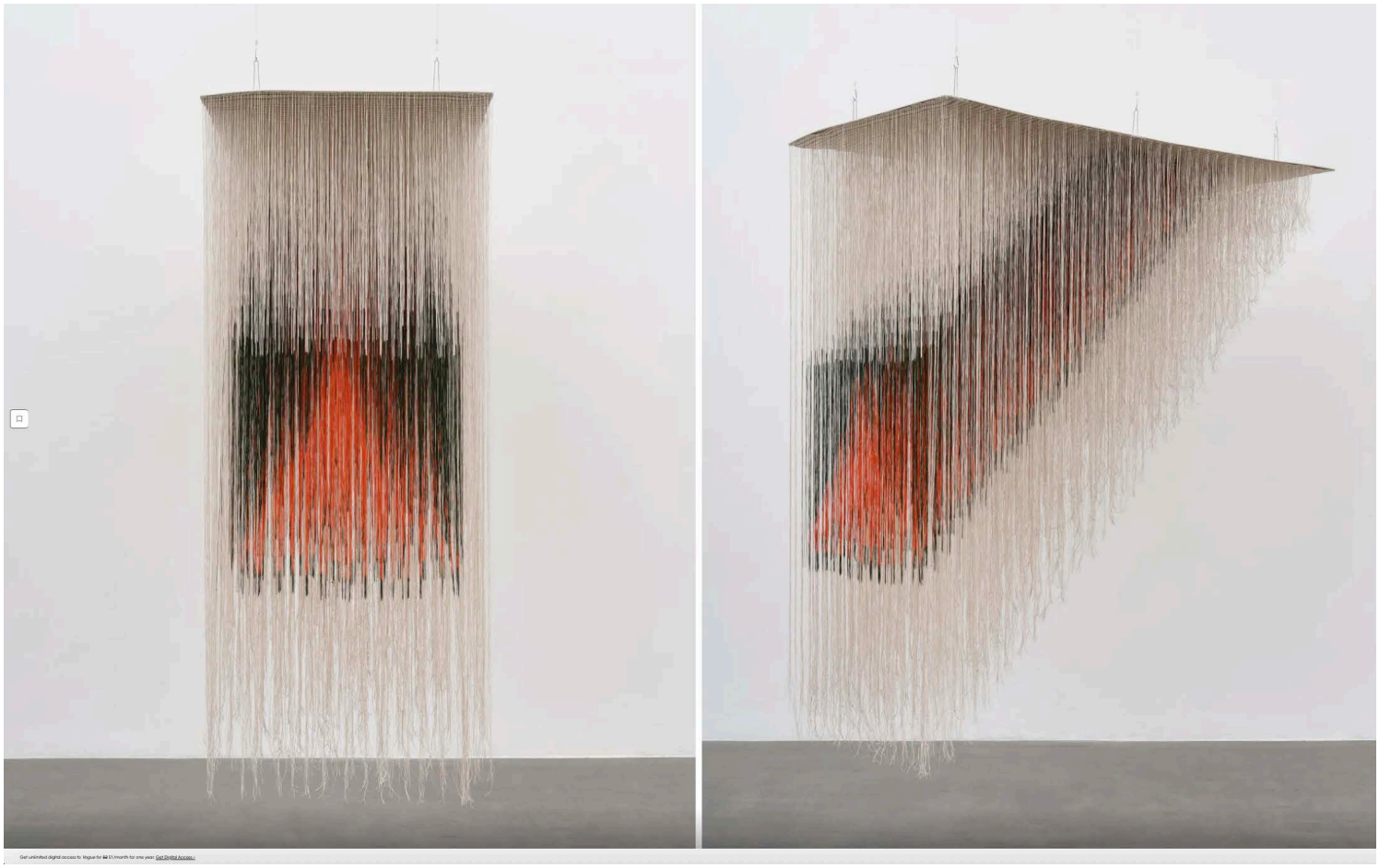


Olga de Amaral, *Textil XX*, 2009. Linen, gesso, acrylic and gold leaf. 88 5/8 x 79 1/8 x 6 1/4 in. © Olga de Amaral. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Olga de Amaral, *Piedra Blanca II*, 2006. Linen, gesso, acrylic and gold leaf. 39 3/8 x 31 1/2 x 1 1/8 in. © Olga de Amaral. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Speaking about her fascination with gold, which appears in many of her most iconic works, de Amaral remarks that "the color gold has a kind of magic to it, and it's not about what it means, it's about what it reflects and illuminates." Beyond its aesthetic qualities, the artist is also inspired by the ceremonial use of gold in pre-Hispanic and Colonial art. In *Strata VX* (2009), the artist employs linen, gesso, acrylic, and gold leaf to create a grand (88-by-79-inch) tapestry that undulates with light. And in *Cesta Lunar* 50B (Lunar Basket 50B, 1991/2017), she uses platinum and gold leaf to create an even larger (137-by-86-inch) wall hanging that experiments with scintillating metallic shades.

Despite the captivating detail in de Amaral's works, she has often described her creations as "accidental." She claims she is deeply driven by a sense of miracle and profoundly impressed by the power of curiosity. It's what led her to create the fascinating *Brumas* (Mists), diaphanous installations of painted hanging threads that coalesce as colorful three-dimensional shapes. "It was an accident. I was working with loose threads —they're independent characters, all of these threads— and first, a single thread appeared, then there was a multitude of them, intersecting, intertwined, and when these threads began to meld, the *Brumas* appeared," she says.



Olga de Amaral, *Bruma R*. 2014. Acrylic, gesso y cotton on wood. 208 x 194 x 87 cm
81 7/8 x 76 3/8 x 34 1/4 in.
© Olga de Amaral. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

© Olga de Amaral. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

In *Bruma R* (2014), one of the most show-stopping pieces in the Lisson Gallery exhibition, the artist uses acrylic, gesso, and cotton on wood to assemble delicate skeins of painted thread that hang vertically from a rectangular frame, creating a soft triangular prism containing a red and black geometric form that changes with the viewer's perspective. *Bruma T* (2014) follows a similar dynamic structure, although it contains a mustard-colored circle with a black border that also shifts according to where spectators are standing.

A master of the loom, Amaral is certain she owes everything to the simplicity and infinite possibilities of thread. "Thread is like a pencil," she says. "I am amazed by the process of coloring thread. Painting thread is so elemental, and yet without being able to do this, I wouldn't be able to do anything."

Fabric of Impulse: Fiber Artist Olga de Amaral Melds Artistic Spontaneity with Slow Craft

By Glenn Adamson December 2, 2021 10:09am

Olga de Amaral, 2015.
PHOTO DIEGO AMARAL CEBALLOS

"The mind was following, not guiding." This is how Olga de Amaral looks back at her own work, from the lofty summit of a nearly seven-decade career. "Very little planning went into it," she says in her most recent catalogue. "It all happened in the moment, following impulses, the intuitions of the moment that came in the process of doing. My creative language developed in this way. Without conceptualization."

That approach isn't unusual for an artist of Amaral's generation. She started out in the late 1950s, when Abstract Expressionism was still a dominant style, and intuition—what happens "in the moment"—was prized above all else. But Amaral is, principally, a weaver. Her medium tends to a slow and structured progression. It rewards considerable forethought and patient execution. This contrast—between feeling and premeditation, impulse and handiwork—is a central animating dialectic of her work. As she has developed discrete but overlapping idioms, Amaral has consistently achieved what seems impossible: a luxuriantly expansive immediacy. Working at large scale with as many as seven assistants, she somehow manages to create textile art that appears instinctive, direct, and deeply personal.

These qualities shine forth in "To Weave a Rock," a survey of Amaral's work now at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, through March 20, 2022, and previously shown at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. (Another exhibition is currently on view at Lisson Gallery in New York through December 18.) The retrospective's title, drawn from an assignment that Amaral set her students at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in rural Maine in 1967, nicely captures the ambience of her works. They feel not so much made as summoned into being. This is especially true when she uses gold leaf, a signature material she adopted in the 1980s, which turns her fiber works into shimmering apparitions. Amaral emphasized the otherworldly transmutation by calling the series "Alquimias" (Alchemies). The magic has continued in her subsequent "Bosques" (Forests) and "Brumas" (Mists), in which geometric forms appear to hover within diaphanous free falls of threads, as well as her "Nudos" (Knots), bundles of painted threads that stand upright on the ground, as decisive as any painted brushstroke.

Amaral's technology of enchantment (to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Alfred Gell) has developed over the course of an unusually cosmopolitan career. Though the artist has lived and worked principally in Bogotá, Colombia, where she was born in 1932, her professional pathway has been continually shaped by experiences in both the United States and Europe. After initially training in architectural drafting, she went to New York City in 1954 to study English. That fall, she enrolled at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, encouraged by a friend from Colombia, architect Hans Drews. As she recalls in the "To Weave a Rock" catalogue, he told her it was "more than a place to study design and crafts. . . . It was a place that valued freedom."

Alquimia 42B, 1986, linen, gesso, and gold leaf, 64 7/8 by 27 1/2 in.
© OLGA DE AMARAL; COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Cranbrook's textile department at the time was led by Marianne Strengell, one of the Nordic talents recruited to the Academy by her fellow Finnish designers, Eliel and Loja Saarinen. Strengell's approach was definitely applied art: textiles in the service of architecture and industry. When Amaral returned to Colombia after just a year at Cranbrook, she set up a studio operating in that instrumental spirit, producing upholstery and furnishing fabrics as well as a fashion line. It was a full decade before she began creating "fiber art"—a term that hadn't quite been invented yet.

That moment came in 1964, when Amaral traveled to San Francisco, to visit the family of her American husband. There she met up with fellow Cranbrook graduate, Lillian Elliott, at an unusually exciting time to be a weaver in America. The previous year the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York had presented "Woven Forms," curated by Paul J. Smith as a showcase for Lenore Tawney, along with four other progressive weavers: Alice Adams, Sheila Hicks, Dorian Zachai, and Claire Zeisler. Tawney's works, in particular, demonstrated a wholly new approach to textiles. They hung freely in space, with warps that traveled in graceful diagonals rather than straight up and down, and passages of openwork to let the light through.

Following Elliott's initial prompting, Amaral soon formulated her own unique response to these currents. In 1965 she began creating hangings with interlaced forms. These were made on a vertical loom with a split warp. Amaral manipulated the resulting strips laterally, dividing and rejoining them, passing them under and over one another into plaits (done off the loom), sometimes integrating individual wrapped cords. The complex results offer a contrapuntal play against the typical textile grid—a weaving of weavings. Though this was a different technique from the one Tawney had used in her "woven forms," it resulted in a comparable effect: a complex, rhythmic cascade.

Olga de Amaral, 1968, in an exhibition of her work at the Museo de Arte Moderno, Planetario Distrital de Bogotá.
PHOTO DIANA WITLIN

The interlaces positioned Amaral at the forefront of her medium, and she was soon exhibiting internationally. She was included in the 1967 Lausanne Biennial, Europe's premier event for experimental tapestry, as well as the landmark 1969 exhibition "Wall Hangings," organized at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, by curator Mildred Constantine and textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen. Smith gave Amaral a show at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts the following year, focusing on her "Woven Walls," a series of densely crisscrossed works, some of which are curvaceous and embracing in their overall form. At the time, Amaral was also experimenting with plastic—a readily available material that she used to pack her work in the studio—rendering it ethereally translucent by layering it atop itself, as in works like *Luz Blanca* (White Light), 1969.

The late 1960s were the peak years for fiber art on the international stage, and Amaral was a singular figure in that context. Though many weavers of the era —Tawney, Hicks, and Anni Albers among them—drew inspiration from historic Latin American textiles, Amaral was the only contemporary fiber artist from that part of the world who was of comparable stature. The geographically dispersed practitioners of the emergent field were her creative community; she did not have strong connections to other artists in the region, even those who were exploring abstraction in textiles. (Via email, she explained that she knew the work of the Venezuelan artist Jesús Rafael Soto, but had no relationship with him. Meanwhile, she was unaware of what Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape were doing in Brazil.) Her affinities were elsewhere, some elemental and some highly sophisticated. On the one hand, she noted, "I was inspired by women in the countryside preparing the wool. And I loved rocks covered with moss." On the other, she befriended the great Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz (subject of a current exhibition at Tate Modern), whose supremely powerful, heavily textured, often figurative works doubtlessly influenced Amaral in the early 1970s, when the latter executed her pieces mainly in wool and horsehair, and even ventured briefly into freestanding totemic forms.

"Estela" (Wake) grouping, 2018, linen, gesso, acrylic, and gold leaf; each element 61-76 inches high.
© OLGA DE AMARAL, COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

By the 1980s, the lights dimmed on fiber art. Organic handwrought abstraction, notably macramé, had been a perfect fit for the countercultural era, but it did not suit the media-obsessed, conceptually inclined period that followed. Fortunately, Amaral had light of her own to bring. Her "Alquimias," particularly, won wide acclaim despite the general malaise afflicting her discipline. She arrived at them gradually, first adding gesso to her weavings (bringing them closer to the material state of paintings) and only later realizing that this move yielded an ideal surface for adding gold leaf. While her use of this precious metal has often been associated with pre-Columbian artifacts, Amaral stresses that she found its attraction primarily formal—a new color in her palette, introducing a play of reflectivity. Her repertoire became more refined in other ways too: she shifted principally to fine linen as a substrate rather than fibrous wool, and embellished threads with acrylic paint and pigmented clays. She also strove to create internal illumination, in ways that again recall Tawney's works—this time the suspended "Clouds," with their long, dangling fibers, which marked the culmination of the older artist's career. Like those ethereal pieces, Amaral's "Bosques" and "Brumas" are essentially unwoven textiles—warp threads without corresponding wefts, hung vertically to create a color-space.

Knot 28, 2016, linen, gesso and acrylic, 118 by 11 3/4 inches.
© OLGA DE AMARAL, COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

The "Nudos," which are among Amaral's most recent works, are also her most concise. They bring to fruition her long-standing interest in "scaling up of the discrete components of the textile elements," she remarked in another email. "The beginning of a fabric, the kernel of a textile, is a knot. I wanted to monumentalize this incredible technology." The comment makes me wonder whether these works might be self-portraits of a kind. Vertically oriented and rising to a hairstyle-like topknot, they certainly could be read as figural. But Amaral says no—she was not thinking about the body when she made them, but about the intrinsic logic of the medium. Rather than self-portraits, then, perhaps it would be better to see them as statements of purpose, materialized manifestos, the exclamation marks of a long and amazingly generative career. When it comes to summarizing all she has achieved, it would be hard to put the case better than Amaral does herself: "I wanted to make the thread and the knot more visible, giving them the weight, the importance they deserve."

Artland Magazine

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MAGAZINE

Female Iconoclasts: Olga de Amaral. Unapologetically Against the Prescribed Narrative

Portrait of Olga de Amaral © Olga de Amaral

By Anthony Dexter Giannelli

An Undefinable Symbol

Gold as a material has found an uneasy place for many modernist or contemporary artists. Its illustrious history and embedded capital-centred connotations have made it a somewhat overwhelming material to work with, to the extent that, in modern eyes, it runs the risk of overpowering or even casting an elitist, gaudy, materialistic shadow outshining the artists' intended message of a specific work. Routes to circumvent this connotation include attacking the surface, distorting the divine lustre, contrasting it against any symbolic or visual representations of low-culture, or creating a dialogue that places the work in the realm of parody or social commentary. All of these practices rely on the assumption that this most precious metal is simply too much for audiences to digest.

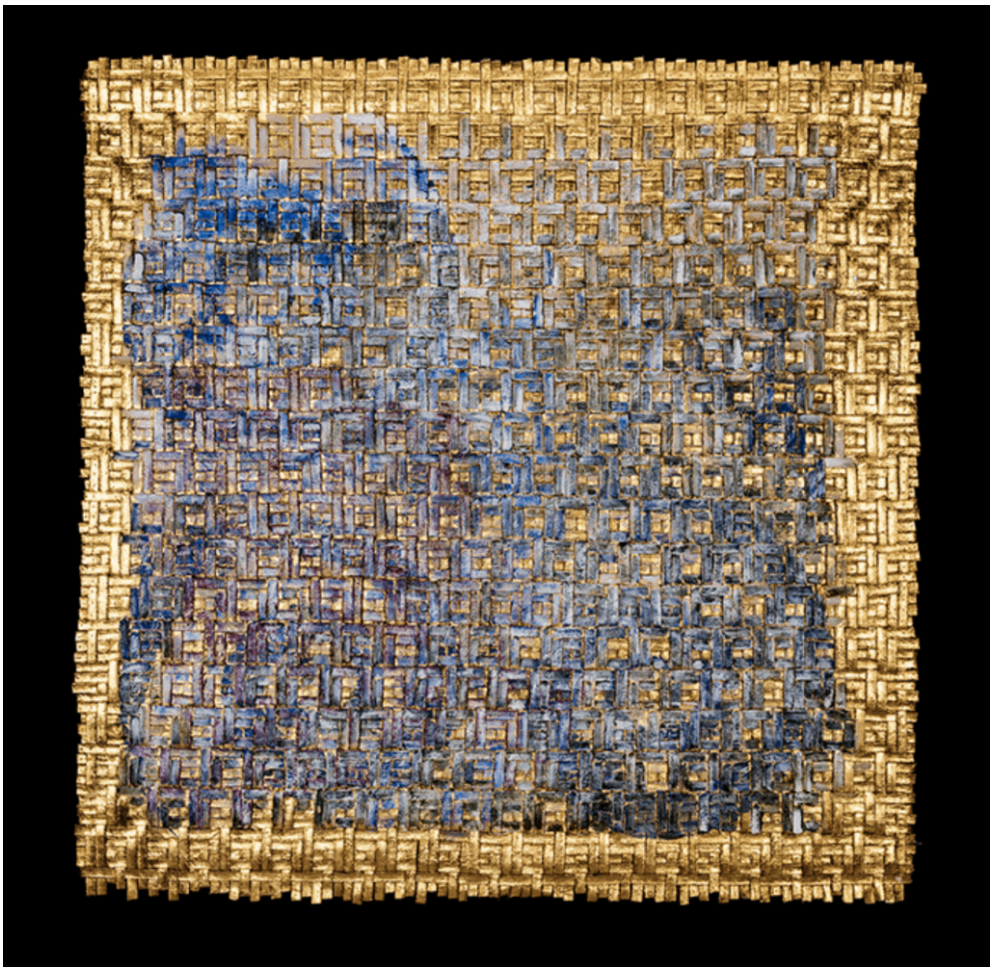
In direct opposition to this, it is the creative world of Colombian weaver and fiber artist Olga de Amaral, whose approach to materiality, colour, texture, and surface celebrates each element with an alchemical-like treatment. Displaying a uniquely unapologetic use of gold, precious metals, decadent pigments, and natural fibers, she takes the viewers' preconceived notion of luxury and turns it on its head. Amaral's overall practice rebels against classification and prescribed notions of what she or her objects should be, firmly staking her claim as a pioneer within the textile arts and the growing evolution of abstraction beyond the canvas.

Olga de Amaral, *Arboles series* (2013)

Rebelling Against the Divides of Art

Thankfully, we can now see the conservative, western-centric world of the fine arts moving slowly (and reluctantly) towards a more holistic view on creativity and inclusivity of media. We are moving further and further from the rigid divides that Amaral was first introduced to as a young, trained architect From Bogotá who arrived at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan to study in their textile faculty in 1954. The status quo placed any artist using textile – regardless of the practicality of their final creations – precariously on the ledge between fine art and craft, leaning heavily towards the latter. At the time Olga de Amaral was introduced to the world of the loom, she stood at a crucial turning point for the medium which, similarly to other craft traditions such as ceramics, was long looked down upon for being considered "women's work" and unworthy in eyes of western high art. However, this started to change in the '60s, only when established male fine artists such as Oppenheim and Artschwager, began to incorporate everyday, folk material into their practice, in an attempt to question and tear down hierarchical views on the material.

Along with her contemporary Ruth Asawa, Amaral has helped to push forward the revolutionary notion that works of fine art can exist in the same space, and not be separated from the world of craft. Even if these creations are craft at their core, does that make them of any less value culturally or monetarily? In fact, each one of Amaral's works plays testament to the labour-intensive and material honouring craft origin, while their surfaces and presence rival the captivating abstraction presented through oil paint atop a Rothko canvas. In-wall hanging works such as Calizia II (below), gold-plated linen strands overlap and tunnel to develop a landscape brought to life through layers of blue and turquoise pigment. The romantic linen stretched surface of the great oil painters is thus elevated through an added dimension of heightened depth which embeds the painter into the very fibers of her canvas.



Olga de Amaral, *Caliza II* (2015)

Manipulation of Dimensions

The demonstrated treatment and understanding of the intricate relationships between depth, texture, and colour, delivers Amaral's creations out of the standardized categorizations given to woven objects. Instead, for such dynamic pieces, the setting plays just as much into the interpretation and overall meanings of the works themselves. Hung from the ceiling, accumulations of delicate singular strands become strong columns or heavy barricades; walls to divide space and create their own interdimensional landscapes. In each variation of the woven form, Amaral plays upon the strength of her medium, building upon contradictions, the soft, malleable, familiar, and domestic starting material becomes weightless beams of light, embodying a signature luminosity. This alchemical transformation is only brought on through mastery of colour, technical skill, and expert manipulation of material. Combining these elements allows Amaral to access dimensions beyond depth, height, or length, in the realm of light and luminosity.

Olga de Amaral, *Nudo 22* (2014)

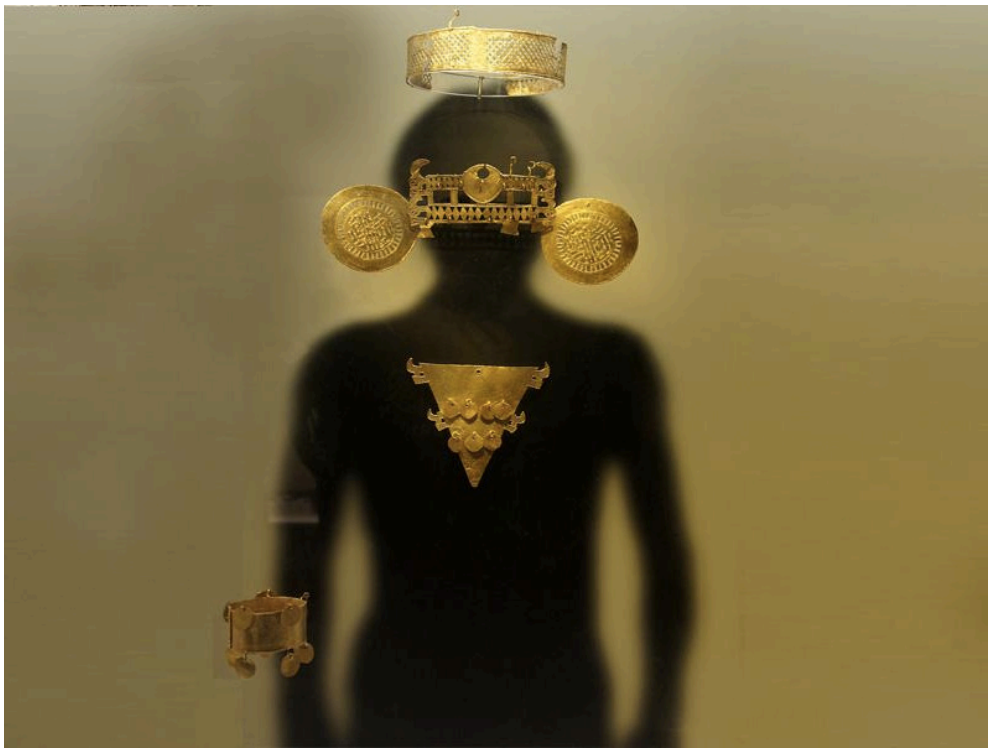
Our brains are hardwired to be infatuated with the effervescent: our perception is sometimes lost or misguided by the way in which gold, silver, and rich pigments distort and amplify light and reflections. It is upon this anamorphic landscape that Amaral's works dwell in an added plane for our mind's eye to run wild. Each work, regardless of its literal depth, morphs into new distinct and dynamic surfaces depending on the onlooker's viewpoint. This is thanks to the combined effort of each strand's multifaceted faces and plates making up the greater image. Using an off-the-loom technique, Amaral builds upon woven structures with gesso, pigments, and precious metals to allow each section, each strand to act as a smaller work; its own vignette of abstraction within the greater work. When shifted by a slight breeze or passerby the viewer can appreciate each moment, each snapshot of an ever-changing surface coming to life in a type of passive, third-person interaction.

Olga de Amaral, *Escrito X* (2014)

Defining One's Own Luxury

These lush visual and spatial environments, for many, may be reminiscent of regal excess, conjuring an image of tapestries hung in an exuberant place of medieval worship, or grand hall. However, past this initial impression, another picture of reality presents itself. Olga de Amaral first began using gold in her work after the influence of the British ceramicist Lucie Rei using the Japanese form of kintsugi. This practice seeks to repair broken ceramics with gold to highlight the cracks rather than attempting to return them to a lost state before the break occurred. Instead, a new state is created and elevated now, celebrating this imperfection. In a way, she was inspired by a rebel against a common understanding of luxury and its idolization of the unachievable, superficial perfection.

Though her fascination with gold started with this Japanese tradition, Amaral comes from a land whose pre-contact civilizations inspired the European conquistadors and explorer obsessions with the famed El Dorado, the City of Gold. For the sake of storytelling, let's entertain this possible influence to Amaral that art historians and critics are drawn to the world over. The Muisca who inspired this legend took a polar opposite approach to gold than that of the Europeans who would move heaven and earth to seek out the metal. Though both infatuated with the malleable liquid sun, the Muisca chose to let this gift from the gods live as they did. In life, many throughout their ranking in society adorned themselves in delicately fashioned symbols not solely reserved for nobility or warriors. In death, it was buried alongside the revered for the afterlife, or in ceremonial occasions, the carefully crafted golden objects were dumped en masse into Lake Guatavita, given back to the watery underworld.



Example of Muisca gold work on display at Museo del Oro in Bogotá

Gold lived with their society, not hoarded only in the storerooms and closed-off buildings of the elite, this was the idea of El Dorado. While Europeans searched and desecrated numerous amounts of gold and resources from the Americas, El Dorado was never found for it was the idea of it that they never truly understood, and could not be pillaged. In fact, while gold was indeed highly cherished, weaving objects held a remarkably similar position. Astonishing examples still exist of royal llama weaving from across the Andes, but woven works penetrated so deep into societal life they were developed as a record-keeping and counting system.

Amaral's practice embodies a lifetime of rebelling: as a textile artist, as a woman artist, as an artist between the United States and Latin America, she actively worked against what the art world cared to view her as. Her works combine the approachable, the familiar world of soft cloth with gold, that untouchable warm, holy embodiment of the heavens; thus, leaving us to question, why shouldn't these types of cherished materials be more approachable? What better way to make us question our appreciation of the material, our praised objects or their availability to the masses. While we can't deny her works themselves, ownership and sale play into the art market's inescapable consumerist notion of luxury, when displayed, the space they create gives a moment of luxury and grandeur accessible to anyone.

LISSON GALLERY

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
December 9, 2021

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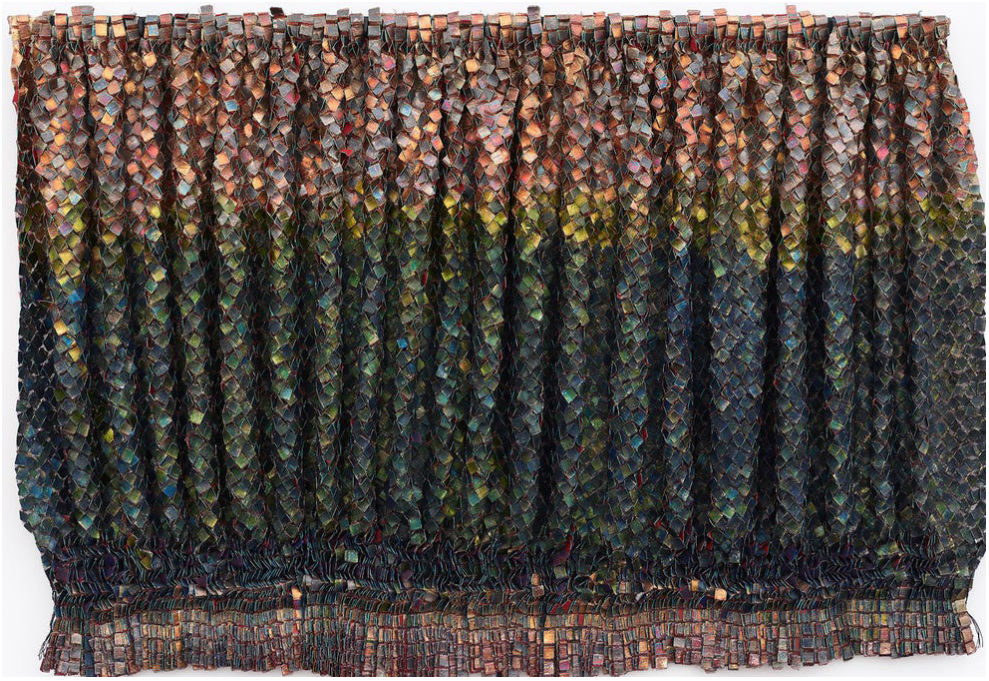
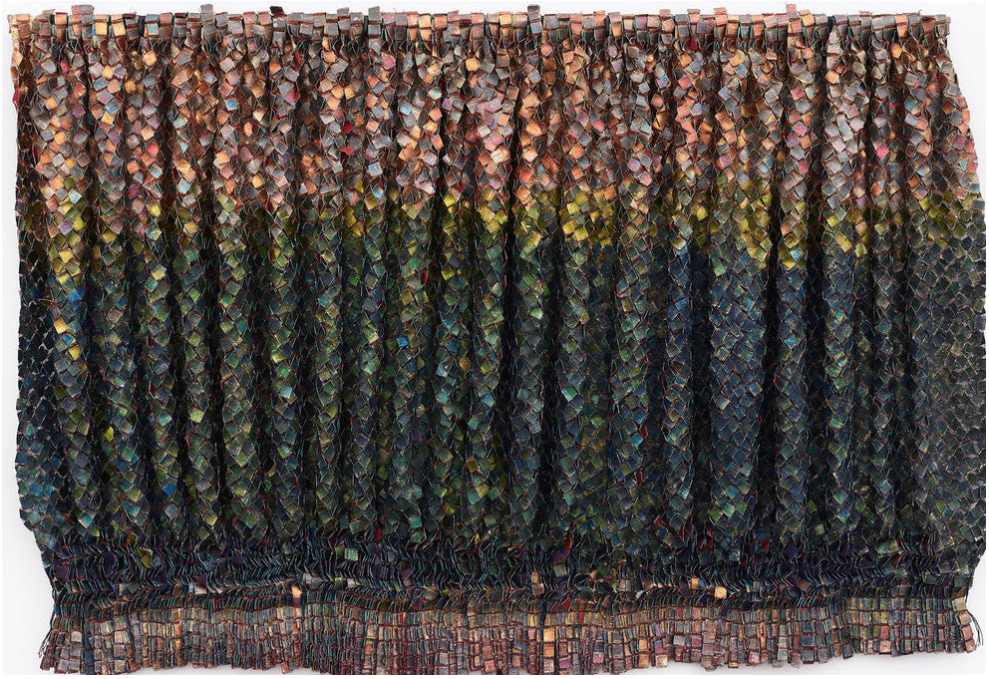
The Weight of Weaving: A Closer Look at Olga de Amaral's "Lost Image 17"



By Julieta Fuentes Roll

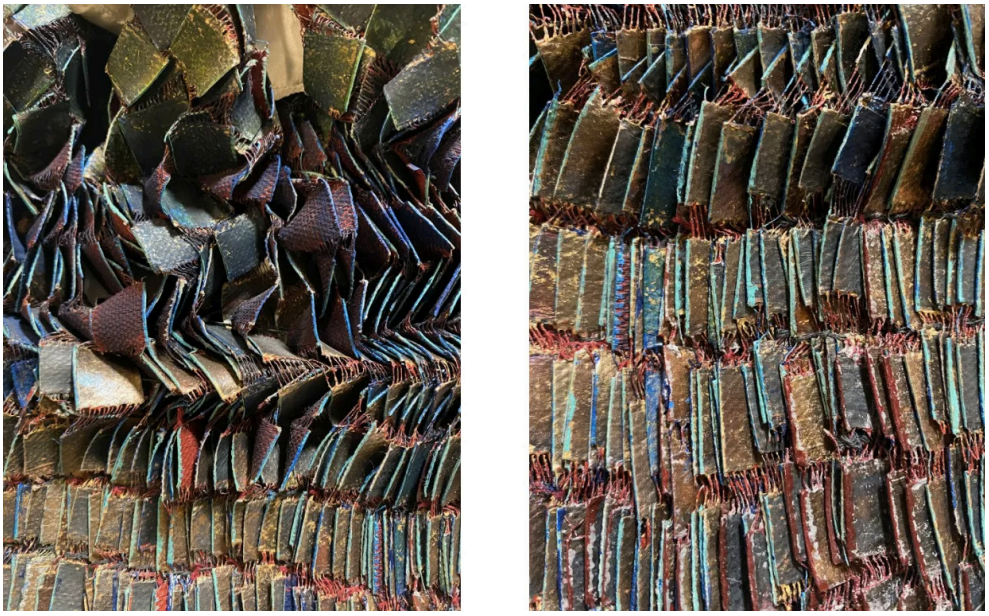
I didn't know what to expect as I began my summer internship at the de Young museum within the costume and textiles department. I was both nervous and thrilled. I worried that the space might prove to be inaccessible to me as an undergraduate student. This opportunity was special to me as an anthropology major at the University of California, Berkeley; working at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco felt like a dream. One of my tasks was to conduct research on an object of my choosing. I searched for an intriguing piece from Latin America, as I felt it was important to bring my Mexican American lived cultural experience into my research. When I laid eyes on Olga de Amaral's *Lost Image 17*, I knew I had found my muse.

Olga de Amaral (1932–) is a textile artist from Bogotá, Colombia. She studied architecture in the United States before returning to Bogotá to pursue her craft. Since the beginning of Amaral's career, her work has been an extension of the self. Building off the traditional craftsmanship of Latin American weaving that was typically seen as "women's work," Amaral pushes the boundaries of what we define as "fine art." Intertwined in her textiles are reflections of culture, gender, and how we understand our place in the world. In studying Amaral, I came to better understand both the political and social weight a textile can carry.



Olga de Amaral, *Lost Image 17*, 1992. Linen with acrylic paint and applied gold and silver leaf; plain weave, oblique interlacing, 42 x 61 in. (106.7 x 154.9 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Anonymous Gift, 1994.178

Lost Image 17 can best be described as a sculptural textile. The piece is massive and consists of a linen grid structure painted with acrylic and coated with Amaral's signature gold and silver leaf. *Lost Image 17* was finished in 1992 and was most recently displayed at the de Young in 2018. This is one of the later, mellower pieces in Amaral's Lost Images series. It is a prime example of the intricate textured style she is most recognized for. Photographs do not do it justice. Only when I had the opportunity to view *Lost Image 17* in person was I able to fully grasp its power. It consists of a copper, yellow, and greenish ombre rectangle with fringe on the bottom. In the light, it shimmers with silver and gold notes like fish scales. The linen and acrylic layers make the piece physically stiff, yet it is alive in its visual glimmer. Like a shiny ornament, *Lost Image 17* is a beacon. The title descriptor "Lost" appears contradictory considering its presence, yet I enjoyed this puzzling contrast. It is not hard to see how Amaral views craft and fine art as one in the same.



Olga de Amaral, *Lost Image 17* (details), 1992. Linen with acrylic paint and applied gold and silver leaf; plain weave, oblique interlacing, 42 x 61 in. (106.7 x 154.9 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Anonymous Gift, 1994.178

Amaral's work gave me a sense of empowerment. I admired her boldness. Considering the time period in which she started working, I could imagine the uphill battle she faced against Western ideals of "high art." Yet, she continued. In his article *Female Iconoclasts* in *Artland*, writer Anthony Giannelli poses this question:

"Even if these creations are craft at their core, does that make them of any less value culturally or monetarily?"
—Anthony Giannelli

This question speaks to the broader commentary of which artworks and artists society deems valuable and worthy of recognition. Why does an art piece like *Lost Image 17* being "craft at its core" determine its cultural worth? What historical power dynamics are behind weaving not being recognized as fine art? Although how we perceive skill and value is shifting to be more inclusive of different perspectives, I felt it was important to keep this concept in mind when conducting my research. In this context, we can critique Amaral as well. She had the ability to pursue a career as an artist, but how many artisan workers, particularly weavers, go unrecognized? I pose this question in an effort to highlight that we must always think critically about the work we are engaging in.

During my internship, the museum staff transformed my apprehension by making the textile department an inclusive and welcoming space, and Amaral's work encouraged me to explore my own identity as a Mexican American and how I relate my cultural experience to my art. I hope to embody her determination and radiance as I move through my life. *Lost Image 17* is a testament to the many stories textiles carry and what they can tell us about ourselves and the world. While they may be hidden at first, those stories are there, lingering beneath the fabric.

Text by Julieta Fuentes Roll, textiles intern, artist, and student.

LISSON GALLERY

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November 4, 2021

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Olga De Amaral:
The Elements

Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Olga de Amaral: The Elements
Lisson Gallery, New York
November 02 – December 18, 2021

Best known as a **textile artist**, this exhibition positions Olga de Amaral as a vital force in sculpture, installation art and indeed in painting, albeit using her foundational materials of fiber, thread, wool, gesso and metallic leaf. Amaral's inaugural show at **Lisson Gallery** New York coincides with her first major **retrospective** in North America, 'To Weave a Rock,' which is now on view at the Cranbrook Art Museum, Michigan after its **debut** at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Exploring the core principles of her varied **career**, this combination of seven different bodies of work, spanning 40 years, reveals how Amaral's oeuvre ranges all the way from an appreciation of Colombian heritage and indigenous craft, through the influence of **Latin American Modernism**, to latter-day developments in experiential art, optical abstraction and post-Minimalism. The earliest work in the show, Estudio en dos Elementos (Study in Two Elements) from 1976, is composed of coarsely intertwined horsehair and serpentine coils of cord, which switch from deep red and ochre to black, recalling the natural tones of **earthworks** she was making at the time.

Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

A decade later comes the 1988 Tierra y Oro (Earth and Gold), a free-floating **cascade** of vertical lines that relates in conception to her imposingly physical structures titled Woven Walls – as well as the comparably **large-scale** Memorias (Memories), 2014 – but with the addition of light as an extra material or element – the looser weave allowing a moiré **pattern** to develop in its interstices.

Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Visitors are greeted at the entrance by the vision of five hanging '**stones of gold**', invoking a sacred convention of ancient **monoliths.** Hovering above ground, these shimmering Estelas (Stelae) defy gravity and form individual parts to an ongoing series of densely packed **tapestries**, conjoined by layers of linen, gesso and gold leaf, with a stony gray painted on the back.

Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Amaral's work veers away from the domestic in feel, approaching **monumental architectural** proportions through the spectral presence of crosses, stripes, lines and organic shapes in others. Indeed, she initially trained in architectural drafting in Bogotá during the **1950s**, but went on to study **textiles** at Cranbrook Academy of Art, which makes the opening of her retrospective in Michigan even more poignant.

Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Employing not only these forces and forms of **nature** and leaving behind both the ceiling and the wall, comes another singular Amaral form, the Nudo (Knot), 2016. Hundreds of painted threads strung up by hand form a giant mane, with multiple loops and threads **performing** the knotting **gesture** – an essential yet overlooked aspect of weaving. Gravity finishes the composition as the threads reach the floor and touch back down to earth.

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Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

LISSON GALLERY

Widewalls
November 2, 2021

WIDEWALLS

A Comprehensive Survey of Olga de Amaral's Work Coming to Lisson Gallery

By Balasz Takac

Working with textile was a women's craft for centuries that wasn't quite appreciated until the 20th century, due to the affirmation it received in the avant-garde circles, mostly through the modern schools such as Bauhaus in Germany or Vkhutemas in Russia.

During the 1960s and 1970s, textile art became rediscovered by a new generation of female artists, a Colombian Olga de Amaral being one of them. This particular figure, most appreciated for her large-scale abstract works made of fibers and covered in gold, gradually became one of the few abstract artists from South America to reach international acclaim in the mentioned period.

To revisit her sculptural domains and the innovative use of fiber, thread, and metallic leaf, Lisson Gallery New York will be hosting an exhibition titled *The Elements* that coincides with the artist's first major retrospective in North America that is on view at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Michigan.

Left: Olga de Amaral - Alquimia 42B, 1986. Linen, gesso and gold leaf 165 x 70 cm, 64 7/8 x 27 1/2 in / **Right:** Olga de Amaral - Nudo 28, 2016. Linen, gesso and acrylic 300 x 30 cm 118 x 11 3/4 in

Revisiting The Work of Olga de Amaral

Olga de Amaral was largely influenced by the travels she conducted in the 1950s and 1960s which is best illustrated with the series *Fragmentos Completos* (Complete Fragments). The series resulted from the exploration of the Japanese technique of kintsugi at the ceramics studio of British potter Lucie Rie in 1970.

The artist developed her own tools and techniques and has experimented with shapes and forms, such as hanging tapestries or floating formations. She has also produced outdoor works such as *Hojarascas* (Dried Leaves) or grand scale commissions such as *El Gran Muro* (The Great Wall), both executed in the 1970s. In the 1980s, de Amaral has made works that are rooted in religious and ceremonial practices of the pre-Columbian worship of gold as seen in her *Alquimia* (Alchemy) works begun in 1984.

Olga de Amaral - Tierra y oro 11 (soplo de oro), 1988. Linen, gesso, horsehair and gold leaf 80 x 130 cm 31 1/2 x 51 1/8 in

The Selection

The exhibition opens with five hanging golden stones that are reminiscent of ancient monuments. Called *Estelas* (Stelae), these objects that hover above ground defy gravity nicely escort the series of well-crafted tapestries.

The installment includes de Amaral's early works such as *Estudio en dos Elementos* (Study in Two Elements) from 1976, which is made of intertwined horsehair and serpentine coils of cord and evokes the natural tones of earthworks she was producing at that time. Also on display is a work made a decade later in 1988 called *Tierra y Oro* (Ground and Gold). This free-floating cascade of vertical lines responds well to the physical structures titled *Woven Walls* and *Memorias* (*Memories*), produced decades later around 2014, also featured in this exhibition. Another highlight is a singular form, the *Nudo* (Knot), made in 2018 from hundreds of painted threads strung up by hand.

Left: Olga de Amaral - Transparencia dorada, 1984. Horsehair and linen, 170 x 200 cm, 66 7/8 x 78 5/8 in / **Right:** Olga de Amaral - Prosa 7 (Sol blanco VII), 1993. Linen, gesso, acrylic, Japanese paper and gold leaf, 140 x 90 cm, 55 x 35 3/8 in

Olga de Amaral at Lisson Gallery

The upcoming survey at Lisson Gallery tends to revisit the principles of her artistic practice by focusing on different bodies of work de Amaral has produced in the last 40 years. The visitors can discover the focal points of her interest that span from adoration of Colombian indigenous traditions, over the influence of Latin American Modernism, to the 1960s and 1970s tendencies such as Op art, post-Minimalism, and conceptual art.

The exhibition *Olga de Amaral: The Elements* will be on view at Lisson Gallery in New York from November 2nd until December 18, 2021.

The Detriot News
October 27, 2021

The Detroit News

From Colombia to Cranbrook, artist Olga de Amaral's work blurs boundaries

By Maureen Feighan

Trying to sum up Colombian artist Olga de Amaral's work into one neat category is like calling Italian great Leonardo da Vinci simply a painter. It's impossible.

De Amaral is a renowned fiber artist, but also a sculptor, painter and architect. Her large art pieces combine a range of materials — from horsehair to linen painted with gold leaf — and they're often inspired by the Colombian countryside and have a sculptural component.

On Saturday, the Cranbrook Art Museum will unveil the first major museum retrospective in the United States of de Amaral's work, "Olga de Amaral: To Weave a Rock." It includes roughly 40 pieces — some small, some large — gathered from not just Colombia but other museum collections across the country.

Cranbrook is an appropriate place for the exhibition given that de Amaral, now 90 and still creating art to this day, spent two years there doing post-graduate work in the mid-1950s. And it was at Cranbrook that she learned to weave.

Column in Pastels, (c), Wool and horsehair.
Clarence Tabb Jr, The Detroit News

"Weaving was unknown to me and Cranbrook led me into this new world of thread and looms," said de Amaral, who lives in Bogotá, in an email. "Imagine the wonderful surprise of being introduced to the loom and starting on this long path."

Laura Mott, senior curator of contemporary art and design at the Cranbrook Art Museum, calls de Amaral's time at Cranbrook "transformational." Today, she's almost like a "cult" figure in the craft world and Latin America, said Mott, though she's not known as well as she should be in the United States.

But that's changing with shows like the one at Cranbrook. The same "To Weave a Rock" exhibition opened earlier this year at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, which co-organized the retrospective. And a major show of her work also will open at New York's Lisson Gallery next week.

"She's definitely an artist that's been underrepresented" in the United States, said Mott. "People may have seen one individual work of hers in a group show or collection show but nothing to this in-depth scale that shows the variety of her work over decades. It hasn't been done until this moment."

The exhibition, which runs through Feb. 13, is loosely divided by decade, starting with the '60s. Sculptural art pieces in earth tones woven together open the exhibition, which then moves on with works made from woven linen painted in gold, plastic pieces, even linen string.

Estela (Installation), Linen, gesso, and gold leaf. *Clarence Tabb Jr., The Detroit News*

Gold really made its way into de Amaral's work in the 1980s. She sometimes applies gold leaf to different structural fiber works or handmade paper. One striking installation in the exhibition, "Estela," features a grouping of weavings that combine linen, gesso and gold leaf.

De Amaral said the way color informs her work is difficult to articulate, but it's about "the colors I see during the day after day of living with my eyes absorbing, experiencing, and inhabiting them."

"Color becomes life and life becomes color," said de Amaral.

Another unique installation, "White Light" or "Luz Blanca" in Spanish is made of plastic, part of an entire series she created.

"When you think about a fiber show, typically you're just going to see weavings but this is so much more," said Mott.

De Amaral discovered Cranbrook after an architecture friend in Bogotá told her about it. She said studying there was stimulating in a way she'd never experienced in Colombia.

"It was a surprise at the beginning, this new environment of learning and being surrounded by other students and professors," said de Amaral, who also met her husband at Cranbrook. "Cranbrook's was a magical system that brought one into knowing and activating the special part of one's creative mind."

White Light, Plastic material. *Clarence Tabb Jr, The Detroit News*

Mott said the new exhibition really frames de Amaral's work in the larger discourse of contemporary art.

"We show the range and scale" of her work, said Mott. "In the beginning her amazing sculptural weavings are these colors from the earth. Then her most recent work from the last decade is really bright and vibrant. And so you kind of get a walk through her life and the decades of her work in the exhibition."

And for de Amaral, it closes "a cycle," she said.

"It brings my work back to a place that ignited the beginning of a long path," she said. "It makes me happy that more people and art students will be able to understand and experience my work."

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Olga de Amaral is a renowned artist in Colombia known for her fiber, paint and sculptural works of art. She did her post-graduate studies at Cranbook in the mid-1950s.
Cranbrook Art Museum

Preview
July 26, 2021

Olga de Amaral's MFAH exhibit is a must-see as she 'plays around'

The Colombian artist brings a career retrospective to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston through September.

Portrait of Olga de Amaral
Photo: Diego Amaral, Director

By Andrew Dansby

Olga de Amaral works with wispy and often gentle materials: horsehair, thread, nylon, gold leaf.

Those materials seemingly run contrary to the title of her new exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston: "To Weave a Rock." The contrast is telling, as De Amaral creates brilliant constructs out of tension and contrasts. She has for more than half a century created beguiling and challenging works that fuse her background in architecture with her affinity for painting and color. She transforms fragility into works that, if not entirely permanent, certainly resonate across time.

“To Weave a Rock” opens at the MFAH Sunday and offers an immersive tour of a process that was defined and refined over half a century. There’s a temptation to start at the end, a series of pieces titled “Brumas” (“Mists”) from 2013. But before getting to those emotionally striking works, there’s value in mentioning “Agujero Negro” (“Black Hole”) — a wonderful portal to her more recent work. The piece is such a rare treat in that an artist offers the viewer an opportunity to see a piece of art while simultaneously looking behind the curtain.

De Amaral’s piece places a circular black void at its center, but the threads in the foreground are pulled back like hair into a ponytail, revealing the underpainting, such that it is: More threads forming another dark circle, though this one bears golden rays of sunlight around its perimeter. The piece exudes a somber vibe but is also threaded with a little glow on the periphery. It exudes a feeling of hope.

From there, viewers enter a gallery containing “Brumas,” which are entrancing from all angles. The delicate threads show almost extraterrestrial color, with interior shapes that look holographic as one circles them. Though framed in a rectangular manner, they invite circling, the colors jittery and mobile as the viewer’s eyes move around them. De Amaral’s work has been called “alchemic art,” and it’s easy to see why. There’s a collision of art and math and science and magic within it.

‘I play around’

De Amaral’s career is a marvel of absorption and adaptation. She is 89, a native of Bogota, Colombia, who learned weaving, studied architecture and found a way to implement both into a singular artistic path charted in “To Weave a Rock.”

“What do I do?” de Amaral asks in an introductory video for the exhibition. “I play around.”

Sure, she certainly does that. But that assessment barely covers it. Laura Mott, senior curator of contemporary art and design at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Michigan (and a Houston native) and Anna Walker, assistant curator of decorative arts, craft and design at the MFAH, worked for several years to bring the exhibition to the States. They identified works from her days as a student, as well as newer pieces from her studio. Nothing was off limits. “Tabla 28” — a tall, enchanting piece in which balls of linen are stitched into a regal panel — was hanging in a stairwell at de Amaral’s home.

“A tenet of weaving and architecture is testing the materials,” Mott says. “That’s something she has always done.”

“To Weave a Rock” was an assignment de Amaral gave her students 50 years ago. But it also applies to a series of pieces that appear early in the exhibition: A photograph captures a series of standing stones by de Amaral’s home outside Bogota. They served as inspiration for “Estelas,” bold and bright linen pieces covered in gold-leaf.

Walker points out that de Amaral “is part of the conversation of fiber arts in the ‘60s, but she also worked far outside that movement.

“She saw the loom as a tool, but she wanted to work on a larger scale.”

Some of the sculptures mix differently woven pieces — some of them at least 10 feet in length — into figures that invite anthropomorphic comparison. They appear on the cusp of movement when the museum lights go down.

A different path

De Amaral work and study reach across the Americas. She studied fiber art at the Cranbrook Academy near Detroit. And so she spent time in Michigan, New York and Bogota, transforming her knowledge of fibers to a distinctive realm of her own. She said her affinity for mixing elements and colors could’ve positioned her as a painter. Instead she chose a different path.

The first gallery bearing pieces by de Amaral serves as a foundational introduction to her art. It holds some early woven pieces and small studies in which the artist experimented with form and materials — from horsehair to gold leaf. Some are the size of a sheet of paper, but they are clearly full of potential revealed as the exhibition unfolds. The path to the “Mists” pieces is revelatory one room at a time. But those early studies pull the eye in for their intricacy: Here you can see the way the artist sets up a layered construction with contours. At times, she makes gold her focus with arresting pieces. Other times, the gold rests beneath the surface; a murmur rather than a shout.

De Amaral's mix of materials is fascinating for the different ways they speak to the eye and also to the mind. Some pieces were constructed from horsehair, the artist working with natural elements available to her. Others have subtle, political underpinnings. "Luz blanca" ("White Light") was a concept she started in 1969 and updated a decade ago: de Amaral threaded pieces of plastic through a grid. On one side, they look like a translucent coat and train that Elton John might've worn on stage in the 1970s. The back side shows the meticulous grid built to facilitate the cascade of pearl tones.

Rare is an exhibition that moves with the purpose of human exploration. But "To Weave a Rock" certainly does so. It opens with such a rudimentary introduction: Swatches that illustrate an artist braiding together seemingly disparate trades — textiles and architecture — and then seeing where that strange fusion goes. In the case of de Amaral, the path led to fairly flat tapestries to seemingly two-dimensional pieces with water-like ripples to sculptures designed to be circled. And then those recent "Mists," which Walker calls "a jewel box." They bear an irresistible pull.

The pieces — with their brightly colored tendrils — beg to be leaned into and also viewed from afar. They possess a kinetic energy akin to a jellyfish . . . moving almost imperceptibly as air conditioners kick on and shut off and kick on again. But engaging them feels like swimming through the ocean: an opportunity to interact with the elusive brilliance of bioluminescent colors that vanish when you return to dry land.

Which is a fitting summery of spending time walking through a retrospective of de Amaral's work. It feels earthy and celestial, immense and meticulous, near and far — a self-contained travelogue through an artist's vision that has evolved with intrigue over time.

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