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Olga de Amaral's Sumptuous Works Are in Hot Demand, as Textile Art Gains Market Momentum

Not so long ago, specialists were alone in championing her work. Those days are long gone.

Artist Olga de Amaral with one of her artworks. ©Olga de Amaral; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

By the time veteran art advisor Naomi Baigell began working at Prudential in the late 1980s, the financial services company had amassed a sizable corporate art collection that was heavy on paintings, prints, and works on paper from the 1970s and 1980s. It also had several textile pieces by the Colombian-born artist Olga de Amaral, However, Baigell told me that, as curator and manager of the collection until the late-90s, "I couldn't hang one of them if I tried." Executives said, "No. Give me an abstract work of art instead."

Times have changed. In recent decades, there has been a radical reconsideration of fabric art by both museums and the market. While it's not accurate to say that Amaral, who is now 93 and still making work, was ignored or overlooked in her days, she has earned international renown for her masterful works as appreciation for textiles has soared.

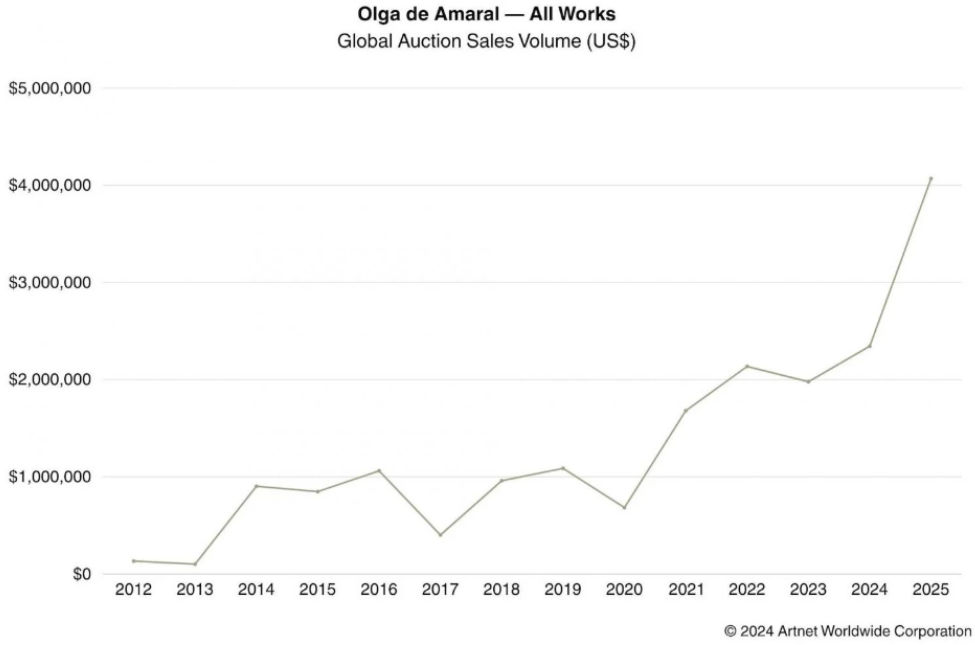
Olga de Amaral, *Imagen perdida 27* (1996). Image courtesy Phillips.

The Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami is currently hosting a dazzling Amaral solo show (through October 12) that was organized with, and first shown at, the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris. Featuring more than 50 works that she produced across six decades, it has been garnering rave reviews.

Amaral's works, made with materials like rough wool, horsehair, and shimmering gold fabrics, are also included in the Museum of Modern Art's high-profile "Woven Histories" show. Since 2019, Amaral has been represented by the powerhouse Lisson Gallery, which has expanded her audience, according to market watchers.

“Olga stretched the idea of textiles becoming art,” Baigell said. “She really pushed the idea of weaving into an art form rather than a household craft item.” She compared her to Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, who elevated photography into the realm of contemporary art. “We’ve gotten to be a much broader and more evolved viewing audience, where we’re accepting of multiple forms of art and artistic adventure,” she said.

Though it is not yet half done, 2025 is proving to be Amaral’s best auction year yet, with her highest volume to date and a new record price set just last month. Eager to learn more about the rise of her market, I recently caught up with several experts.



Overall Performance

Auction record: $1.16 million, for *Imagen perdida 27* (1996), handwoven linen and gold leaf, which sold at Phillips in New York on May 13, 2025 (pictured above).

Other recent top prices: $1.14 million for *Imagen Paisaje I* (2005), linen, gesso, acrylic, gold and silver leaf, sold at Sotheby’s New York contemporary day auction May 16, 2025.

And $698,500 for *Pueblo X* (2013), gold leaf, acrylic and gesso on linen, sold at Sotheby’s New York, May 14, 2024.

Lowest overall price: $1,200 for *Vestigio 50* (1997), acrylic and gold leaf on fiber laid on panel, at Christie’s New York, January 10, 2007.

Performance in 2025

Lots sold: 7

Bought in: 0

Sell-through rate: 100 percent

Total sales: $4.07 million as of June 2025

The Context: “Olga always had a very strong presence, mainly in the Americas,” Vivian Pfeiffer, deputy chairman at Phillips, said. The artist attended the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., in the 1950s, received a Guggenheim fellowship in the 1970s, and represented Colombia at the Venice Biennale in 1986. She was also featured in the main show in last year’s Venice Biennale.

“Now there is a wider audience for her work and much further appreciation,” Pfeiffer said, noting her steady rise from an auction high of around $400,000 in 2010. She credited Lisson with having done “an amazing job at bringing her work forward.”

View from Casa Amaral, Bogotá, Colombia. Olga de Amaral, *Décimo X*, 2015 © Olga de Amaral. Photo © Juan Daniel Caro.

Kaeli Deane, a senior director at Lisson who was formerly head of Latin American Art at Phillips, said in an email that she “first encountered her work in 2014 and in subsequent years had the privilege of bringing a few of her works to auction. Even then, her work attracted strong results and a dedicated, though niche, group of collectors.”

Lisson first worked with Amaral in August 2021, staging a small solo presentation at its pandemic-era location in East Hampton, N.Y. A larger solo followed in Manhattan that November. Both sold out quickly, according to Deane.

Pfeiffer told me that, around a decade ago, she could sense that things were changing in how the art world viewed both textiles and Amaral specifically. That year—when she visited Amaral's studio in Bogotá—the artist appeared in the 2013 São Paulo Biennial in Brazil, and in 2017, the American textile artist Sheila Hicks contributed a massive piece to the Venice Biennale. The Brazilian artist Sonia Gomes had also begun showing with the contemporary art gallery Mendes Wood DM. "So craft art and weavers were everywhere," Pfeiffer said. "It was a moment like: Aha something is happening," she said.

Detail of Olga de Amaral, *Memorias 6*, (2014)
©Olga de Amaral; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Expert View: The top three auction prices for Amaral have come from three different decades (1996, 2005, and 2013, in that order). Which periods are most in demand?

Deane said that preferences have "evolved over time. A few years ago, there was a clear and defined preference for her gold leaf pieces. However, since we began working with her in 2021, we have seen demand broaden to the full scope of her practice." Early on, Lisson "made a conscious effort to highlight Amaral's earlier work in wool and horsehair," she added. "This helped audiences recognize the ingenuity and mastery that define Amaral's 60-year career."

Pfeifer said that she thinks Amaral's work resonates with current tastes. "People are going for warmer interiors and maybe there is more of an appreciation for craft," she said. "Tastes are shifting and people want to live with more comfortable and warm colors."

Even as recently as 2021, Deane said, the majority of sales "were driven by a select group of leading art advisors who had been closely following Amaral's work." Collectors of Latin American artists of Amaral's generation and institutions with major Latin American art collections were also key supporters, she went on. "However, at that time some contemporary art collectors were still hesitant to embrace fiber art. This has shifted dramatically in recent years."

Lisson is now seeing "significantly more demand for Amaral's work than supply," Deane said. "As such, we take great care in placing Amaral's works in collections that will contribute meaningfully to her legacy on a global scale."

The Appraisal: For an esteemed artist who has been making artwork for so long, she has relatively few entries in the Artnet Price Database: 124. Of those, 100—a strong 80 percent—found buyers. Her works just crossed the $1 million mark this year, and auction prices are trending only slightly higher than those in the primary market. Given the scarcity of Amaral's works, it may very well be a seller's market.

Baigell wondered aloud if some of the artist's tapestries or textiles are sitting, rolled-up, in storage somewhere in a Prudential facility. Present-day executives might be very interested in Amaral's current status. I contacted the firm for comment but did not hear back.

Vogue México y Latinoamérica
21 January 2025

VOGUE
MÉXICO Y
LATINOAMÉRICA

La intuición del arte

Olga de Amaral: la artista que reinterpreta la vida y el color a través del *fiber art*. Con la fotografía de ANDRÉS OYUELA y las palabras de MIGUEL MESA.

OLGA DE AMARAL está sentada de espaldas, usando un vestido plisado negro de Issey Miyake de los años setenta. Con pliegues más profundos, satinados y espesos que los que se fabrican hoy, evoca una elegancia vigente que recuerda a los peplos, columnas jónicas y arquitecturas contemporáneas. En París, su exposición en la Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain resume más de cincuenta años de trabajo, misma que estará abierta hasta el 16 de marzo de 2025. En Bogotá, Olga está acompañada por su esposo Jim, su asistente Margaret y Homero, el perro de la pareja. Nos reciben con café y pan de yucas en su casa del barrio Quinta Camacho, que originalmente albergaba el *showroom* de Taller Amaral en el primer piso y el taller de proyectos personales en el tercero. Hoy, la casa es un espacio de recepción y exhibición de sus obras.

En Taller Amaral, Dora y Pilar, colaboradoras de Olga, trabajan en un espacio iluminado por ventanales, con dos mesas tipo caballete: una con materiales y otra con un textil azul oscuro en proceso. A la izquierda, un marco de madera para telar en vertical descansa en desuso. Las ventanas están decoradas con paneles de polipropileno, fotos de

exposiciones y muestras de hilos, junto a una hoja seca de Yarumo y una imagen de la Virgen. Olga interrumpe el sonido del radio para pintarse los labios de rojo y comenta: "Hay que ponerle color a la vejez". Ha llenado de color todas las etapas de su vida, impulsada por el humor e imaginación de Jim, su esposo durante más de 67 años. Tras algunas fotos, nos sentamos a conversar.

Un tema importante para Olga es su madre, Carolina Vélez de Ceballos, a quien describe con cariño y admiración. De sus visitas a las plazas de mercado, Olga aprendió a valorar la artesanía textil: "Mamá disfrutaba mucho con las cobijas, con las ruanas. Cuando íbamos a la plaza de mercado de Ubaté, la manera como cogía las cosas era impresionante. Fíjese que esa fue la primera sensación que yo tuve de que tenía amor por esas cosas". Los textiles de la región cundiboyacense, donde vivió, son conocidos por su textura, no por estampados. El gesto circular de su madre acariciando la tela revela cómo construía una pequeña arquitectura con sus manos. Olga, como su madre, tiene manos que miran y ojos que saben tocar.

Las experiencias que configuran los recuerdos de Olga están influenciadas por los Andes, una cordillera que atraviesa tanto el continente como su biografía. Esta topografía se refleja en el movimiento del telar, donde los lisos suben y bajan entrelazando los hilos. Olga ha aprendido a trasladar esas sensaciones de la tierra a sus textiles, creando atmósferas que evocan afectos y memorias de esos paisajes. Sus obras son arquitecturas intuitivas, fruto de una sensibilidad cultivada a lo largo del tiempo. Su vocación no llegó como un llamado dramático, sino como un camino tranquilo hacia lo extraordinario.

Sobre su trayectoria, Olga comenta: "La felicidad está en el hacer, en el descubrir y crear, no es que uno haga carrera: es en la vida de uno. Es la sensación de satisfacción que se siente al descubrir algo. Es un camino que uno se traza sin darse cuenta y que no se acaba". Me cuesta imaginar cómo funciona la mente de Olga, cómo ha logrado escribir un nuevo capítulo en la historia del arte a través del *fiber art*, creando experiencias sensoriales que resuenan tanto con el territorio andino como con una humanidad universal. Ha ido construyendo con calma su propio paraíso. Acaricia el oro como si fuera un romance, encuentra el color en cada nudo y en la repetición constante de gestos, transformando la materia bruta en ideas vivas. En la exposición, se pueden ver 78 obras, desde las primeras de 1966 hasta las más recientes, de 2019.

Junto a ella hojeo uno de sus libros, recorriendo parte de su memoria. Con intuición, pasa las páginas y se asombra del camino trazado. Observándola, pensé que si al nacer nos dieran una piedra, esa piedra apenas cambiaría a lo largo de nuestra vida. Pero Olga no se conformó: la reinventó, le dio color y volumen, la aplanó, la cubrió de crin, lino, pintura y laminilla, multiplicándola como una alquimista y dotándola de vida. Luego la colgó, cual columna vertebral, y la volvió textil. Sus obras provocan vértigo, como contemplar el nacimiento y desarrollo de un volcán.

HILOS UNIVERSALES
Desde arriba: vista de la obra, Memorias 3 *(2011); piezas de la serie* Brumas *(2014-2018). En página opuesta: la artista de raíces colombianas, Olga de Amaral.*

Volviendo a la imagen de Olga sentada, su semblante evoca el de un volcán: una roca vibrante, de ternura andina y a la vez eterna. El tiempo la vuelve más noble, combinando la solidez de la piedra con la voluptuosidad del espíritu. Al escucharla hablar y verla interactuar con sus tejidos, da la impresión de que ha visto algo que los demás aún no. Es el carisma de quien ha imaginado y regresado de ese mundo con respuestas, sin temor. Un deleite conocer a alguien que ha vivido de sus obsesiones y dispara muchas ideas certeras que nos desarman. Un volcán que crea nuevos horizontes hechos de geografías textiles. Si la desobediencia reabriera las puertas del paraíso, tal vez el paisaje se parecería a la obra de Olga de Amaral.

LISSON GALLERY

The Times
31 October 2024

THE TIMES

INTERVIEW

Olga de Amaral — the 92-year-old artist who weaves with gold

The textile art trailblazer talks to Lisa Grainger as her first European retrospective at Paris' Fondation Cartier opens

Most artists aged 92 aren't still producing works. Few are having exhibitions. And the majority certainly aren't confident doing interviews via a computer screen.

But Olga de Amaral isn't like most nonagenarians. Talking to me on Zoom from her daughter's office in Bogota, the Colombian seems as vibrant as the artworks she creates. With her white hair pulled back into a chic bun, her body draped in an elegant blue jacket, and her eyes glittering behind giant black round spectacles, she's the Iris Apfel of the South American artworld.

Who she is — and what her art represents — she wants to make clear to me immediately. For a start, she says, she doesn't really care what people think of her. And second, the reason she works is not to produce items for exhibitions or sales (including Sotheby's, where this year she sold a work for almost $700,000). Creating pieces from various fibres — whether that's linen and cotton or strands of horsehair, which she then knots, weaves, knits, sculpts and sometimes coats with gesso, paint or gold — is part of who she is. It's what she has done since she was a child. If she doesn't produce art during her waking hours, she doesn't feel alive.

Cenit, 2019

Círculo V-VI (diptique), 2004

Her true love — as her daughter, who is sitting beside her, attests — has always been textiles. That's probably because, she surmises, they were always the most beautiful items in the markets she went to as a child. "I saw the way my mother would look at blankets and materials, the way she touched them. I could see that they were impressive. And I felt the love she felt."

Wool was the first fibre she started to experiment with: weaving, knotting and shaping it into elemental forms. Then she tried horsehair "because there were many horses around". At the start the shapes and patterns that she made were inspired by nature "because that's all I knew: mountains, forests, plants, horses". This changed when, after a degree in architecture, she enrolled at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, the American equivalent of Germany's Bauhaus school, and took lessons with Marianne Strengell, a Finnish-American experimenting with three-dimensional fibre art.

By the 1960s, de Amaral had been recognised alongside Sheila Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz as one of the world's most innovative fibre artists, responsible for creating a new art form — modernist fibre art — that, for the first time, didn't hang on a wall, but was often part architecture, part sculpture, part painting, part installation.

La Casa Amaral, Bogota

Bruma T, Bruma Q, Bruma R, 2014

©OLGA DE AMARAL, COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Of the 90 works of hers on show at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, most are abstract and strongly graphic in their design: a “rainshower” of bright blue threads falling from the sky; a trio of upended gold-covered, rolled-carpet shapes; a Rothko-like almost Majorelle-blue layered hanging painted with a simple red square; a triangle of linen fibres hung in parallel rows, each painted in reds and blacks to give a 3D effect.

Perhaps the most famous are her “gold” works: intricate weavings into which she adds small squares of gold on gesso. Some are enormous, undulating hangings in vivid blue with little glints of gold, while others are pure-looking contemporary white “altars” of thread, stippled with gradations of gold.

A key part of her work is bright colour, particularly the hues of the Colombian countryside. “In the little towns in the campo, the walls of the houses were always painted white and blue. Everything was white and blue. I loved that. So at the beginning I used it a lot.”

Gold soon became her signature colour, however. “I can’t say why. I just fell in love with it,” she says. Perhaps it was its sheen and warmth, she says. Or perhaps its link with pre-Colombian art, or the local Catholic churches she’s visited all her life. “Also, in Bogata we also have a wonderful gold museum,” she adds. “Gold is everywhere.”

Bruma D1, 2018

©OLGA DE AMARAL, COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Olga de Amaral in 2024

©JUAN DANIEL CARO

She first saw the metal being used in contemporary art by her friend the ceramicist Lucie Rie, who incorporated the Japanese technique of *kintsugi* — adorning cracks with gold powder — into her works. Soon after, de Amaral started to coat her enormous hangings, made of thousands of little woven squares, with gesso, then gold leaf. The whole process, she admits, "takes a long time. And I had to learn to do it and have special tools because gold is very delicate."

Slowly her art started to appear in galleries round the world. After her work's first European appearance in the 1960s in the third Biennale of Tapestry in Lausanne, leading institutions and collections began to follow, from the Tate Modern and Moma to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Why no European gallery has mounted a major retrospective of her work until now "is not clear", she says, shrugging. "I don't know why. And honestly it doesn't bother me." Although the work clearly does make her happy. "I love to do art, and that people will be able to see that is wonderful. I guess that it's in Paris is fantastic — not because I need to be celebrated, but because I love my work. So the pleasure for me is that at last it, not me, is being recognised."

Bruma T, 2014

Essentially, she says, making art is the love of her life, and all she wants is for other people to feel that love too. She loves making it, she loves doing it. And she is delighted that textile art has gone from “women’s work” and something “that’s not very manly to do” to an internationally recognised, non-gender-specific art form.

What does make her slightly sad it’s that she probably won’t get to see the greatest retrospective of her life’s work. The journey from Bogata to Paris is, she says regretfully, “a long and heavy one. While I have the energy to work — because works are my best friends — can I get on a plane? I’m not sure. We’ll see.”

The Olga de Amaral retrospective is at the Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain in Paris until March 2025, fondationcartier.com and is accompanied by a book of her works (€49)

Art in America
25 October 2024

Art in America

Olga de Amaral Renders Delicate Threads Emphatically Monumental

By Maximilíano Durón October 25, 2024 7:00am

View of the exhibition "Olga de Amaral," 2024, at Fondation Cartier pour l'art Contemporain, Paris, showing works from the artist's "Brumas" series.
Photo Marc Domage

For decades, **Olga de Amaral** has created works in fiber that have a certain presence to them. Whether they are just a few inches tall or more than 11 feet, hanging from the ceiling or cascading onto the floor, there's a certain heftiness and monumentality to her work: threads here are no longer easy to overlook. Instead, they are the source of endless possibilities and delight.

Amaral's career retrospective at the **Fondation Cartier** pour l'art contemporain in Paris, on view through March 17, features more than 80 of the textile-based works she's been making since the mid-1960s. On the ground floor, visitors are greeted with dozens of Amaral's eye-catching mature works, separated into two installations. But to understand how Amaral got there, it's essential to see her earlier tactile experiments by descending into the basement level, which architect Lina Ghotmeh has transformed into a chasm meant to mimic a night sky, with elliptical-shaped galleries and unfinished walls that are meant to be touched.

In this void of textured spackle, Amaral's colorful tapestries—in warm and vibrant shades of red, orange, pink, purple, silver, copper, and gold—glow with saturation. Take *Elementos rojo en fuego* (Red elements on fire), from 1973/1981, an eight-foot-tall work made of various squares of crimson, ochre, marigold, and magenta woven into a grid. No two sections are alike; it's as if you're witnessing a massive fire as it crackles and sets the night ablaze.

Nearby are works that show Amaral's diverse approaches when it comes to fiber, including weaving, braiding, and knotting. The fuchsia and purple bundles of cords that comprise *Naturaleza mora* (1979) are paired with layered swatches of purple and orange fabric in *Encalado en laca azul* (1976). Her relentless experimentation betrays the endless ways one might combine countless threads, minute things we encounter so ordinarily that we can forget the labor and craft behind them. Other works hang in the center of the room, their backsides revealed, offering insight into how Amaral constructs her complex configurations: we see the shimmering gold in one sun-like work intricately stitched onto a backing of royal blue waves.

While her work conversed with modernist pictorial strategies—like color field painting and geometric abstraction—Amaral also looked at pre-Columbian knowledge and artifacts, including quipus and stelae, to develop her own language of abstraction, unique for its emphasis on materiality. Her works have taken the forms of quipus and stelae, which recorded the histories of their eras, yet her references remain enigmatic, and not for us to ever decode.

Back on the ground floor, a thematic grouping of works from 1976 to 1992 titled "Weaving the Landscape" highlights Amaral's attempts to portray the vistas she saw in Colombia. She chased the ways they changed as the sun shifted along its daily route, and those layers of history were brewing beneath the surface. Ghotmeh has placed several rocks around these sculptures to bring that landscape into the space.

The grand finale is one of Amaral's most recent series, "Brumas" (Mists), begun in 2013. Thousands of brightly dyed strips of linen float throughout the gallery, hung from the ceiling and forming triangular volumes. Shapes—circles, triangles, rectangles—are hand-painted in acrylic across strands, emerging near each works' center. They look as if a breath might disturb them, yet the strands don't seem to move, hanging there like a thick fog—rendering a humble thread bold and monumental.

LISSON GALLERY

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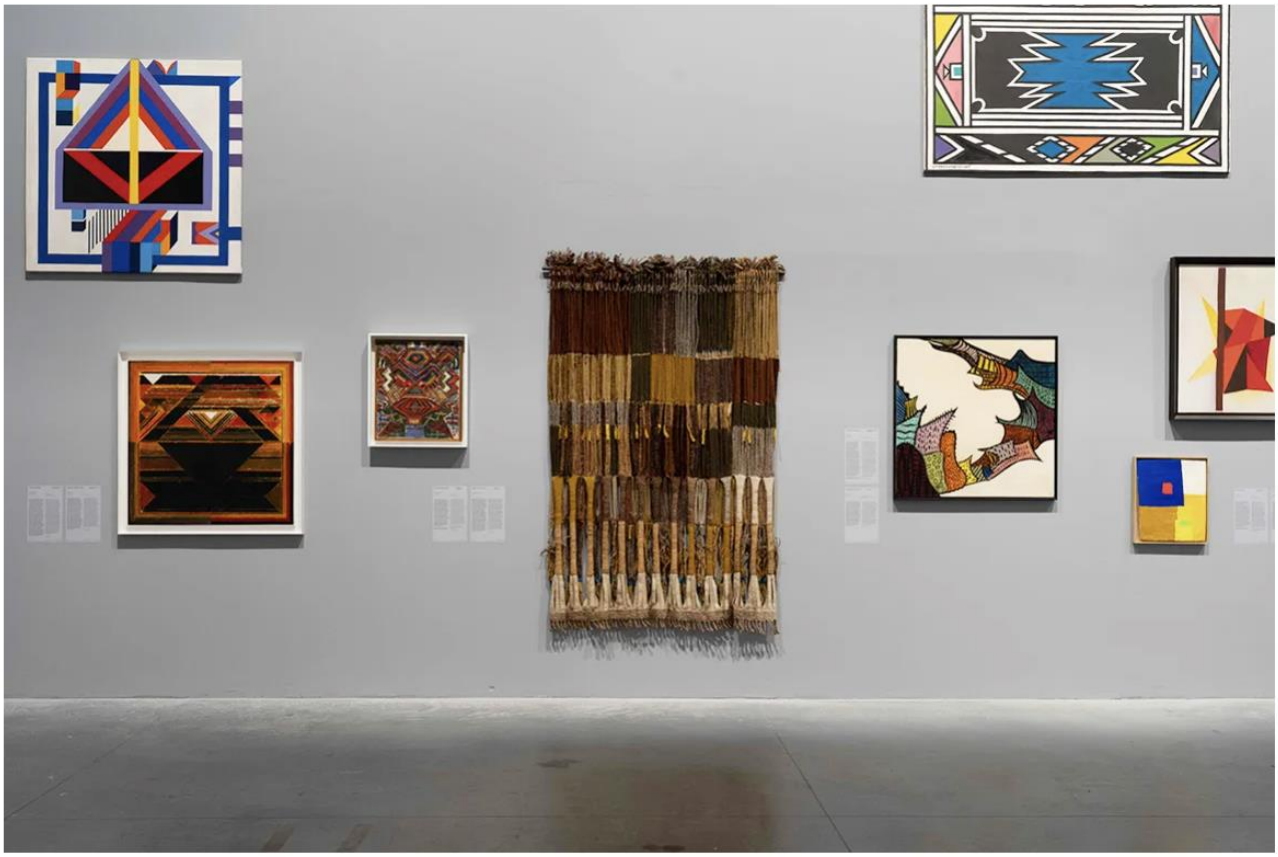
VENICE BIENNALE 2024

By Manuel Borja-Villel



View of "*Nucleo Storico*: Abstraction," 2024, Central Pavilion, Venice. Center, from left: Sayed Haider Raza, *Offrande*, 1986; Ernest Mancoba, *Composition*, 1940; Olga de Amaral, *Muro tejido terruño 3* (Woven Wall Homestead), 1969; Hugette Caland, *Suburb*, 1969; Etel Adnan, Untitled, 1965. Photo: Universes in Universe/Pat Binder & Dr. Gerhard Haupt.

WITH A SUGGESTIVE TITLE, "*Stranieri Ovunque*" (Foreigners Everywhere), and 331 artists, the vast majority from the so-called Global South, the curator of the Sixtieth Venice Biennale, Adriano Pedrosa, has tried to pay a historical debt and provide visibility for artists who have been systematically undervalued or consigned to oblivion. The work done is exhaustive. Pedrosa has made a monumental effort to find a common ground for practices from such disparate countries as Peru, New Zealand, China, and Lebanon. The chance to view Rubem Valentim and Bertina Lopes in the same room, or Ernest Mancoba alongside Olga de Amaral or Sayed Haider Raza, opens possibilities for rare and highly edifying readings. A video by Elyla, textiles by Claudia Alarcón and the women's group Silät, and ceramics by Julia Isídrez, to give but a few examples, illuminate a reality of transcontinental modernism and shared decolonial affinities that demands further scholarship and investigation.

But all the artists, even very good ones, did not fare so well. I have followed the Brazil-based Movimento dos Artistas Huni-Kuin (MAHKU) for a time, and I have seen their major exhibition at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), the institution directed by Pedrosa. There, the paintings and objects on view acquired sense among themselves and in relation to a specific social and political environment. In Venice, however, a city that has become a theme park, the collective's work—a mural splayed across the facade of the Italian Pavilion in the Giardini—comes across as little more than a billboard. In fact, it brings to mind the "decorated shed," formulated by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour in their book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), where symbols on the exterior have little bearing on the internal organization. I don't mean to reiterate the old modernist hierarchy between structure and surface. To the contrary. Though MAHKU's paintings are a bold celebration of an aesthetic mode completely different from the edifice on which they are placed, that aesthetic appears indifferent to what is behind it. There is no antagonism between structure and surface. The problem, in this case, is curatorial, not artistic.

Works by Julia Isídrez, 2017–23, ceramic. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice, 2024. From “Foreigners Everywhere.” Photo: Marco Zorzanello.

For decades, the Venice Biennale has been speaking without really taking into account its own context, and the sixtieth edition is no exception. This placelessness comes into conflict with a good amount of the art on view. In an interview, Pedrosa remarked that he aimed to organize the exhibition’s work according to abstraction and portraiture, supposedly universal aesthetic impulses.[1] The difficulty lies in the wish to replace one canon with another, one that is also universal and neutral, since the very idea of a universal canon is itself a Western construction. Indeed, even if certain painters or sculptors included in the section devoted to

abstraction (Margarita Azurdía, Mohamed Melehi, or Kazuya Sakai) produce pieces of a geometric nature, the works' lines, surfaces, and colors are never just "abstract" but specific. Their forms combine and intertwine among themselves through certain histories and ways of narrating. When decontextualized, their semantic complexity and plastic density diminish. One gets the impression that Pedrosa sought to avoid cacophony and harmonize difference, and thus reinforce—rather than question—the hierarchy of a higher authority.

The criteria established for choosing the works are not very clear. The categories employed are so broad that they are liable to contain something together with its opposite. What does seem appreciable, given the preponderance of media such as paintings, sculpture, textiles, and ceramics, is the assumption of a link between the Global South and art made with the hands or related to craft. It is true that video has been included, but it is comparatively deemphasized. Indeed, one of the most significant examples of new media in the biennial is also one of the few Western productions, the *Disobedience Archive*, launched by Italian curator Marco Scotini in 2005. Though Scotini's project encompasses videos shot by artists and activists from all over the world, such as Marcelo Expósito, María Galindo, and Tejal Shah, one misses projects like Video nas Aldeias, an experimental project begun in 1986 to support Indigenous communities in Brazil with the use of audiovisual resources. That effort, which incorporated as a school in 1997, has in turn generated an extraordinary collection of material that at once forms a living cultural memory and powerfully challenges Western conventions of the archive and representation.

Is an alternative to the canon possible if the frame of reference remains the same?

This is not a young Biennale. A vast majority of the artists represented in "Foreigners Everywhere" were born before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nearly half are dead. Yet despite the evident retrospective goal, history is absent. It has been replaced by faith in progress. The phrase repeated incessantly on the wall labels—*This is the first time that such and such is presented at Biennale Arte*—demonstrates acceptance and delight in achievement rather than rupture. The display of these works is supposed to prove the excellence of a system, the same system that is responsible for colonial plunder. What is most important, it seems, is getting to the Global North, achieving recognition, and entering its public and private collections—which in turn ought to lead to a longed-for change of model. But is this the case? Is an alternative to the canon possible if the frame of reference remains the same?

Although roughly 75 percent of the participants in "Foreigners Everywhere" are neither European nor North American, this is perhaps the most overtly Eurocentric Biennale in recent memory. No matter how many times the curatorial text cites names like Oswaldo de Andrade or Lina Bo Bardi, the principles underlying this show are to my mind those formulated by Immanuel Kant in *What Is Enlightenment?* In that 1784 text, the philosopher from Königsberg explained that some societies are more developed than others. Those that are civilized and mature are autonomous, meaning they are able to follow self-imposed laws, while those that have not yet scaled the peaks of Western culture are heteronomous, meaning they must remain obedient to laws that are externally imposed. As we know, this division was used to justify the colonial wars. It provided the empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with arguments for invading other nations in the name of an alleged universal good.

Pierre Huyghe, *Liminal*, 2024–, real time simulation, sensors, color, sound, indefinite running time.

We cannot propose a real mutation of the dominant epistemological paradigm if we are incapable of imagining a world situated beyond a colonial regime that, as the Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato reminds us, is based on racism, patriarchy, and extractivism. If the show foregrounds Indigenous and Afro-descendant collectives, would it not have been pertinent to make a statement on the colonial wars currently being fought in the Sahel or in Palestine? Would it not have been fair that the Biennale, an event that to this day remains utterly colonial regardless of what is being shown in its premises, refer structurally to colonial violence? In this respect, “Foreigners Everywhere” reveals a great contradiction: It extends invitations to Indigenous peoples but maintains the structure of national pavilions.

This is not the responsibility of the curator, it is true. At other moments in history, however, the Biennale's organizers took specific actions, such as the boycott of Pinochet's Chile in 1974 or of Spain in 1976, during the death rattles of Franco's regime. In the latter case, not only was the Spanish pavilion closed down but a group of art historians, curators, artists, architects, and designers organized a large exhibition of Spanish artists in exile or openly opposed to the dictatorship inside the country.

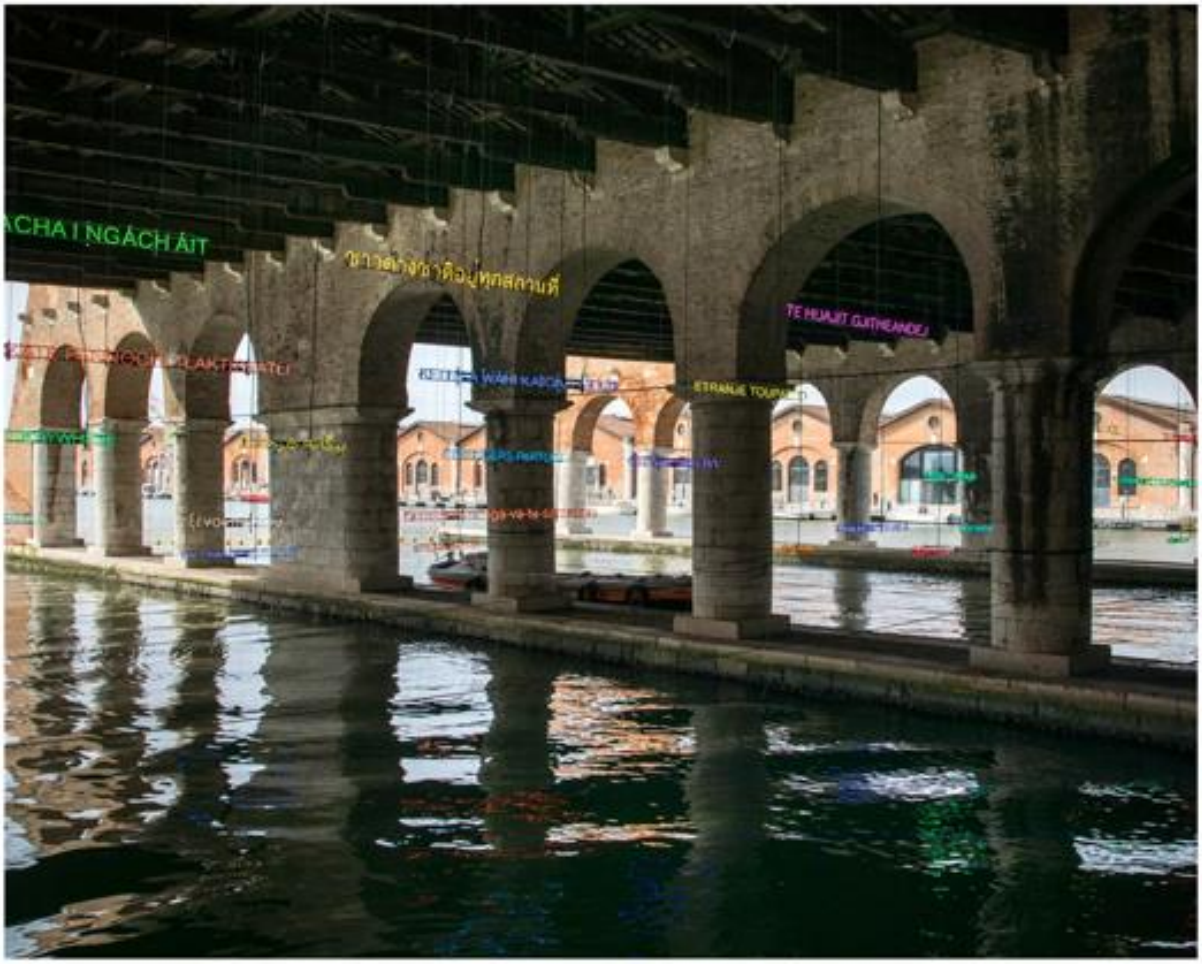
The notion of the foreigner is indissociable from that of the diaspora. Both terms are consubstantial with modernity. In one section, Pedrosa assembled a cluster of works by Italian artists who left the country, some exiled for political reasons, others departing of their own volition. This nucleus, displayed using Bo Bardi's *cavalete de vidro*, or glass easels, devices designed by the architect for MASP in 1968, constitutes one of the most beautiful passages of the Biennale. Suspending individual works on glass panels embedded in and held upright by blocks of concrete, Bo Bardi's system invites viewers to wander among the paintings as if in a forest, making nonlinear connections between them. Yet the meditation on exile is situated, again, beyond history, without any references to causes and conditions. Besides depoliticizing artistic production, it impedes an apprehension of the myriad ways in which the artists of a diaspora construct unique vocabularies to relate to and respond to situations that are plural in the extreme. Diasporic artists must navigate incommensurate signifying systems, occupying a borderline position that forces them to fuse avant-garde features with others of a popular or academic nature. What might be understood as *retardataire*, whereby the subordinate is prevented from ever acquiring the supposedly pristine and uncontaminated vision of the avant-garde artist, is in fact an advantage, since it implies generating often unexpected associations and negotiating the dissonances they give rise to.[2]

> The notion of the foreigner is indissociable from that of the diaspora. Both terms are consubstantial with modernity.

The "foreignness" of "Foreigners Everywhere" responds to an identitarian nature. It unifies very different subjects and collectives whose conflicts are diluted in a sort of essence that condemns them to always be the same. The identity of the foreigner is counterposed with that of another identity, that of the European. The other always subsists as other, and the separation between those who are outside and those who are inside remains intact. Instead of revealing the domestication, transformation, and distortion that hegemonic cultures impose on alien ones, Pedrosa elevates that process to the category of a principle that determines how we evaluate the works without exception. Since it is a maxim applicable to other cultures, any colonial nexus set up between the artistic practices of the dominated and the oppressed fades away. Far from being the result of specific historical conditions that began in the sixteenth century and continue up to the present day, the art of the Global South in the Sixtieth Biennale appears as the product of a natural and ancestral drive, represented through constants like abstraction, portraiture, the queer, art transmitted from parents to children, or weaving. As such, the show suggests that so many artists have been relegated to oblivion for reasons that are cultural, not political.

Following the Syrian thinker Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm's critique of Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*, we might conclude that "Foreigners Everywhere" is premised on the thesis that colonial empires would have behaved otherwise if the North's conceptual framework was simply more empathetic toward the South.[3]

At the same time the Venice Biennale was opening its doors, the Punta della Dogana in the same city hosted an excellent exhibition by Pierre Huyghe titled “Liminal.” While we might deduce that “Foreigners Everywhere” had the mission of absorbing dissidence and did so in the best way known to capitalism, which is by turning everything into merchandise and hiding the conditions of production, Huyghe presented us with a dystopian future where the human being has disappeared, leaving behind only other forms of existence. What we find is the extinction of humanity, but not the system in which it is immersed. Distinct as they are, these two shows mirror each other in the failure to imagine a world beyond capitalism and colonialism.



Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere/Stranieri Ovunque (60th International Art Exhibition/60. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte)*, 2004–24, sixty neon signs, framework, transformers, cables, fittings. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice, 2024. From “Foreigners Everywhere.” Photo: Marco Zorzanello.

In the 1960s and ’70s, Pier Paolo Pasolini already averred that it is up to the poets—that is, the champions of intellectual rage and philosophical fury—to create a state of alarm that will resemble the actual state of emergency that he, following Walter Benjamin, demanded in his fight against fascism.[4] For Pasolini, one could not establish that state of emergency without first retrieving the traditions of the oppressed. If the substratum of the local and the vernacular is being erased in a metaphorical but also very literal sense by a voracious and extractive economic order, then the global subaltern’s rage must be given a voice and a place. Perhaps we expected this of a Biennale in which so many subaltern voices and bodies had been invited to participate. It would have been stimulating to contemplate their legacy from the standpoint of friction, not conformity, and to propagate what Pasolini described as the whirlwind of history, the seedbed for disruptions of colonial space, time, and logic.

CODA

I began by mentioning the Biennale’s title, “Foreigners Everywhere.” This was the name of an anti-fascist and anti-xenophobic group operating in Turin in the early 2000s. In 2006, the Palermo, Italy–based Claire Fontaine appropriated the moniker for a neon work, and Pedrosa, in turn, adopted it for his show. Today, however, the phrase’s meaning has begun to seem ambiguous. Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s prime minister, is a member of the right-wing Brothers of Italy party, obsessed with implementing anti-immigrant policies. Could the title be read, cynically, not ironically but as an endorsement of her xenophobic positions? And Venice has a clear mass tourism problem. Does the title come across as a joke? Perhaps it would have been wise to raise these questions before starting.

Manuel Borja-Villel is an art historian and curator based in Madrid and Barcelona.

Financial Times
28 January 2024

FINANCIAL TIMES

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

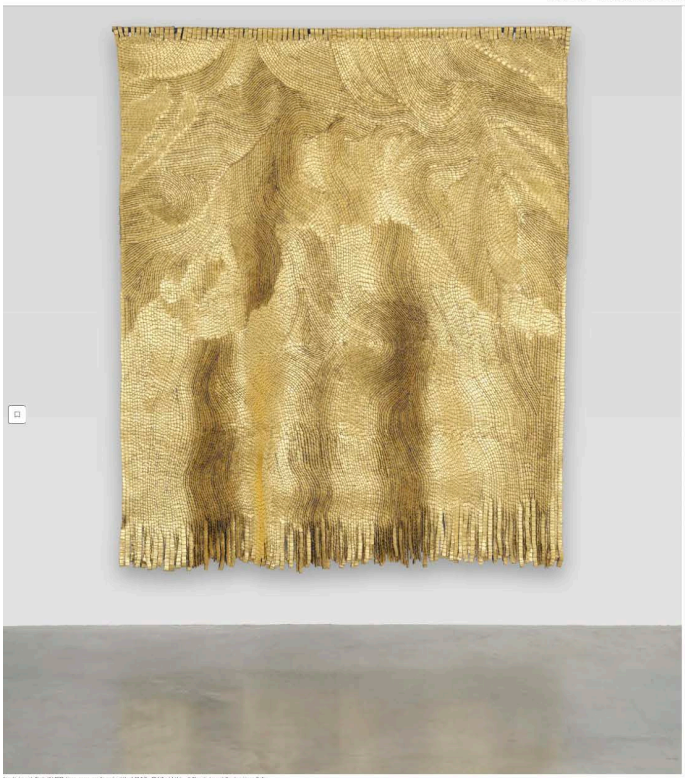
On view at Lisson Gallery from September 23 to October 29, "Olga de Amaral" is the Colombian artist's first solo show in London since 2015. Highlighting seminal works from the past two decades of her trailblazing career, the exhibition features iconic tapestries mingled with gesso, gold leaf, and palladium,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

Olga de Amaral, *Luz blanca*, 1969/1992/2010, 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.

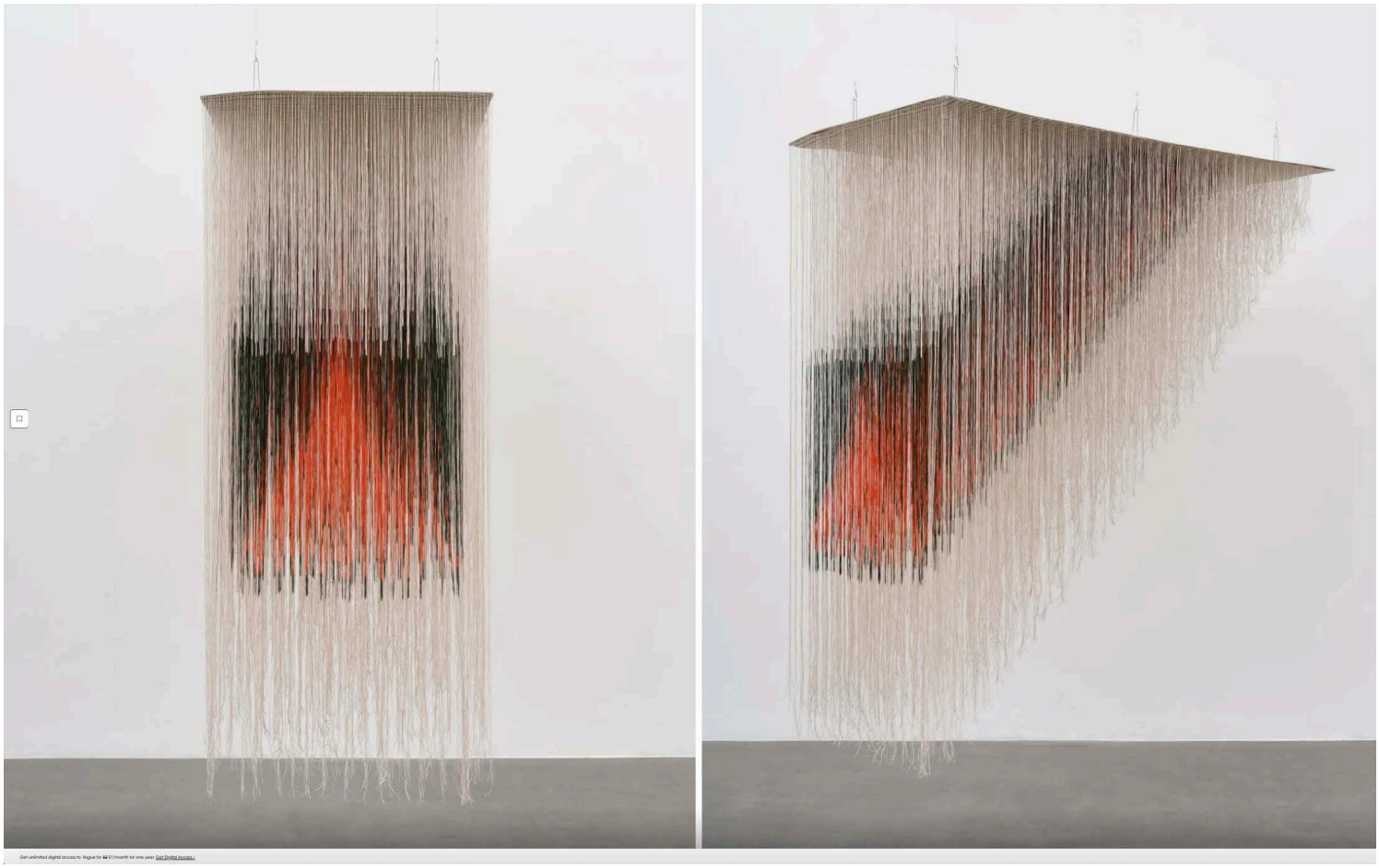


Olga de Amaral, *Textil XX*, 2009. Linen, gesso, acrylic and gold leaf. 88 5/8 x 79 1/8 x 6 1/4 in. © Olga de Amaral. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

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

ARTLAND

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.

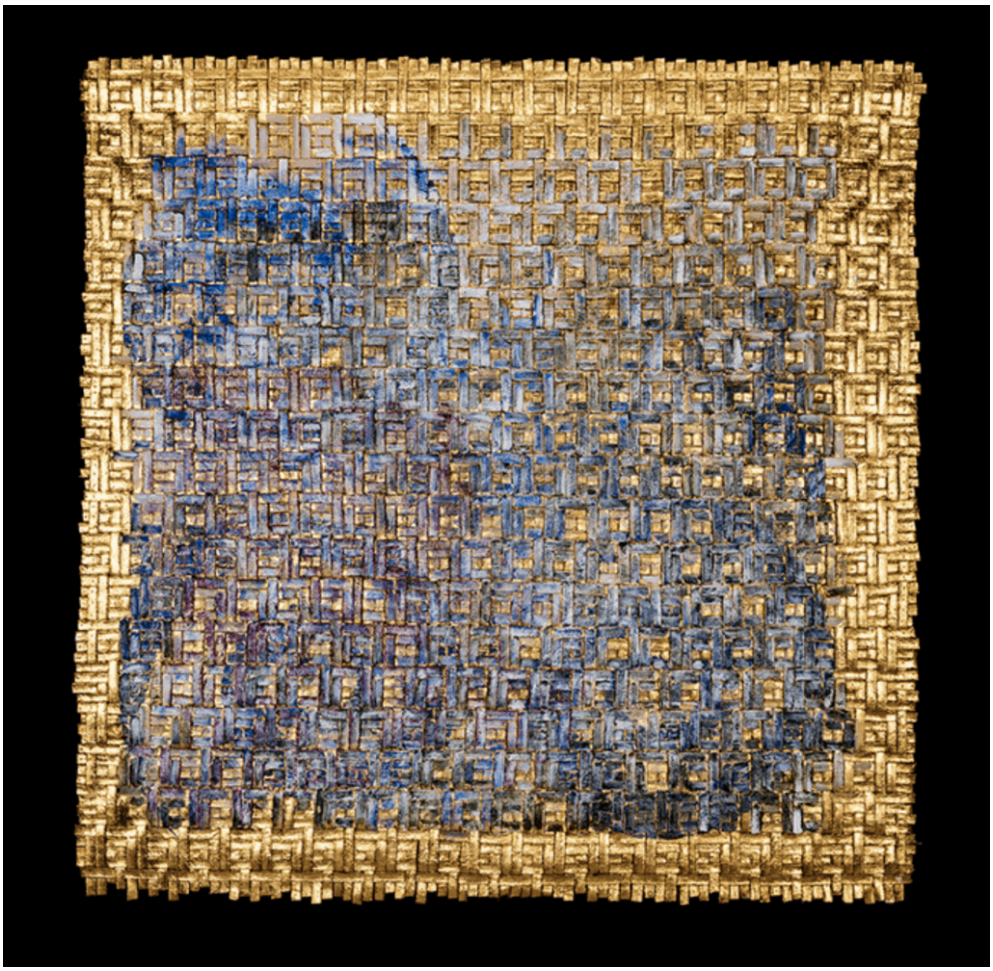
In direct opposition to this, it is the creative world of Colombian weaver and fiber artist Olga de Amaral, whose approach to materiality, colour, texture, and surface celebrates each element with an alchemical-like treatment. Displaying a uniquely unapologetic use of gold, precious metals, decadent 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)

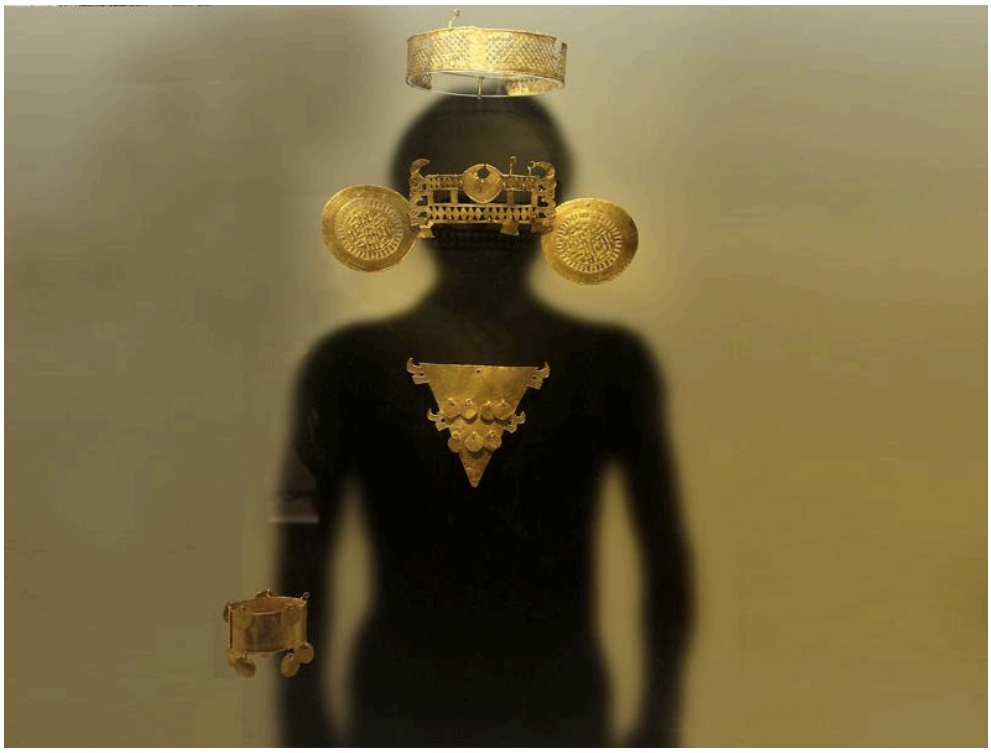
Our brains are hardwired to be infatuated with the effervescent: our perception is sometimes lost or misguided by the way in which gold, silver, and rich pigments distort and amplify light and reflections. It is upon this anamorphic landscape that Amaral's works dwell in an added plane for our mind's 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

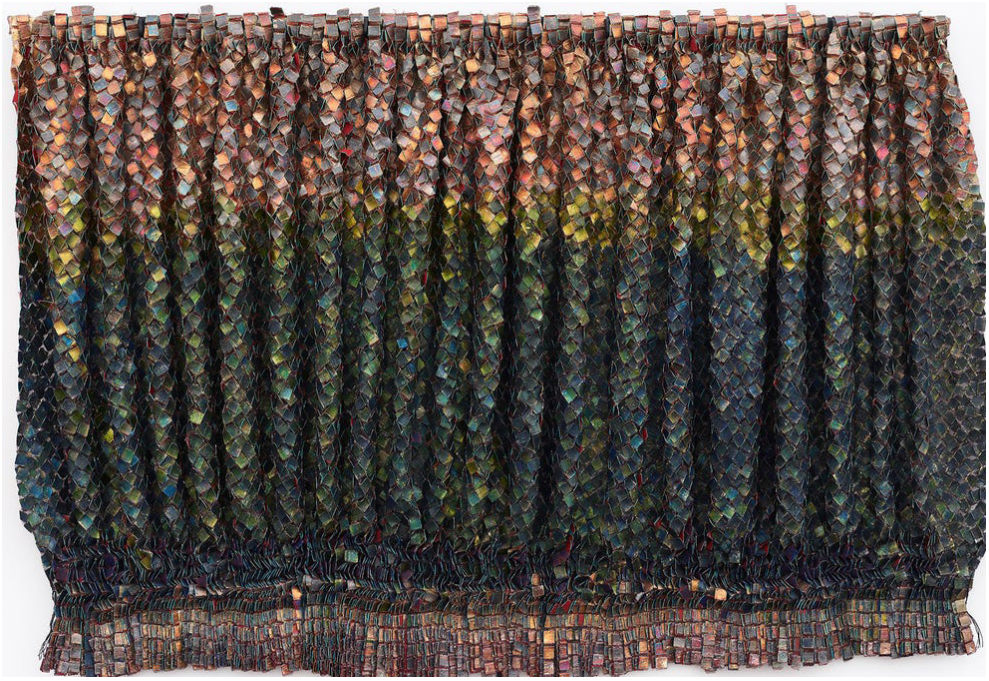
Gold lived with their society, not hoarded only in the storerooms and closed-off buildings of the elite, this was the idea of El Dorado. While Europeans searched and desecrated numerous amounts of gold and resources from the Americas, El Dorado was never found for it was the idea of it that they never 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.

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
December 9, 2021

de Young \
\ Legion of Honor
fine arts museums
of san francisco

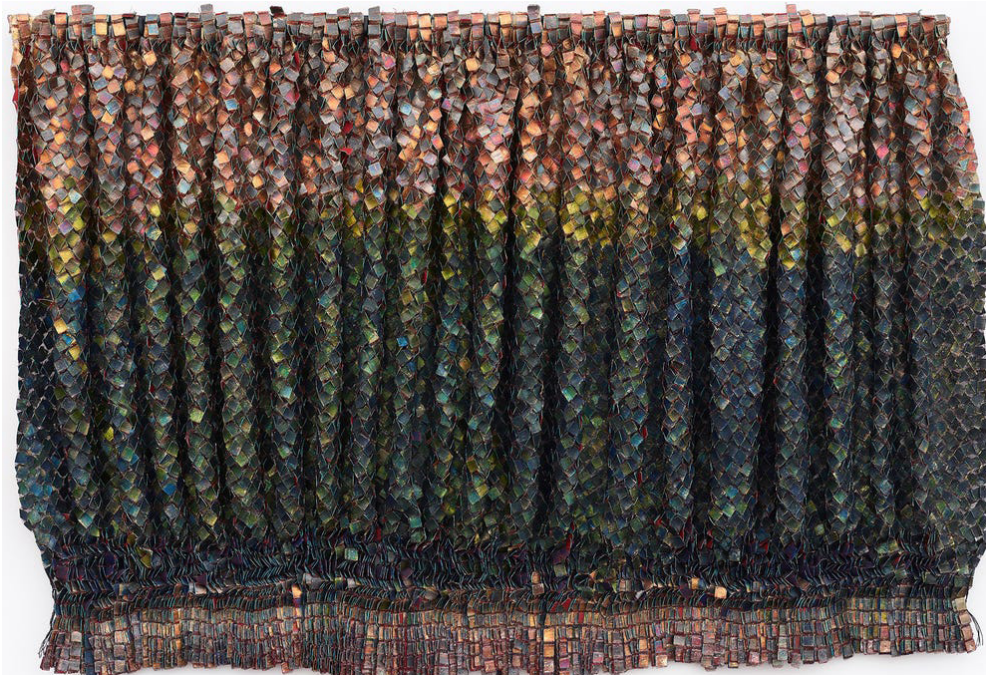
The Weight of Weaving: A Closer Look at Olga de Amaral's "Lost Image 17"



By Julieta Fuentes Roll

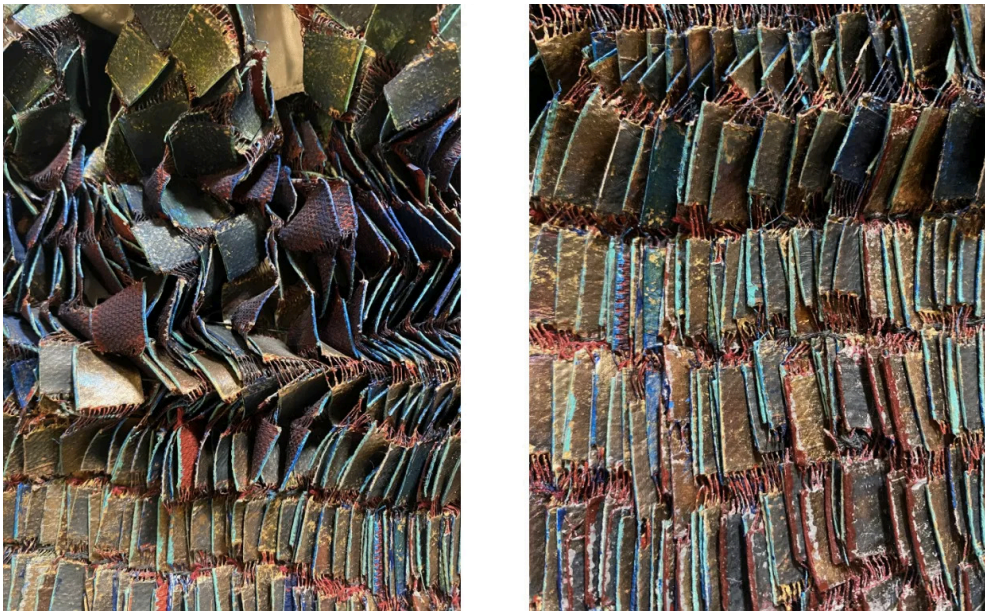
I didn't know what to expect as I began my summer internship at the de Young museum within the costume and textiles department. I was both nervous and thrilled. I worried that the space might prove to be inaccessible to me as an undergraduate student. This opportunity was special to me as an anthropology 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.

more. **www.lissongallery.com**

Image courtesy of 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."

mfeighan@detroitnews.com

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

PREVIEW
HOUSTON'S INSIDER GUIDE

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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