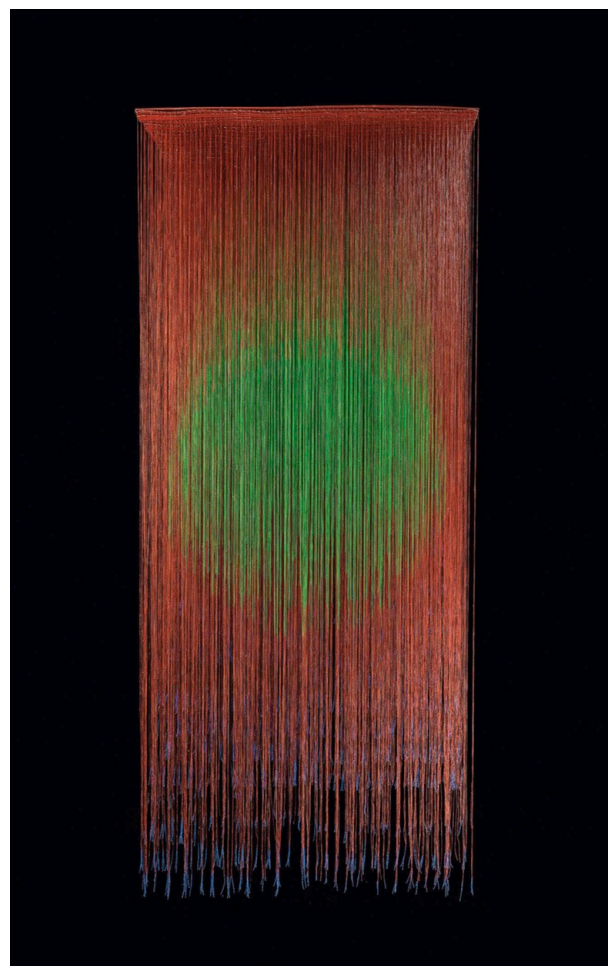


beyond conventional languages that described traditional tapestries and industrially-manufactured textiles. Light and volume are essential preoccupations in Amaral's most recent works and engage in a very specific vocabulary inherently connected to the kinetic art movement in South America. Titled *Brumas (Mists)*, these sculptures consist of thin, painted threads of fiber that form a colorful geometric shape when suspended in the air. Psychically connected to the work of Jesús Rafael Soto, Amaral's suspended sculptures embrace abstraction and magic in uniquely geometric ways. Sandra Monterroso's approach to fiber stems from a multipronged approach to gender violence, colonialism and power structures. Her chosen materials connect geographically and culturally to her indigenous ancestral heritage as a Mayan woman. Using traditional dyes, natural fibers and found objects, Monterroso constructs wall hangings that connect to an indigenous spirituality based on ritual and performance practices that celebrate her mestizo identity through tradition and memory. Marina Weffort's gossamer-like textiles pay tribute to the history of constructivism and minimalist art through geometric patterning reminiscent of Agnes Martin and other modernist masters. Weffort poetically disrupts the warp and weft structure, the two basic components used in weaving to turn thread or yarn into fabric, by delicately extracting individual strands of fiber to create her delicately wrought compositions. Seen together, *Through the Eye of the Needle* and *The Poet*, effectively articulate for a much-needed reassessment of the values and materials that visual artists such as Cohen, Amaral, Monterroso and Weffort employ. Their unique sensibilities each grapple with a contentious past that nonetheless embraces the potential to approach the future with optimism and beauty.



Olga de Amaral
Bruma K, 2014
 Linen, gesso, acrylic, 74 3/4 x 35 3/8 in.

Gilbert Vicario, Guest Curator

¹ Theosophy is a religion established in the United States during the late 19th century. It was founded primarily by the Russian immigrant Helena Blavatsky and draws its teachings predominantly from Blavatsky's writings. Categorized by scholars of religion as both a new religious movement and as part of the occultist stream of Western esotericism, it draws upon both older European philosophies such as Neoplatonism and Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

² Albers, Anni; Danilowitz, Brenda (2000). *Anni Albers: selected writings on design*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

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Liz Cohen: *The Poet*
Through the Eye of the Needle:
 Olga de Amaral
 Sandra Monterroso
 Marina Weffort

October 21 to December 18, 2021



Liz Cohen,
HIM, 2015-2016
 Mixed media
 Variable Dimensions

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Liz Cohen: *The Poet*

Olga de Amaral, Sandra Monterroso, Marina Weffort: *Through the Eye of the Needle*

The Poet and *Through the Eye of the Needle* explore contemporary artists engaged with the texture and materiality of fiber as a primary medium. At present, we are witnessing a moment where the history of modern art is being rewritten and course-corrected to include artists whose chosen media has heretofore left them out of the larger discourse around modern and contemporary practice. In many cases, these artists have been predominately women who in some cases have been accused of engaging in “women’s work,” a derogatory and oftentimes punitive designation meant to relegate their work into an inescapable, gender-biased category. Rather than shying away from these categories, a new generation of art historians and curators have leaned into these histories to better understand the contributions of women artists and their work, which in fact has both elevated and complicated our understanding of modern art and abstraction over the last century.

Our understanding around ideas about abstraction, spirituality and magic, for example, have recently begun to shift as we learn of the contributions of artists such as Hilma af Klimt, Agnes Pelton and Emma Kunz. Each in their own way they sought to give light to the mystical sources and inspirations that gave “form” to otherwise intangible concepts – ideas not found in nature but that live in the imagination. Interests in non-western religions and theosophy led many of these artists to seek knowledge from leading figures such as the Russian émigré Helena Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy¹, and Annie Besant, author of the influential book *Thought-Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation* (1901), that sought to visualize thoughts, experiences, emotions and music. Simultaneous to these formal explorations were investigations into materials and craft that were first instigated by the legendary figure Annie Albers who was forced to work in the weaving studio at the Bauhaus because it was the only area open to women. Later she would say, “*In my case it was threads that caught me, really against my will. To work with threads seemed sissy to me. I wanted something to be conquered. But circumstances held me to threads and they won me over.*”² Gunta Stölzl (5

March 1897 – 22 April 1983), the head of the Bauhaus weaving workshop where Albers studied, emphasized the singular nature of the woven form, at once a platform for the investigation of form, color, texture and material specific to weaving and an opportunity for the woven object to lay claim to itself as a modernist medium.

Over the course of the 20th century, many artists have engaged in the rich territory of abstract, fiber-based arts: Lenore Tawney (American, 1907 - 2007), Kay Sekimachi (Japanese-American, born 1926) and Magdalena Abakanowicz (Polish, 1930 – 2017), to name a few. The tradition that Albers and Stölzl established at the Bauhaus school, in fact, carried over into American institutions such as Cranbrook Academy of Art where Loja Saarinen, Eliel Saarinen’s wife, was the Academy’s first head of the Weaving Department. 80 years later, Arizona-based artist Liz Cohen (Colombian-American born 1973), who was the Artist-in-Residence and Head of the Photography Department at Cranbrook Academy of Art from 2008 – 2017, entered into this history. Cohen’s artistic practice is rooted in both photography and performance and is perhaps best known for her immersive, ten-year project *BODYWORK*, which explored low-rider and custom car culture. Being at Cranbrook, however, allowed Cohen to step away from her more recognizable practice and into a formal and conceptual territory connected to the history of this institution. During the course of her time at Cranbrook, she began to investigate the notion of ostracization and subsequently developed a friendship with the poet Eric Crosley. The poet began gender reassignment surgery 20 years prior that was of interest to Cohen, and together they embarked on a collaborative research project exploring the constantly shifting definitions of “self” of both artist (Cohen) and subject (Crosley). Using classic documentary tools, interviews, photographs and video, Cohen staged a performative environment in which Cohen and Crosley interacted over the course of twelve hours. As Cohen has stated, “*Playfully cloaked, Eric wore 5 fabric collage masks over a course of 12 hours. He pivoted in a smoky room with the sounds of a drummer as I, camera in hand, orbited around him in the opposite direction.*”

The installation that now comprises *Him* grew out of that improvisational ritual performance giving it both structure and form forged out of spirituality and magic. Inspired by the writings and biography of Eric Crosley, the various objects in the installation function both as iterations and reflections that communicate the intangibility of Cohen’s and Crosley’s thoughts and actions. The physical structure of *Him* is comprised of wooden, skeletal armatures upon which various photographs, collages, weavings and masks are displayed as documentary residue of their performative interactions. It functions as a constructivist portrait of Eric Crosley, whose spare, geometric design Cohen would later connect to Aleksandr Rodchenko’s design of a Workers’ Club at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris in the summer of 1925. The 17 framed collages were made from raincoat material intended to function symbolically as protective coverings and are a poetic reflection that signify the pleasure, pain and creativity that comes from the groin. Cohen has stated that “*Eric Crosley describes himself as a eunuch since his journey into realizing gender reassignment was never fully realized. Perhaps his poetic stance, she says, is a resistance to over definition—a refusal to be boxed in. Uninterested in destinations, he exists and pays a price for living with integrity.*” The 17 woven and framed napkins mirror the forms contained in the collages creating an almost shadow-like reference to themselves. Both collage and weaving are displayed in a grid-like fashion affixed to the wooden structures. Other elements of the installation continue the rhythmic play between reflection, impression and object through the presence of the actual masks Crosley wore during their interaction. In addition, there are photographic images of him wearing the mask, all of which suggest a complex and complicated approach to portraiture wrought out of woven and soft materials.

Presented independently from Liz Cohen’s installation is a three-person show titled *Through the Eye of the Needle*. This exhibition features the work of Olga de Amaral (Colombian, born 1932), Sandra Monterroso (Guatemalan, born 1974) and Marina Weffort (Brazilian, born 1978), who each explores the tactility and materiality of fiber in unique yet overlapping ways. Olga de Amaral studied at Cranbrook Academy of Arts in the 1950s when she was barely 22 years old. Amaral, like most of her fiber contemporaries, was a pioneer in the articulation of her fiber-based practice



Sandra Monterroso,
Ofrenda, cuando las piedras hablan, 2021
Mat woven on floor loom, wool, coral, quartz and thread
31 1/2 x 23 9/16 in.



Marina Weffort
Untitled [light brown with column], 2021
Fabric and rivets
45 5/8 x 39 3/4 x 1 1/8 in.