



A Beautiful Mess: Weavers & Knotters of the Vanguard **Artist Descriptions Attachment**

A commonality shared among all of the artists in *A Beautiful Mess* is a desire to upend traditional perceptions or narratives about weaving, knotting, macramé, and fiber arts as a whole. Each artist radicalizes the medium from a unique perspective.

Renowned artist Windy Chien pushes her craft to the cutting edge by integrating technology, design, history, and even linguistics into her large-scale installations. The San Francisco-based artist believes “it is the responsibility of artists to modernize traditional crafts and forms,” and she fulfills this promise with slick, ingeniously woven pieces rooted in architectural and digital engineering. Chien is passionate about the practice of knot making, with a keen interest in the practical function each knot possesses. By elevating the art of the knot into expansive installations, she challenges the original role of these rope-bound objects and, as American writer Rebecca Solnit puts it, allows “the mute material world [to] come to life.”

Similar to Chien, Chicago artist Kira Dominguez Hultgren integrates technology into her massive weavings to question cultural constructs. Treating her loom as a digital computing device, Dominguez Hultgren literally and figuratively weaves HTML code to create intricately layered personal narratives. The artist uses images from the Smithsonian’s digital archives of Navajo textiles, CAPTCHAS, and computer language throughout her material-heavy pieces. These grand installations speak to Dominguez Hultgren’s experience as a mixed-race artist and serve to deconstruct her family’s post-colonial history. In addition to using the internet as source material, Dominguez Hultgren collects personal, re-appropriated elements to integrate into her weavings. She incorporates rock-climbing ropes from her practice as a climber, silk fabric from the saris of relatives, and even strands of her hair. Together, Dominguez Hultgren’s synthesis of technological systems and non-traditional fibers challenge assumptions of identity and the tradition of weaving itself.

Like Dominguez Hultgren, Chicago-based artist Jacqueline Surdell’s wall hangings explore personal histories and integrate objects from life in order to challenge defined roles and conventional tropes. Surdell was raised in a family of athletes, and from childhood through college, she played volleyball competitively. Her weavings are imbued with the full-body action and physical nature that she has practiced her whole life. In the studio, she hauls yards of heavy rope, manipulating them across mural-sized looms. Her finished work is alive with movement, layers of knots, and open areas that flow organically like a living organism. In *Orange 2*, Surdell strategically hangs her weaving across a steel curl bar used for weight lifting, and hanging from



the bottom of the piece is a single dumbbell weight. Not only do these elements recall Surdell's athletic background, but they also employ a rich juxtaposition between traditional gender roles: masculine strength training versus feminine fiber arts. One can interpret the weights in *Orange 2* as a metaphor for the incredible weight that women bear in our patriarchal society.

Dana Hemenway is a San Francisco-based artist who, similar to Surdell and Dominguez Hultgren, elevates utilitarian objects and uncovers invisible structures. In her sculptures and site-specific installations, she gives extension cords, heavy cotton rope, and fluorescent bulbs new life, fueling an ongoing exploration into how environments dictate the value of items. Further, by fashioning artwork from useful objects, Hemenway blurs the distinction between functionality (design) and decoration (art). The artist links the ability to make our built environments strange to the process of deconstructing and revealing the hidden systems of oppression. By creating a liminal space that defies the role of utilitarian and aesthetic objects, Hemenway opens a window into an alternate reality, rich with imaginative possibility.

Kirsten Hassenfeld, a fiber artist based in Brooklyn, New York, also repurposes materials from life in her vibrantly colored, round woven hangings. She upcycles fabrics from thrift stores, basements, and nearly forgotten storage spaces and weaves them into vividly hued arrangements, densely packed with pattern. By using salvaged fabric scraps like blankets, wedding dresses, and tablecloths from strangers, Hassenfeld reveals the mysterious histories and stories tucked away in them.

Rope Team pays homage to Hannah Perrine Mode's time spent living and working on alpine glaciers and the coastal channels of Southeast Alaska. While conducting research in these remote locations, knots became an essential function and fascinating aspect of life for the artist. To safely traverse glaciers, Perrine Mode became part of a human rope team, quite literally tethering herself to others using lifesaving knotting methods. When out in the ocean, the artist again used various knots to dock boats and cast fishing lines. With this ancient knowledge engrained in her memory, the artist brought the art of knotting back to her studio. The resulting installation incorporates over 150 clay knots hung in an organic formation alongside a video of the artist tying knots as a performative ritual. In this visual arrangement, the ceramic knots become a potent visual representation of earth systems, geologic time, and human connection.

Similar to Perrine Mode, artist Liz Robb uses natural-based fibers in her weavings to pay homage to geological elements, specifically the desert. Robb utilizes linen, merino, cotton, cochineal, and earth pigments in her large-scale sculptural works. Robb's hanging sculptures take on a referential and ceremonial quality using a visual language of universal shapes, raw materials, and earthy tones. References to folk art and ancient fiber crafts are felt strongly in her



wall hangings, which are inspired by the climate and palette of the Mojave, Sonoran, and Chihuahuan deserts.

Materiality is also important to Katrina Sánchez Standfield, an interdisciplinary Panamanian-American artist. Her sculptures, rugs, and large-scale installations are notable for their playful shapes and sizes, defying the weaving norm. Her undulating, tactile ropes of vivid color call out to be squeezed and hugged. By focusing on the material's physical and visual elements, the artist explores the close relationship between physical touch and human emotions such as healing and renewal.

For many of the artists in *A Beautiful Mess*, creating is just as important as the final product. Oakland-based artist Meghan Shimek covets the experience of weaving as a time of therapeutic reflection. She imbues her weavings with emotions of loss, grief, healing, and all of the complex relationships she unravels during the process of making her work. Because Shimek's large-scale weavings demand full-body action, it makes sense that the ordeal of lifting heavy fabrics would provoke an emotional response. Using the rich metaphorical language of weaving, Shimek says, "I thought about how the things I chose to bind myself to had shaped my life and once those cords were broken I now have the opportunity to bind myself to new things." Movement is key to the artist's practice, and she explores this by using an organic weaving style and allowing the fibers to fall in an indeterminate pattern.

For artist dani lopez, weaving is a physical manifestation of longing. Her work reflects a complex tangle of desires relating to love, identity, and time. She intertwines this with an exploration of queerness, femininity, and gender structures. The material the artist uses also plays a profound role. Theatrical, glitzy materials are chosen in reference to drag queen culture and the performative exaggeration of femme identity. Paying close attention to form and materials, dani lopez controls her narrative. In the artists' words, "The work is becoming a fictionalized memoir, where I am in control of what is true, what gets rewritten, and where the two become blurred. The narrative of an out loud youth within the work comes from the closeted one I lived."

Artist Lisa Solomon also taps into the physicality of her art practice by exploring repetition. Solomon is drawn to the juxtaposing connotations repetition holds, both as a symbol of strength and as a symptom of a virus spiraling out of control. In her large-scale installation *Senninbari [1000 stitch knot belt]*, the artist explores the number one thousand as it relates to Japanese culture. In Japanese folklore, the number one thousand, or sen, symbolizes luck. During World War II, the wives of husbands going off to war would gather in groups of a thousand to stitch Senninbari belts, which were worn as talismans to protect soldiers. Solomon explored this concept by creating one thousand French Knots, the knot used in Senninbari to create a strong



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stitch. The knots were dyed in an ombre of pink to red and hung in a grid – an arrangement that makes for a powerful viewing experience. By making these visual choices, Solomon highlights the rigor, focus, and stamina required to make this piece.