

Surface Design

Margo Wolowiec: The Elusive Narrative

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The inundation of images on the internet makes for a primordial soup that requires a weeding out to stay afloat in the quagmire. The choice to look or look away, constantly poses a conundrum between the pressure to be informed and involved; while simultaneously attempting to maintain some semblance of disconnect for the sake of one's identity and peace of mind. At the root of Margo Wolowiec's weavings is a rigorous practice of gathering images from the internet, then reappropriating and manipulating them to a tangible end. Her work bridges the ever-lessening divide between technology and the hand-made. The result is work that not only addresses formal qualities of geometric abstraction, but also questions the phenomenology of memory, place and the archive.

For the last four years, Wolowiec has predominantly been using technology-based making processes in conjunction with weaving techniques. Usually, she uses white warp threads, but this past year she has been adding color with traditional dyes. These are then woven as plump and rounded "X" shapes that mimic Photoshop brush tool lines. In an email conversation, Wolowiec made a personal connection with painter Laura Owens' representation of Photoshop brush tool shapes. Although Wolowiec equates her work in dialog with painting, she does not feel it necessary to defend her work in the art vs. craft discussion. Dipping into post-minimalism's use of fabrics and mixed media, her work alludes to abstract painting while at the same time denying the material of paint. Using a symbolic reference to a brush tool adds a layer of technology that works in conjunction with the hand, pushing the implications of the maker's control.

It is the conceptual lack of control that activates her work beyond the tangible tools and obvious references. While working on new techniques in 2012, Wolowiec recalled her grandparents pining over her childhood city of Detroit. Their memories overwhelmed her with a sense of loss and lament. For her MFA thesis exhibition *Hin Und Weider at California College of the Arts in 2013*, she wrote "In my practice, this lament has become a fertile ground for analyzing and revealing changing landscapes of immateriality, opening up new understandings of language, the body, and personal histories." With these thoughts in mind, she began the first works that involved printing images of Detroit maps on the weft, which she left unwoven to further reiterate the incompleteness of the city in its current state.

The unweaving continued while her archiving process for gathering images expanded in works that were shown in January of 2014 at Johansson Projects, Oakland. Wolowiec uses an app on her smartphone that automatically downloads images for her and places them in a Dropbox folder. As she goes about her day engaging in the real world, "liking" things and taking pictures on Instagram, the app is responding and auto-archiving more images out of the worldwide Web based upon her interests or preferences. Later, Wolowiec goes through the images provided for her and begins to form new relationships with them. For instance, she has been making an album of "dream homes"—images of houses where she wishes she could live. But where does the space between reality and fiction collide? She is allowing feelings of anxiety and desire to fold into the selection process, to generate meaning and to create narratives that she prints onto the weft threads using a sublimation process.



Untitled 1969, Hand Woven Polyester, Cotton, Dye Sublimation Ink 55" x 70", 2014. Photo credit Phillip Maisel.

The first stage of the process involves printing mirror images on heat sensitive paper. The second step is extremely laborious, requiring that the weft string be laid out on top of one printed image, close together in a single layer. The mirror printed image is then laid on top of the string and the

three layers are pressed together in a large heat press to set the dyes onto the string. Because the strands are loose and not yet bound, there is a high chance for irregularity—specifically, the sides of the string that are not imprinted with ink leave a tiny white band. Once the strings are woven onto the warps, these small untouched spaces next to bright colors lend an overall static effect when viewed from a distance. For Wolowiec, process quirks are fully embraced as inherent of the string’s materiality, and conceptually play into the work’s premise to upend what is known or remembered and therefore archived.

In April 2014, Wolowiec mounted a solo exhibition of new work at Anat Ebgi Gallery in Los Angeles, drawing from current everyday online source imagery and Navajo traditions. The show remarked upon notions of place and how one locates themselves in greater conversations, akin to the Navajo’s use of abstract symbology and methodology. Embedded in Navajo visual nomenclature are keys to understanding each weaver and their interpretation of culture. Each author inserts their own narrative into each piece, signifying an unspoken understanding conveyed by a visual language known in the community.

Deborah Brinkerhoff (curator of *The Navajo Weaving Tradition* at The Bruce Museum in 2000) remarked that the weaver’s intentions and personal meanings are embedded in the work. “The individual’s freedom to make decisions about design, color and technique has remained at the center of Navajo weaving.” Viewers may interpret the work for their own edification; the artist’s true intentions will never be entirely known or revealed. “The meaning belongs to the textile,” Brinkerhoff explains. Like the Navajo, Wolowiec’s weavings are elusive and open for analysis. Her appropriation of Internet imagery provides clues to her trains of thought, but the rest is left hidden in the textile.



Crumpled in the Back Seat, Handwoven polyester, cotton, linen, dye-sublimation ink, fabric dye 81 x 57 inches, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Anat Ebgi.

Bold and vividly arresting patterns dominated the scene at Anat Ebgi Gallery. Throughout the selection, large diamonds or wide bands hover over fields of smaller abstract patterns. The titles lead the viewer into a curious dialog with the work. *Due North* and *A Specific Direction* point toward an unknown locale, although inferences can be assumed based upon color and hints of representation. In the former, blues, blacks and whites are predominant, while indecipherable figures bleed through water or snow. The second is more ambiguous: a chevron pattern, used on road signage to delineate lanes or caution directional cues of a curving road. *Crumpled in the Back Seat* features layered diamonds in golden, canary and butter yellows. The morbid connotation of the title seems to imply a car accident, while the yellow diamond shapes appear to emulate warning or caution road signs. The blur of the layered diamonds mimics the whirr of a speeding car. Meanwhile, *Three Degrees and No Visibility* refers to aeronautic stipulations and extreme wind direction variance classifications for flying. Together, the titles and the material converge in Postdigital storytelling.

Postdigital artists are concerned with creating semblance between technology and humanist needs such as haptic gesture, physicality, dimensionality—anything that relocates the body away from the screen and activates it in the tangible living world. As the Postdigital artist and theorist Maurice Benayoun points out, “I rely on technology as long as it helps me improve and make clear my relationships with other people, or better comprehend and deal with the world. Only then, I consider technology as my tool of choice.” For Wolowiec, technology and gathering an archive serve as the intangible portion of material, while string and weaving are the literal materials. Both are tools dependent upon each other as the concepts and subjects of her work. But it is up to artists like Wolowiec to take technology and use it for other ends, to bring it forth as concept, subject and material. Wolowiec, like other artists today, is working in an era that has no distinct movements, except for that of the digital—a pervasive entity that encroaches upon everything in life, not just the arts. “Today it is necessary to include the information world within the “tissues” of the real,” Benayoun continues.



Although Wolowiec does not self-identify as a Postdigital artist, there is a parallel with her process and a humanist focus. “We are slipping further and further in to a digital realm,” Wolowiec stated recently, “and this is somehow truncating our daily methods of communication.” Her work eludes direct narrative, concentrating instead on the intangible qualities of communication—those moments when reality becomes a figment, where memory serves to fragment, and the archive—albeit tangible “proof”—is only a portion of the truth. All of which is very real and somehow peaceful, despite its elusive nature.