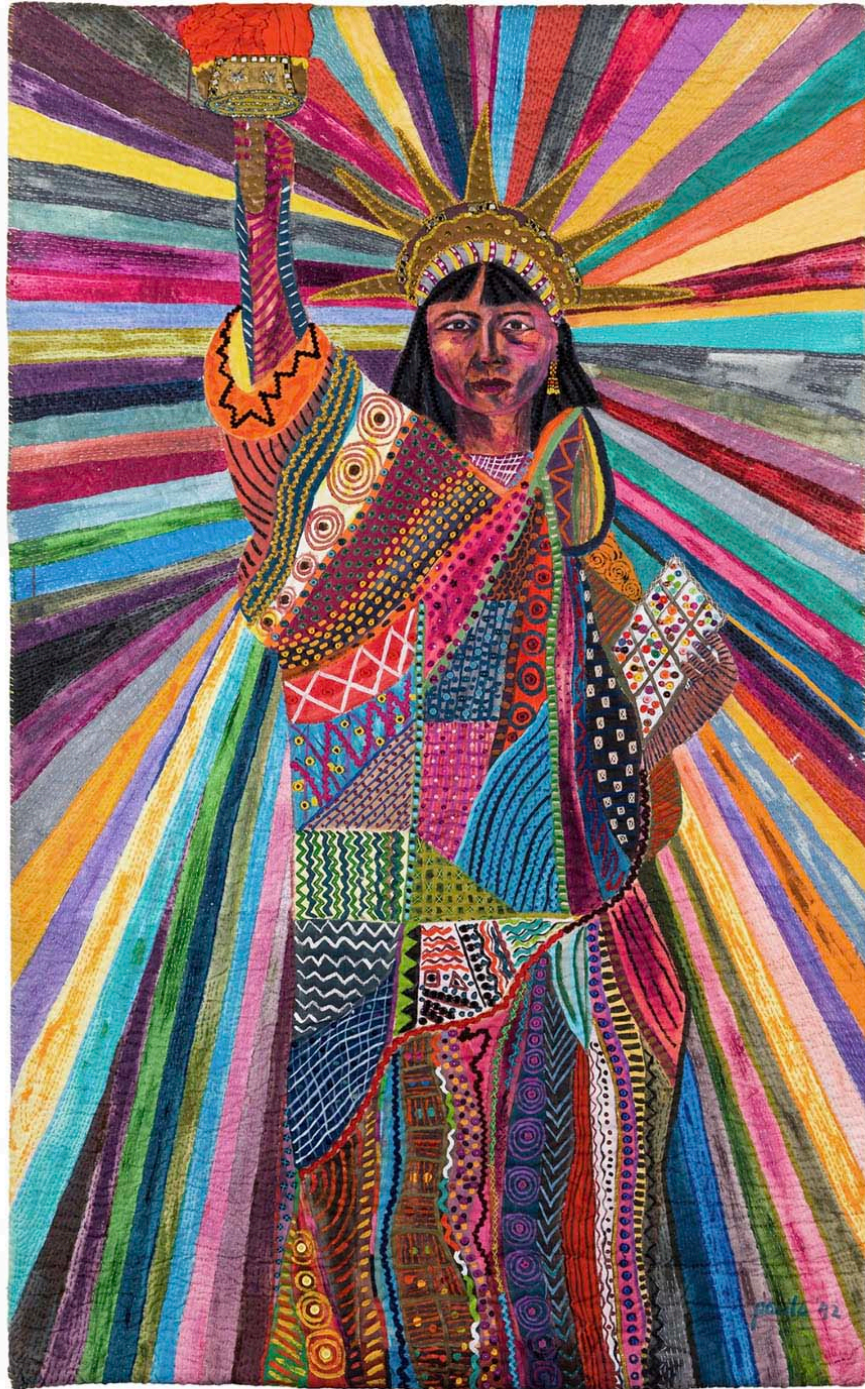


Frieze London Shows the Art World Has Cottoned On to Weaving

A special “Woven” section at the fair celebrates an art form that was long undervalued as a result of sexism and snobbery.



“L.A. Liberty,” a 1992 work by Pacita Abad, on display at the Frieze Art Fair in London. Silverlens Galleries

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By Amah-Rose Abrams

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LONDON — The Frieze London fair opened on Thursday, and art dealers from all over the world have gathered for what organizers are calling the most international edition in the fair’s history. In a huge white tent in Regent’s Park, more than 165 galleries have set up their stands, and on them, you can see art made from iron, found rocks, melted glass and old televisions, all fascinatingly inventive.

But it is a more familiar, though often overlooked, material that is in focus at the fair this year.

Weaving, once looked down on by the art establishment as women’s work, or scorned as folksy craft, is now the subject of major exhibitions at prestigious museums. This year, the Met Breuer in New York, Tate Modern in London and MAXXI in Rome have staged large textile exhibitions; artists whose work features or is inspired by weaving, such Sheila Hicks, Grayson Perry, Faith Ringgold and Annie Morris, have all been praised for recent shows.

Where museums lead, the market follows, and this edition of Frieze features a special “Woven” section. (The smaller 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, also in London, is presenting a similar stream, titled “Thread.”)



Works by Cian Dayrit at Frieze London. Tolga Akmen/Agence France-Presse, via Getty Images

“The initial idea was to respond to the current situation in the U.K. and how that is interwoven with its colonial legacy,” said the curator of “Woven,” Cosmin Costinas. “The use of textiles is at the core of art history here and all over the world, but it has also been marginalized, because it was associated with women and with practices with their roots outside of the West,” he added.

Ann Coxon, a curator at Tate Modern who helped oversee a recent show on the Bauhaus-trained textile artist Anni Albers, said that “For many years the art museums, fairs, biennials, et cetera, have been filled with film and lens-based media.” Yet now there was “a resurgence of interest in textile media,” she said. “It may be that the interest in hand craft has arisen at a time of global political turmoil, when people are wanting to get back to simpler ways of living, in defiance of the establishment, or of technological progress.”

Included in “Woven” is work by the Indian artist Mrinalini Mukherjee, who died in 2015, and whose posthumous retrospective “Phenomenal Nature: Mrinalini Mukherjee” at the Met Breuer in New York ended on Sunday. Ms. Mukherjee was one of few women artists working in Mumbai when she started out in the 1970s, and only received wide recognition in the last decade of her life, when she was included in a number of high-profile international group shows.



“Kusum,” a 1996 work by Mrinalini Mukherjee. Nature Morte

“It is people’s viewpoint that has changed,” said Aparajita Jain, the director of Nature Morte, a New Delhi-based based gallery that is presenting Ms. Mukherjee’s knotted hemp sculptures and bonze works in “Woven.” During the 1970s and 80s, people talked about Ms. Mrinalini’s work as being craft rather than art: to them weaving was something that women did in their free time, Ms. Jain said. “But I think our generation is giving it value,” she added.

Angela Su, a Hong Kong-based artist featured in “Woven,” uses human hair and silk to embroider text. In an email, she said she was “attracted to works that move beyond the seductive quality of textile, to become something that is critical or even confrontational.”

“I think contemporary art and folk art is one continuum,” she added. “Traditional craft as a medium also carries its own ‘message.’ It might seem like a thing of the past to many people, but it’s all up to artist to make it relevant to the contemporary world.”



“Blason des Cheveux,” a 2016 work by Angela Su. Angela Su and Blindspot Gallery

Ms. Su, whose work deals with resistance and cultural dominance, has been working recently on pieces that react to the recent protests in Hong Kong. She was interested in using traditional crafts to explore “power relationships that sustain colonialism,” a concern shared by other artists in “Woven.”

Cian Dayrit, a Philippine artist, uses what he refers to as “countercartography” to debunk stereotypes about the indigenous people of the Philippines. He does this by creating alternative maps to those created by the country’s colonists, working with displaced indigenous people. Mr. Dayrit uses a combination of Latin, Filipino and English texts, and imagery from the period of Spanish colonial rule, to create large, hanging woven textiles.

“When are you weaving, you are crossing the threads,” said Joël Andrianomearisoa, a French-Madagascan artist who makes large textile sculptures and installations which can be seen in “Woven.”

“I like the idea of crossing things to create a strong, powerful material,” he added.



“Blue Take Me to the End of All Loves,” a 2019 work by Joël Andrianomearisoa. Joël Andrianomearisoa and Primae Noctis

Mr. Andrianomearisoa said that combining fabrics that has been made in different countries was potently symbolic, and showed that beautiful things could emerge from cross-cultural exchange. “I think textiles reveal the complexity of the world right now,” he added.

Ms. Coxon, the Tate Modern curator, who is preparing for an exhibition of work by the textile artist Magdalena Abakanowicz to be shown at the museum next year, said that while weaving was enjoying a moment of fashion in the art world, the definitions of what constituted “fine art” were still too narrow.

“Artists themselves no longer feel the need to put themselves into any one camp,” as an artist or a craft practitioner, she said. Now, they “feel free, finally, to use whatever medium feels appropriate,” she added.

“We have to be self-conscious about what constitutes taste,” Ms. Coxon said, “and how the historic categories of art and craft have come to be defined, and by whom.”