

FIBER ARTISTS SHARE COMMON THREADS

Alyssa Swanson

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I, like many, have a love affair with fiber art. On many occasions I have been caught in the act of crocheting with my eyes closed before bed, fighting sleep for just one more row. Through my graduate study of fiber arts, I've explored topics like the subjugation of craft, voice, performance, and spirituality as they related to my own experiences and those of the women in my family. Though fiber art is a topic I am incredibly passionate about, as I began to write a voice told me I needed to look beyond myself. I could not simply recount my own story on these pages. I have learned so much of what I know about art from this community, largely by watching and listening. I asked community members to reflect upon their own creative practices. The following is a curated record of their thoughts.

Why do you work with fibers?

I knit because it is useful. It is portable. It is relatable. The extremely tactile nature of knitting appeals to me. Taking a string and two sticks to create a sweater, hat, socks, a shawl—it is like magic, really. —**Laing**

There is something so soothing in the repetitive actions of sewing and weaving. I am attracted to the monotony but also the gratification of visible progress throughout production. I am drawn to the materiality of fiber, its tactile quality and the sensations this induces, even without touching the surface. I use sewing as a way to draw with thread as well as to bind things together in a unique way. The thread introduces detailed surprises to the work including texture and dimension. Threadwork is also

reminiscent of suturing and a lot of my work references aging, the body, and the medical field. —**Gaunt**

To me, fibers are the language of love. These materials and processes provide a link to the women in my matrilineage. When I work, I feel connected to these women; I sit where they sat and we have silent 'conversations.' It is as if each stitch is a word in a secret dialect. —**Swanson**

My relationship with fibers is physical, conceptual, and emotional. My maternal great-grandmother was a tailor and that technical skill and aptitude for sewing was passed to my grandmother and my mother. I too, learned how to sew as a young girl, but it is weaving, knitting, and metalworking that is at the heart of my work as an artist. —**Keo**

Image Credit (from left to right): Shannon Laing (photo courtesy of Karin Kraemer), Torina Stark

Why do you work with fibers? *(Continued)*

I never intended to work with fabric, but I am so grateful that my life has led me here. My children's participation in a particular traditional Native American ceremony required me to make blankets as a part of their offering. The process was very spiritual for me. It was the only way I could contribute as a non-native woman, I pored everything I had into those offerings. I taught myself this art form and now I cannot seem to let this love affair with fabric go. Still, even though my work is no longer ceremonial, it's very spiritual for me.

—**Treuer**

I cannot remember a time when I wasn't drawn to fabric, thread, yarn, and anything textile. I was an 8-year-old who fantasized about going to Ben Franklin to look at fabric and I would not sleep the night before because textiles were way more exciting than any holiday to me.

I always have a project with me wherever I go. It is as necessary to me as eating or sleeping to be able to hold a needle and thread, to look at



fabric options, or think about what I want to make next. It is how I process challenges (I live with a severe mental illness and chronic illness) and it gives me purpose every single day. —**Stark**

The materials I most often work with in my weavings are yarn, string, and strips of recycled fabric. I use all types of fibers and do not feel restricted to a certain fiber content but, rather, I am often inspired by my materials and choose yarns that are exciting to me. I find that my best work comes when I feel this type of connection with my materials. I love the tactile nature of yarn and the wide

range in different properties and characteristics that plant, protein, and synthetic fiber sources possess and how they behave when woven with.

—**Kaas**

As a fiber artist, I am not the detailed and disciplined seamstress my mother is. I suppose that's because I'm never sure at the start of a project where and when I'll reach the end. The "blank canvas" that I start with (the dressed loom, the beautifully patterned fabric, the newly dyed wool) already feels to me like a work of art. As I work and re-work (stitching, cutting, pleating, braiding, beading, weaving...) the piece reveals itself to me. Although

Image Credit (This page) Kristen Kaas, (Opposite page from top to bottom) Erika Mock, Susanna Gaunt

I make art with a variety of media working with fibers feels, to me, like coming home. —**Vandersteen**

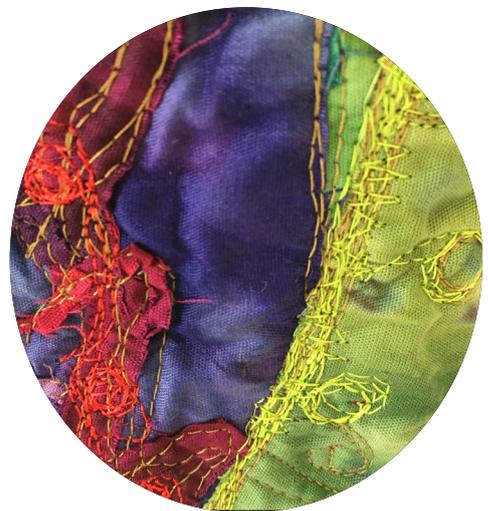
With specific reference to three major aspects, yarn (cotton/cocoon/wool) spinning, dye making/ process, and cloth weaving (using the loom), fiber art as a profession is hereditary to me. The reason being that I never woke up one day and decided to be an artist working with these fiber materials/processes; I was born into it. A further explanation is necessary here. I had two step-grandmothers, Iya alaro (a renowned indigo dye maker and dyer) and Iya aranwu (a renowned yarn spinner), while my grandmother too, Iya-onikijipa (vertical-loom cloth weaver), specialized in a kind of Yoruba (of Nigeria) traditional handwoven cloth known as kijipa. Thus, I grew up into the family of Yoruba (West African) traditional fiber art professionals, watching and helping all of them in their fiber art materials/ processes inside the akodi (Yoruba large house) where all of us – my entire extended family members, about thirty of us –

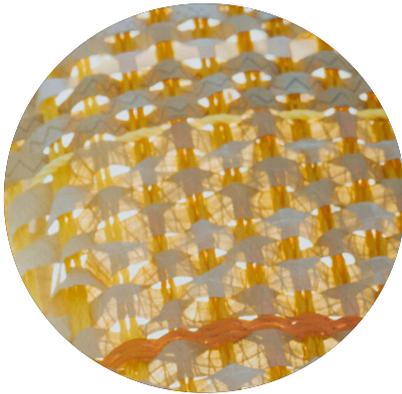
lived together. Consequently, by the time I was 12, I had become a master yarn spinner, indigo dye maker and dyer, and traditional handwoven cloth weaver. This is the reason I still work with these materials/ processes, especially the handwoven textile using four-harness loom. —**Famule**

The profound simple answer is LOVE; fiber is a calling and a teacher. Fiber intrigues and entices me. It is in my bones. It is a basic element that connects us organically and symbolically with the natural world. This connection is an essential one of body, mind, spirit, science, and art. From plant and animal fiber to our very bodies of hair and skin, sinew and bone; we are all raw material immersed in the mystery of life.

I am a maker inspired by the movement of needles thru yarn and cloth: It is an alchemy of hands which helps my heart open to see and explore the vital plexus of webs everywhere.

I stitch to question our stories, knit to flip the paradigm, weave to honor our interconnectedness. —**Mock**





Have you noticed a recent shift in the genre of fiber art?

Trends tend to be very cyclical, but yes, there has definitely been a revival of the traditional fiber arts over the past several years. It also seems that with this increase in exposure and popularity, fiber art is getting much more recognition in the art world than it has in the past. The discussion regarding craft vs. art seems to be never ending and fiber art and textiles traditionally classified as primarily functional and domestic has always fallen into the realm of craft. By elevating the fiber and textile arts, better documentation of works and access to see these pieces will be made available. —**Kaas**

The interest by younger women to learn handcrafts that have been traditionally labeled as feminine has been noticeable for a while now. But, the shift in approach—taking something that was considered ‘old fashioned’

and not much valued and elevating it—that is phenomenal. I love that women are playing with radical messages and images in embroidery and using technology to design work and to kick off their creative businesses. Mostly, I love the shift that the people who are learning fiber arts do so regardless of age or gender. Many of our grandmothers probably could not have imagined this. —**Laing**

I don’t know if I’ve noticed a shift so much as I have paid more attention to fiber art now that I am incorporating it into my own work. During my BFA studies at UMD, I certainly looked into craft’s role in fine art and noticed there is more respect for the skill and the aesthetic of arts that have fallen under the craft umbrella. I think part of this is due to increased awareness and admiration for underrepresented and sometimes anonymous artists such as women, people of color, and native artists. My instinct (and hope) is that art is moving away from the fine-art-centric-white-cube museums that show the genius individual artist. Instead, creatives seem to be thinking beyond tradition and towards a more collaborative and democratic art world. Crafts in general are less elitist and more accessible, so I think a wider audience can appreciate them. —**Gaunt**

Of course, yes. In the past, fiber art products were not duly recognized as a form of art. The reason being that they were mostly worn as body adornments, therefore popularly known as ‘utilitarian’ items. Similarly, there was no need for individual innovation on the part of the artist; all you needed to do as a fiber artist was copy and use the exact prevailing design-pattern. But today, aesthetics or creative consciousness on the part of individual artists has brought a recent noticeable shift in the genre of fiber art.

—**Famule**

I work with bringing art to the everyday, so the shift I’ve noticed is more and more people using some form of stitching to find calm and balance. Fiber is accessible. It can be a medium of meditation, healing, and resistance. —**Mock**



How does/can fiber art specifically engage with where we are in 2020?

I think that fiber, perhaps more so than other forms of visual art, at its core feels accessible on a universal human level whether you consider yourself an appreciator of visual art or not. In 2020, my hope is that because of this, fiber art can utilize this sense of familiarity, this sense of safety. My hope is that fiber art can open the door for the important conversations we need to have, to engage with people of all generations, backgrounds, and with self-proclaimed “non-art people.” To build connectivity and to unify us. —**Treuer**

When I think about how I am using my weaving to engage with others during this time I reflect on the ideas that I have around how weaving in both the symbolic and

literal sense relates to lives. In a literal sense the act of weaving is to connect, to bring separate pieces of yarns together. The over-under sequence results in the interlocking of yarns to create a solid piece of cloth. But I also see this as symbolic in a time when we are mostly separate and isolated. I use my hands to weave fabric and make textile pieces that then go out into the world to be with people in their lives and in their homes. It has become my way to make connections during this time. —**Kaas**

Currently, I am using the process to explore ways of creating contemplative, experiential spaces for the body and the mind simultaneously. My temporary public art installation UNWEAVING is the first (albeit adapted for COVID) iteration of my vision. The work weaves

together personal stories about ancestral history, epigenetics, emotional inheritance, and racial justice through the idea of unweaving in order to know ourselves, to recognize our place in a larger tapestry, and to imagine the ability to unweave and reweave the foundations of our fabric.

—**Keo**

Fiber art is a tool that can be used to cope. It can be self-care. It can educate, empower and bring people together. It can be done together or alone. There is an abundance of teaching tools just a click away to learn whatever you want these days. —**Stark**

Image Credit (from left to right): Tia Keo, Alyssa Swanson, Liz Vandersteen, Blair Teuer



How does/can fiber art specifically engage with where we are in 2020? (Continued)

I often think we've become desensitized to violence, bigotry, and injustice because of the endless noise. We are inundated with literally audibly and visually loud messaging. And, honestly, in my opinion it is deserved considering where we are at politically and socially. But, I think it's become too easy to tune it out. That said, I have been following the craftivist movement, or activism through craft, for a number of years and I often wonder if the impact of this movement is just what we need to be implementing. Imagine, among the pandemonium, an intimate, silent, sensitive, and handmade piece of protest art that you either stumble upon or have given to you by a friend. I wonder if that small gesture would be more meaningful at this time in contrast to the noise.

—Swanson

Our brains are filled with uncertainty, fear, hope, anger, and frustration—often all in one day. I have been thinking a lot lately about this and although I have plenty of projects that could be finished, I think now is the time to take out those skeins of mink yarn that I have been saving and make something comforting. Something to

knit slowly and thoughtfully and let the process rather than the end product be the focus because thoughtful approaches are what we are in desperate need of right now. —Laing

I think there was already a trend toward DIY activities and I would guess this has only increased as folks are forced to mend things themselves or simply want to learn a new craft and work with their hands now that they suddenly have the time for it. From a social justice standpoint, I imagine fiber arts can be a place for collaboration (think of the AIDS quilt) as art often is. Small things I've seen that come to mind are the sewing of masks that display a social or political statement. I will say I am excited to see how artists respond in the coming years as this is a pivotal moment.

—Gaunt



Image Credit (from top to bottom):
Erika Mock, Susanna Gaunt

• CONTRIBUTORS

Olawole Famule is a professor of visual arts at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. He holds an M.A., Ph.D. in History and Theory of Art from the University of Arizona, Tucson, and an M.A. Fine Arts in Art History and Fibers Structure of the OAU, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Famule has been published in many academic journals and has contributed book chapters to many other publications. He has exhibited his artwork (mostly terracotta sculptures and creative fibers/ weaving) in Nigeria and many places within the United States.

Susanna Gaunt is an award-winning visual artist living in Duluth, MN. She works with a variety of mediums such as drawing, photography, embroidery, and collage to create installations that analyze the human condition through a philosophical and scientific lens. A recent graduate from the University of Minnesota Duluth, she holds a BFA in Painting, Drawing, and Printmaking as well as a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from Boston College. Susanna has exhibited in galleries and museums locally and across the country, including the Duluth Art Institute, Tweed Art Museum, UWS Kruk Gallery, and Manifest Gallery.

Kristen Kaas is a weaver, designer, and textile artist exploring texture and dimensionality to create contemporary, experimental, and functional fiber works. Kristen grew up in the artistic community surrounding Stillwater, Minnesota and received a Bachelor's degree in Art from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities and a Associates degree in Apparel Design from The Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. Kristen lives and works in Northern Minnesota with her husband and four children.

Tia Keobounpheng (Tia Keo) is a multi-disciplinary artist who lives and works in North Minneapolis. With a BA degree in architecture and background in handwork, Tia Keo is a 2020 & 2017 Artist Initiative Grantee from the Minnesota State Arts Board and a 2018 Next Step Fund Grantee from the McKnight Foundation through the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council. Her work has been included in shows at the MN State Fair Fine Arts Exhibitions, Finlandia University Gallery in Hancock, Michigan, the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, and the New Studio Gallery in St. Paul. Keo currently has a public art installation called UNWEAVING in Sister Cities Park (Duluth, MN).

Shannon Laing is a knitter in Duluth, Minnesota. Her fascination with what can be created with knitted fabric has led her to experiment with non-traditional and recycled materials like kitchen string, wire, deconstructed thrift-store sweaters, ribbon, and plastic bags. A marketing professional by day, Shannon strives to elevate and honor traditional women's handcrafts by encouraging proper valuation and supporting women artists. The piece illustrated in this article is the first non-wearable item she has created for a public exhibit.

Erika Mock is a Swiss born textile artist who uses recycled materials to sculpt zero waste art to wear. Textiles for Body and Soul are free spirited, richly colored accessories to wake your body and perceptions. With a background in psychology, music therapy, fiber art, horticulture, and off grid living; her work is inspired by nature and explores identity. Erika lives and now also works in a renovated caboose tucked in the woodlands of NW Wisconsin. Her mission is to catalyze the spark of our human potential. Via textiles and art to explore sustainable practices and interconnected vision to create personal and social change.

Torina Stark is a textile shape shifter, mixed media artist, writer and teacher. Torina combines her love of nature with different mediums to create art that challenges the ordinary. Her work is visually layered creating a sense of how craft and art walk hand-in-hand with nature.

Blair Treuer is a storyteller who paints with fabric and draws with thread. She's a self-taught textile artist from rural Minnesota. Blair's innovative portrait style uses tiny pieces of fabric sewn together and then mounted to wire and is almost sculptural as her pieces hang on the wall. Treuer's work has been exhibited across the United States and in Italy.

Liz Vandersteen has a Master of Art Education from the University of Wisconsin, Superior. She teaches within the community through a number of venues. As a visual artist, Vandersteen feels a responsibility to not only create her own artwork but to also encourage, engage and educate others in their continued exploration of the creative process.