

The 32nd Annual Philadelphia Museum
of Art Craft Show, November 2008

The Poetics of Art-Fabric: Yehudit Katz

Rivka Rass

Using crafts and weaving, activities traditionally associated with women, to create contemporary artworks, is not new. Already in the 1960s and 1970s feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Hannah Wilke, and Eva Hesse, drew heavily on what traditionally was considered “women’s work,” thus helping to dissolve accepted boundaries that used to designate art, craft, design, and photography to different departments, a division that has fragmented the world of art between the aesthetic, the decorative, and the functional. Thus it was not a great surprise that Yehudit Katz’s art-fabric works won the “Best of Israel” prize at the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show in November 2008.

How can one define Yehudit Katz’s three-dimensional art-fabric works? Although some of her work may also be functional, such as the transparent basket-like containers, or shimmering curtain-like works, much of it is not. You may hang her work on the wall or place it on top of a shelf to be appreciated for its aesthetic value and its masterly and inventive execution. Her innovative, non-traditional weaving succeeds in creating three-dimensional objects from what traditionally is a flat fabric.

“Weaving,” she explained when we met at the Philadelphia Show, “is based on a stiff frame. The grid is always fixed, and the loom dictates very defined and limited boundaries. The work always moves from the bottom up—like building a brick wall, you begin at the bottom, and work your way up. Weaving, like architecture, is a process of building and structuring. What I do in my work is working against the limitations, breaking out of the boundaries, exploring ways to liberate the work from the grid.”

Closely examining her work, admiring how these complicated, multi-layered, three-dimensional forms are born whole—no stitches, no cuts—one wonders how Katz has managed to get out of the flat grid of the loom works which are larger than what the loom can or is supposed to do.

“My work is a constant dialogue,” she explains, “between what the loom and the grid dictate, and what I imagine and have in mind to do. I force the grid to accommodate things it cannot do or is not supposed to allow. The result is that the frame of the work is not a square or a rectangle, as one might expect. I developed ways to break the ubiquitous right angle in order to create a three-dimensional work. Pieces of fabric are folded and combined in the very process of weaving. Thus, the entire work, in three dimensions, comes out of the loom whole.”

For her works, Katz employs a rich array of materials not habitually used for weaving, exploring the possibilities inherent in the material and in the meeting of different materials in the weave: copper, nickel, or galvanized steel wires (usually used to

packages. Often, her weave is made of a mix of those metal wires and linen, silk, and paper.

Speaking about the unconventional material she uses for her art-fabric, Katz remarks that “because every material behaves differently—metal and paper threads create hard surfaces, while linen and silk create soft ones—I like to mix them to get the texture, the color, and the feel I want. The meeting point between them often creates shimmering light.”

In reference to Katz’s work, Alima, an established Israeli artist and art teacher, wrote: “By weaving fibers of different materials... she transforms two-dimensional craft into three-dimensional art. With the help of geometric rules and basic forms, she creates multi-faceted objects.”¹

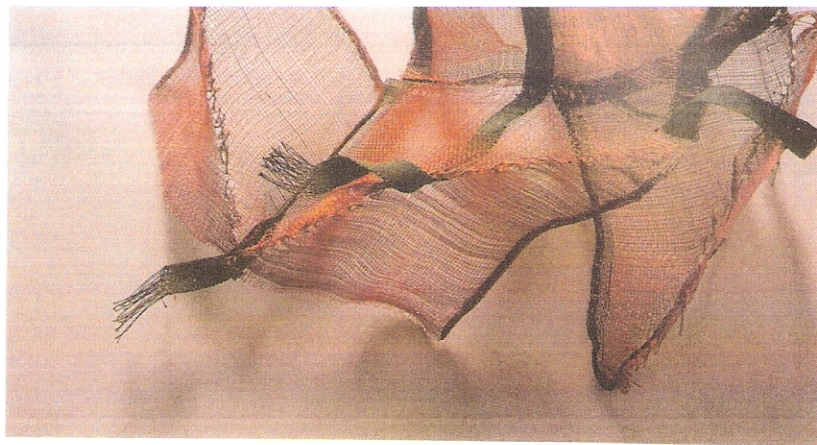
Another interesting feature of Katz’s works is their transparency, which is created by changing the density of the wires and threads. This renders the work light, airy, almost floating, although many of her works are in shades of earth colors, such as light rusty brown, yellowish orange, always multicolored, and always light weight.

Discussing her work, Katz quotes John Cage’s idea about “converting functionality to conceptuality”² as a lens through which to view her art. A weave of container is not a container, but the concept of a container; what seems like a basket is, in fact, the idea of a basket. The process of creating is, to use Cage’s phrase, an “unpredictable incident.” She starts somewhere, and the material, the warp and weft, and her fingers lead her places she has not meant to reach, “the threads are the continuation of my fingers, and I allow them to go wherever they like.”

Duane Reed, in whose St Louis gallery she exhibited, commented that Katz is “an artist willing to take conceptual risks such as mixing silk with metal or creating ‘tablecloths’ that don’t need tables to sit on.” He added that the way her pieces stretch and appear soft despite their metal components is “magical.”³

Katz’s work sheds light on the connection and continuities

The Feminine Mystique, 1963) or Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970) have already pointed out that what was once considered an exclusive women's occupation, even a leisure activity, such as weaving, crocheting or embroidery, was in fact a woman's only mode of creative expression. Women who were banished to the kitchen and the children's rooms were not supposed to nor were they given the chance to sculpt, carve, or paint, so that too often functionality was for many women an excuse to express their creativity. In her eye-opening book, *The Fortune of Women Painters and Their Work* (1979), Greer reveals that in fact, there were women painters already in the 16th century, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, but they were few and far between, hence she calls them "the magnificent exception." In 1979, the same year that Greer published her book on women artists, American feminist artist Judy Chicago first came out with her installation, *The Dinner Party*, where she presented a large triangular table with specially designed erotic plates for 39 famous mythical and historical women. These lucky "famous women" were the exceptional few, almost always daughters to painters who taught them and encouraged them. But the vast majority of women were prevented from artistic expression. For too long women's traditional creative work has been relegated to the long shadows cast by male art and by male art-critics. But today, in the first decade of the 21st century, we can reappraise traditional



women's handiwork, examine it through contemporary lenses, and see it as a carrier of meanings and aesthetics. ♦

Yehudit Katz was born in Israel. She lives and works in Tel Aviv. She studied weaving at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, and subsequently, at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Ateneum, Helsinki. Katz is a senior lecturer at the Shenkar College of Engineering and Design, Ramat Gan, Israel, working on the hand looms where she develops experimental weaving techniques.

Notes

- 1 Alima in her recommendation of Katz for the Andy (Andrea M. Bronfman) Prize for the Arts, September 2007.
- 2 John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1967), pp. 3, 157.
- 3 AIDA Newsletter, January 2005.

יהודית כץ, שני סלים, 2004, כשתן וחוטי נחושת [תצלום: רן ארדה]
 Yehudit Katz, *Couple of Baskets*, 2004, linen and copper wires [photograph: Ran Erde]

