

Beyond the Surface

by Michael Milano

Weaving is a peculiar object in the world. It has a dual life of being at once utilitarian and aesthetic. Not merely an image or design, weaving is the material process of pattern, repetition, and rhythm becoming a physical form. Crystal Gregory and Samantha Bittman are examples of exciting artists who combine this traditional process with unexpected materials. They create hybrid works that expand weaving's emphasis on structure and pattern, and extend its potential as a surface.



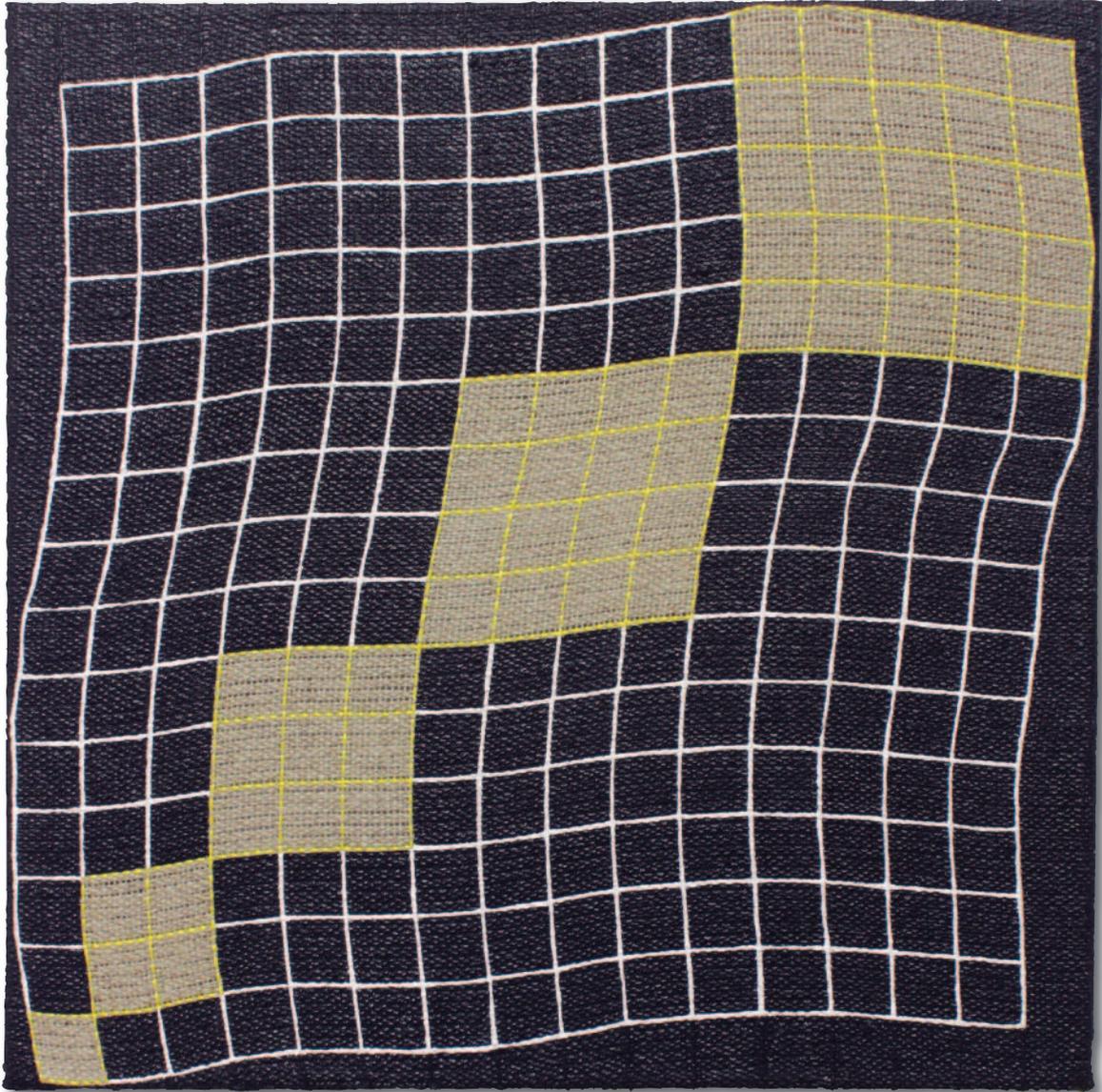
CRYSTAL GREGORY *Variation on a Theme (Black-Blue-Green)* Handwoven textile cast into concrete, 18" x 36", 2013. Detail LEFT.

Crystal Gregory's art offers a provocative mix of traditional handmade objects, textiles, and installations. She specializes in textiles, having studied cloth construction in eight cities and four countries. Originally from California, Gregory worked as an artist in New York City for several years before attending the Fiber and Material Studies program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) on scholarship. Since returning to New York, she has shown in galleries and exhibitions, acquired private and public commissions, and participated in esteemed artist residencies, including the Gerrit Rietveld Academie of Art Glass Department in Amsterdam last fall.

Her research at SAIC included investigations into Modernism's complicated and contested relationship with pattern and decoration, the Bauhaus and Constructivism, and the utopian/distopian aspirations of many early modernist movements. She also participated in an independent study group dedicated to teaching themselves the development of tessellations, plane, and polyhedra geometries through a close reading of the ancient Greek mathematician Euclid and other texts. All of these investigations are apparent in works that range from leaded glass patterns that expand

into three dimensional sculptures, soldered wall drawings that simultaneously imply stained glass constructions, architectural elements and city planning, and cyanotype prints that translate three-dimensional glass structures into two-dimensional shadows.

In Gregory's *Variations on a Theme* series, she has embedded hand-woven textiles into cast concrete. Inspired by a wall hanging produced by legendary Bauhaus textile artist Annie Albers in the 1920s, Gregory produced an open plain-weave cloth whose design retains Albers's emphasis on the fundamentally vertical and horizontal structure of weaving. Gregory then removed the cloth from the tension of the loom and embedded it in wet concrete, allowing the parallel and perpendicular lines to meander, flow, and swim in the unfirm surface. The concrete set over time, became rigid, and returned a level of tension to the woven structure. Here, the already-slow process of handweaving is slowed down even further until it comes to a complete rest, captured in concrete. *Variations on a Theme* has the physical presence of a remnant or relic; it is the fossilized remains of an event, but it feels specifically fragmentary, implying a whole that is outside of the frame of the sculpture.



SAMANTHA BITTMAN *Untitled (grid 12345)* Acrylic paint on handwoven textile, 16" x 16", 2013.

The work involves a series of conceptual negations or inversions. Gregory has taken a once soft and pliable textile and rendered it hard and immobile; she has also reduced the warmth and tactility one associates with cloth. The work is extremely physical and sculptural in its presence, but it is also ornamental in the best possible sense. The decorative elements inherent in the weaving function as a proposition or challenge, questioning the austerity of modernist architecture and design. In one piece, the sinuous threads slip off the hard pristine surface and gather formless on the ground in a soft erratic heap. Yet the cloth that Gregory has produced to assert this

challenge is inspired by Albers, one of modernism's greatest artists and educators. In this way, Gregory is using the materials, processes, and aesthetics of modernism to question its own historical assumptions, specifically that "form follows function" and that "ornament is a crime."

Samantha Bittman studied textile design at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. She produces hybrid works that confuse and conflate the distinctions between paintings and textiles. With a mastery of pattern and structure, Bittman worked as a textile designer in Seattle and New York before moving to Chicago to pursue an MFA in Painting and Drawing at SAIC.

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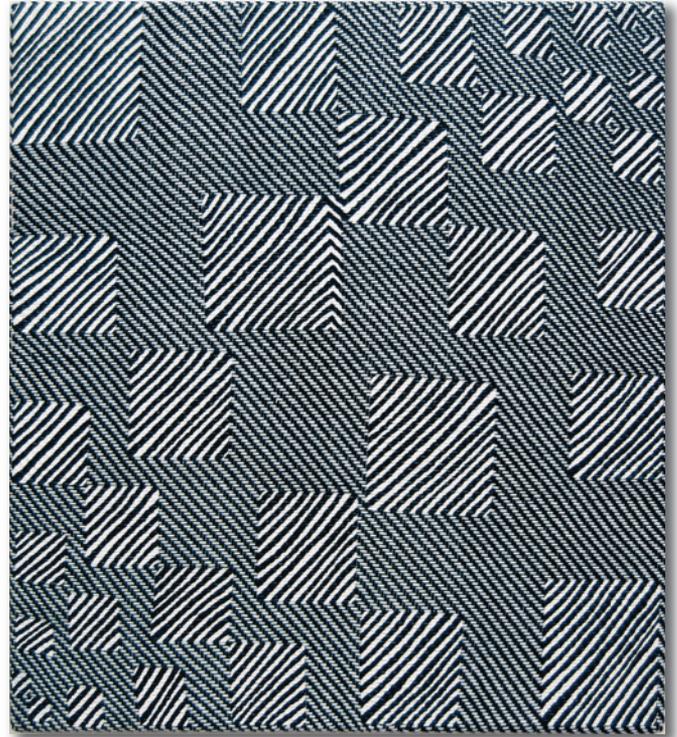
She is the recipient of numerous awards, including an Artadia award, and residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Ox-Bow School of Art, and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

Bittman's art consists largely of medium-scale works of handwoven textiles, stretched like canvas and painted with acrylic paint. Often produced on a floor loom, the woven textiles are of a reduced binary palette (black and white, blue and white, yellow and white), which allows the twills, tabby, and waffle weave patterns and textures to be more pronounced. Like a game in which the board is fixed, the handmade weaving of a particular pattern sets some of the rules for what moves can be made in paint on its surface. The particulars of how this game is played reveal the artist's individuality, intuition, and subjectivity.

Bittman responds to the tactile surface by painting into the patterns of the textile. She is interested in the structural and process-based instructions inherent to textile production. To that end, the works are an accumulation of painted interventions that generate geometric abstractions, ranging from simple to complex.

These are highly optical works that challenge and seduce the senses into being mindful of our perceptions. Whether the paint application is minimal or covers the entire plane, Bittman invites us to scrutinize the surface. We look from different distances and use different modes of perceiving, each with their own set of rewards. The image or the "what" of the piece is often immediate, visual, and sensorial, creating a kind of optical pleasure. But the "how" is much slower, something we must work to fully comprehend. We must get up close and puzzle through what choices are—and are not—being made in its construction, generating a more cerebral enjoyment of each piece.

Bittman is using abstraction in the service of perception. The work requires us to acknowledge that perception is complex: it is both physiological as well as cerebral, pleasurable as well as pedagogical. By exploiting our inherent ability and craving for pattern recognition, we are



SAMANTHA BITTMAN *Untitled* Acrylic paint on handwoven textile, 20" x 16", 2010.

seduced into a viewership that is simultaneously conscious, active, and sensual.

Starting from textiles, both Gregory and Bittman retain the inherent elements of pattern, structure, and logic, while extending those qualities through the integration of materials that lack these properties. Concrete and paint are structurally related, consisting of a material suspended within a fluid binder that becomes rigid over time. In the case of Gregory, this rigidity becomes the support for her weaving. Bittman inverts this relation, making her weaving the support for a fixed material.

Both artists intend to expand the definition of a textile by giving pattern a sculptural form or by elaborating textile structure into geometric abstraction. By expounding the physical surface of textiles, Gregory and Bittman retain the aesthetic and utilitarian associations we have with cloth while expanding the conceptual potential of weaving.

Crystal Gregory, www.crystalgregory.org
Samantha Bittman, www.samanthabittman.com

—Michael Milano is an artist and art writer based in Chicago, IL. www.michaelmilano.net