

INTERVIEW WITH ELANA HERZOG

By Regine Basha

As long as I've known your work, fabric has been the central element...can you give us some background about this choice?

I started using fabric around 1990 as a draped element in my mixed-media sculpture. I wanted the suggestive, sometimes gendered, sometimes ornamented elements that it provided. Historically fabric has been the subject of so much attention in painting—as clothing or drapery that is rendered within the painting, and as the surface on which many paintings have been made. In art, as in life, fabric has been used both to conceal and to reveal the human body.

In 1992, I began working with fabric, almost exclusively, in works that incorporated elastic in fairly abstract, minimal forms. These were sometimes suggestive of underwear or lingerie or had anatomical associations. I was interested in the simple cues given by the materials themselves—front/back, inside/outside, public/private—and in a kind of implied utility that accompanied these forms. Often I went after an “ugly beauty,” one which conveys pathos and the seedy or repugnant—the abject. Eventually, however, this work became quite baroque. You could say it went from seedy to tacky.

When did you start working with staples and making site-specific installations?

I first used staples in 1996 simply as a means of attaching my work to the wall, but I immediately saw them as expressive, aggressive drawing implements or marks. As I worked on a piece, the staples appeared to migrate across the wall surface, leaving traces of the work's evolution. In 1998, I started playing with them as a way to mimic the patterned lines in a chenille bedspread and as a strategy for generating drawings based on those patterns. Since that time, I have developed a way to make these drawings on movable panels. When these panels are installed they appear to be seamlessly fused with the surrounding walls.

I've made site-specific pieces since 1991, in addition to maintaining a studio practice. My first site-specific installation using stapled fabric was made in 2000 at Gaga, a storefront gallery on the Lower East Side. For this piece, I divided a large bedspread into sections, each of which I embedded into a panel, and installed them seamlessly into the gallery wall. The image created by the fragmented textile flowed from left to

right following the contours of the long narrow space. There was only one position from which the viewer could visually complete the image of the original bedspread. Because this installation was made on removable panels, I have been able to re-site it in several other locations since its original incarnation.

Since much of your work is generated through an invitation to transform a space or a wall, how do you decide what fabric to use for any given project?

Many of my fabric selections are made because they challenge my own inherited assumptions about good and bad taste—expressing my ambivalence about decoration, beauty, high and low culture. This applies to a lot of my earliest pieces and to the chenilles, which I have come to appreciate as part of “American culture,” but which I grew up disdaining as tacky. I’m interested in the deeply evocative power of stuff. My fabric choices have changed a lot over the years, and I’ve come to embrace the idea of a more straightforward beauty. I have left off using large rectangular bedspreads and carpets with bold patterns in favor of yardage of plaids and weaves with all-over patterns that come off a bolt. This shifts the reference away from large-scale abstract paintings,

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Deep Relief, 2008

mixed media, 15 x 15.5 x 1.5 inches

and onto the architecture of the exhibition space as the field in which activity takes place.

When I’m choosing a fabric, I think about such things as how densely it is woven or patterned, how dark and/or graphically it will read against the wall, which is usually white. There are times when I want the image to be diffused into the wall more than others, and that might suggest a more open weave or paler color. Often there is a question of size and scale—how big the space is and how much of a given fabric is available for the project.

You said that you are interested in the “evocative power of stuff.” What about your use of Persian rugs? Are there particular connotations attached to them?

I’ve made several installations with carpets, and have been fascinated by the way in which carpets, and the carpet industry, are vehicles for cultural narratives and motifs, and are indicators of trends in design, taste, and technology. In 2003, just as the US was about to go to war in Iraq, I began a project that I called Civilization and Its Discontents Here I used

Persian and Persian-style carpets which I stapled to wall panels and largely deconstructed. This was my attempt to convey the fragility of this particular historical moment, and the anguish and sense of powerlessness I felt and still feel in the face of ongoing world events. Civilization and Its Discontents was first exhibited in 2003 at Smack Mellon, a nonprofit space in Brooklyn, and then in 2005 it was expanded into a larger installation at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University. At the Johnson, I was able to extend the discussion to include the museum, itself, an institution devoted to the acquisition and preservation of objects of cultural and artistic value. I exhibited the stapled carpets, salon style, in one of the museum's galleries, and scattered other elements, such as the shredded carpet residue and unaltered carpets, throughout the permanent collection. I infiltrated both the walls and the spaces of the museum. I love the way this project played with the notion of value and its conservation. On the one hand, things that are considered relatively worthless either because they are worn, discarded, or mass produced are imbued with new value by virtue of their conversion to "fine art." On the other hand, by literally embedding the deconstructed object into the wall, I create the impression that the work is altogether ephemeral, denying it its object-ness and therefore frustrating its status as collectable.

Would you characterize the process of installing your work as closer to painting or sculpture? In other words, is it more of a pictorial exercise concerning pattern or a spatial one?

I'd say it's a bit of both. Formally, I play a lot with traditional abstract-painting issues, which do involve the perception of space, and sometimes pictorial space. The rectangular bedspreads make a clear reference to large-scale abstract painting. Figureground relationships figure largely in the stapled wall installations, where the wall itself is a central part of the work and can function as the "ground." On the other hand, the way in which the staples compress material and embed it in the wall is very visceral and feels sculptural to me, even though it operates in such a shallow space.

The piece I made in 2009 for The Drawing Center was intended to re-shape the walls through the installation of dark wedges of stapled fabric. In several previous projects, I had altered the space by building walls. I

want the work to be experienced as part of the literal, physical world, and as a reference to the illusionistic aspect of painting.

When I approach a space I try to get to know it intuitively and respond to its character and scale. The direction I take an installation is also strongly influenced by what I'm currently doing in the studio and whatever else is on my mind. But because the walls of a space are actually contained by the pieces, rather than vice versa, the layout of an exhibition must be planned in order to maintain the integrity of that relationship.

I'm interested in the collaboration you did with Michael Schumacher, the sound artist, for the Aldrich Museum. What inspired that?

Michael Schumacher's work first came to my attention when we both exhibited pieces at the Sculpture Center in New York City in 2005. I admired the way in which he made sound occupy space and wanted to find out how our work might operate together. His use of sound is dimensional—another way to fill the space. It moves, it repeats, it uses a finite number of elements and recombines them in a theoretically infinite number of ways. Michael and I each use compositional strategies for the production of form that make use of found materials. Our collaboration introduced time into the experience of the work in a very concrete way.

The use of found materials is inherently evocative. The element of recognition is key to a full experience of the work, and yet the process of abstraction is profound.

Do you see the making of your work as performative in some way, even if it's "private," so to speak?

I start with an object and I end up with an object, and in between the object undergoes a process that fundamentally alters its nature and definition. My materials come from a context that is readily knowable—the decorative, utilitarian, and industrially produced. As I work, they are transformed step by step, thread by thread, into something else—not necessarily rationally, or systematically, but methodically and persistently. The object is subjected. My pieces speak of the time and labor that goes into their making, although the finished work exists as a fixed entity that has reached a formal resolution. I want the work to reflect process but also to transcend it. The laboriousness of "making" is an important aspect of my installations; however, it is not meant to be ritualistic or masochistic. My process is one of

action and reaction. I perform and act, perceive the act, and respond to what I see by performing the next act. This is extremely physical and employs a range of repeated movements that have evolved together with the work.

The intensive labor that goes into the making of your work makes me think of the etymology of the verb “manufacture” which derives from the root word for “hand” (*manus*) and “to perform” (*facere*). It also seems that your process implies a kind of reenactment and re-presentation of the original making of the fabrics that you are now, in fact, taking apart. Is this a way for you to reconsider the technology of the fabrics’ manufacture?

The staple is, in fact, analogous to a stitch or a suture, so in some way I am re-imagining the structure of a textile and dramatizing its production. I often think of my pieces as replacing the existing binary language of warp and weft with a corresponding binary system whose two elements are metal staples and fabric. I think of technology as something that exists in a continuum that includes everything from the hand-wrought to the virtual. Our relationship to technology is ultimately delimited by our physical bodies and the time and space in which they operate.

At the same time, I’ve become very interested in the history of the textile industry, and its paradigmatic relation to the history of industry overall, in this country and globally. In the United States, it is deeply connected to the conflicts between North and South, the transition from agrarian to industrial life, the development of urban centers; to issues of labor, race, and “capital flight”... you name it.

What does that have to do with me or my work? I’m not sure. I’m Jewish. My grandfather worked for a tailor and my grandmother was a wig maker, but I’m still not sure what significance that has. As a child I was fascinated by the sight of my grandmother using a hooked needle to attach strands of hair to a fabric mesh, using a process that is similar to the one used to make a hooked rug. By means of a relatively simple repetitive process she was using linear materials to build, in increments, a three dimensional form.

Concerning your exhibition at the Daum: What are the elements that have acted as triggers for the making of your new site-specific piece?

One of the interesting things about the Daum Museum is the way the grid in the surface of its polished concrete floors accentuates the irregular

shapes of its galleries. My piece in the Ditzfeld Gallery is inspired by these lines in the floor, which remind me of sewn or upholstered seams. I've extended these lines up onto the walls by means of a vertical row of staples that begins at the point where each line in the floor meets the wall of the gallery. As they work their way up a wall, the staples incorporate strips of colored fabric, layered in some areas, shredded or removed in others. I am drawing with color and material and with the texture of eroded gypsum. They are like frayed seams, upholstering the walls, punctuating its broad white surfaces, and articulating the volume of the room