

## A RETURN TO THE THREAD

*Eduardo Serrano*

*Translated by Alexandra Schoolman*

The creativity displayed through textile making is part of our prehistoric inheritance, and particular to the indigenous heritage of Latin America. This patrimony, widely valued by the most prestigious international textile artists – beginning with Anni Albers, who is credited with introducing textile art to the Bauhaus, and by extension to modern art –, represents an invaluable cultural heritage that serves as an inspiration or source through which to introduce oneself to other related ways of thinking, not only in regards to the characteristics and specific qualities of this creative modality, but also to the aims of modern art. In fact, Anni Albers made fourteen trips with her husband, the renowned painter Josef Albers, to various Latin American countries to study the legacy and production of textiles.

However, to receive a validation of textiles, not only as a simple work of handicraft, but rather as a new artistic discipline as legitimate as painting, sculpture or architecture, was not an easy task. Even in the Bauhaus, textiles were considered a feminine practice, and in other environments it was related to industry or traditional, hand-made crafts. Although, technically speaking, textiles are based on a binary structure of warp and weft, the experimental drive and analytical attitude that they promote today have broadened this definition considerably. Now works of textile art are emerging from complex transfers that have taken place over time.

This is to say that textiles as an artistic modality are, before anything else, sensory abstractions that combine visual and textural properties through which geographical, social and aesthetic developments can be reflected. Thanks to Albers and other artists who continued on this course, contemporary textile art is a creative axis that involves an infinite amount of possibilities. This is highlighted through the works of American artists Sheila Hicks, Lenore Tawney and Claire Zeisler, who, beginning in the 1940s, integrated their weavings with three-dimensional creativity: Hicks, using diverse materials with an innovative and avant-garde spirit; Tawney, with works of architectonic scale composed of thousands of gleaming threads and Zeisler, who used knotting techniques to free herself from the geometric and two-dimensional limits of weaving.

Outside of the United States are also recognized: the Polish artist, Magdalena Abakanowicz, who around 1970 began to translate her knowledge of tapestry making to sculpture, creating suggestive environments through the repetitions of shapes of the human figure; the Swiss, Elsie Giauque, whose textiles are made from a wide variety of materials, like corn leaves, and the Colombian, Olga de Amaral, who, during the same time period, became known for her large-scale abstract works in which the fibers were frequently laminated with gold or silver. These are artists that have, from different angles, contributed to the inclusion of weavings into the realm of art.

Similarly, the Frenchman Jean Lucat and Spaniard Josep Grau-Garriga – whose works related to those of their contemporaries, the former working in a figurative style and the latter in abstraction– have made notable contributions to the artistic refinement of weaving and tapestry making. As a result of their work, and that of other artists, textile art is regarded today as one of the most significant creative practices with dedicated academic programs all over the world.

The Colombian artist Álvaro Diego Gómez Campuzano merits a special mention. Although he is the youngest of the previously noted artists, he also became a pioneer of textile art, as he has made his innovative consideration of this discipline evident since 1976. The artist focused on space, intervening into it, on occasion, in the manner of large curtains sustained by metallic frames that further subdivided the space around it. Other times, he made large abstract constructions that penetrated space by hanging them from industrial supports. The objective of these installations was to achieve for the spectator a trajectory with different transitions made through the rotations of the panels or reflections of the colors.

It was one of the first spatial artistic interventions, one of the first installations – a method proper to contemporary art. Only, however, it was brought about using artisanal weaving techniques that allowed him to not only exercise his mind through the practice of concentration, but also to activate his senses of imagination and creativity.

The majority of these works, constructed with raw cotton and woolen cords interwoven in relief, create linear geometric figures that function like ideograms: evoking pentagrams or urban planes, given that the notions of verticality and horizontality are predominant. The title of these works, *Creando en expansión* (*Creating in Expansion*, 1986), coincided with the idea of “sculpture in the expanded field”, proposed precisely during this same time period by the critic Rosalind Kraus. This concept specified the idea that Gómez Campuzano’s works could be considered as sculpture, as architecture, or as however one wanted to define them within the appropriate nomenclature, despite his choice of different materials compared with those normally used in these disciplines and his ancestral technique.

Gómez Campuzano has combined since the mid 70s, like the majority of the artists here mentioned, the traditional production of weavings with the objectives of modern and contemporary art. And this temporal syncretism, this tendency to join and harmonize time periods with lines of thinking or dissimilar ideas, have provided him with the arguments and the apt sensitivity to, on the one hand, resignify weaving and remove it from the constraints inherent to immovable definitions, and on the other hand, to express the eclecticism of contemporary art in accordance with the multiple possibilities of modern life.

However, the artist also realized works during that period that related closely to architecture, like *Muro Interior* (*Interior Wall*, 1986) which was included in the 13<sup>th</sup> Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial in 1987. Within the piece, the artist

combined areas of density and transparency and incorporated industrial materials, which, when integrated with the cotton and silk, provided him a suitable structure for the exactitude the work demanded.

Gómez Campuzano has never lost interest in experimenting through his work. This contributes to the reason as to why his choice of materials is always changing: selecting from the previously indicated, to polypropylene, to resins and soil, to even including industrial sashes, in order to create certain works. All of them involve weaving, but, of course, each one demands a different technique.

His productions in polypropylene could be described as compelling and forceful through their large dimensions, heavy weight and intentions to embody strength, torsion, tension and compression through the different methods of weaving: one to create the string and another to produce forms, appropriately, of knots and ties. This is a fundamental idea in the field of weaving, which complements and harmoniously reveals the processes involved in the realization of such works.

*A Return to the Thread*, the title of this exhibition, makes reference to that starting point, an original material in textile art, the thread. Through diverse relationships with other disciplines and elements, one can arrive at enriching artworks imbued with a contemporary legitimacy. In respect to the work of Álvaro Diego Gómez Campuzano, his significance can be extended to imply that the artist is always ready to begin again from the oldest and most fundamental element of weaving, the thread, with a new type of work that will certainly reiterate, in one form or another, his particular combination of history and contemporaneity.