

# **ACCOMPANYING BOOKLET**

## **SOFT POWER**



**CURATED BY  
DANIEL MILNES**

**16.03.2023 –  
11.08.2024**

**Magdalena Abakanowicz**  
(1930, Falenty–2017, Warsaw)

*Diptère* (Diptera), 1967  
Hemp, sisal, horsehair, linen cloth

For Magdalena Abakanowicz fiber constituted the basic element of the organic world, from our nerves, our genetic code, and our muscles within us, to the tissue of plants and leaves outside us. She described fibers as “the greatest mystery of our environment.” The intertwined condition of the human and the nonhuman is always palpable in her visceral, large-scale textile sculptures, which she constructed from sisal but infiltrated with other material such as horsehair, as in the case of *Diptère* (1967). The work’s title further alludes to the animalistic presence that pulses through Abakanowicz’s work, derived as it is from the French term used in zoology to denote an insect with two wings. The work was produced during an important shift in Abakanowicz’s practice, in which she broke with the conventions of weaving, particularly its flatness and its square form. She split the weave and softened its edges into rounder forms, while simultaneously moving into a third dimension. This radical new approach to weaving was given its own name: *Abakan*. This term was first used by an art critic in Poland in 1964 in reference to an exhibition of flat wall-based works. A year or so later, Abakanowicz appropriated the term for herself to describe her unique three-dimensional works. The film *Abakany* (1970)—initiated by director Jarosław Brzozowski and completed by Kazmierz Mucha after the former’s death—documents larger examples of Abakanowicz’s work which are suspended in space. In a spectacular scene, Abakanowicz installs a selection of *Abakans* in the sand dunes at the Baltic Sea, dissolving the boundary between her art and the natural environment.

**Caroline Achaintre**  
(\*1969, Toulouse)

*Alberich*, 2022  
Hand-tufted wool and satin

Caroline Achaintre’s works in hand-tufted wool are wild explosions of color, form, and material. Exhibiting an irreverence toward established artistic categories, her hybrid works blur the lines between figuration and abstraction and between textiles and sculpture, evoking many possible interpretations. The work *Alberich* (2022) is exemplary in this respect. Tufts of pale blue shaggy mohair come together in diagonal arrangements that suggest zigzags or a herringbone pattern, but which are ultimately illogical and irregular, shooting out from the surface like the fur of a wild beast. The work is further interrupted by two appendages lined in bright orange satin which droop downward. Are these the eyes of a sad creature? The sleeves of an extravagant coat? Or something else altogether that does not require a specific reference from our known environment?

**Wilder Alison**  
(\*1986, Burlington, Vermont)

*wreath and spl/t petals—magenta— your magma fumes*, 2024  
Dyed wool and thread

Taking French queer feminist theorist Monique Wittig’s text *The Lesbian Body* as a starting point, Wilder Alison is developing a series of works created from sheets of wool, which are dyed and stitched together into dazzling compositions. In an upending of the traditional logic of the painting process, the material is then stretched into shape as a final step. The basic formal unit of the works, a diagonal line, references the slash used in Wittig’s original French writing to cleave the first-person singular subject *je*, making *j/e*. This gesture is mirrored in the English translation of the work by italicizing the first-person singular *I* and by splitting other pronominal forms, for example *m/y*. The slash typographically marks the cleaved subjectivity explored in Wittig’s writing and signifies a moment of disconnect between queer subjects and the heteronormative, patriarchal linguistic cultures they move through. The incongruent arrangements of diagonal lines and the irregular blotches of bright color in Alison’s work open up a space of resonance for slippages, disidentifications, and divergences, while also underscoring the fundamental moment of disconnect that is inherent to the inability of languages to fully articulate identity and selfhood.

**El Anatsui**  
**(\*1944, Anyako)**

*Untitled I*, 2023  
Aluminum, copper wire, nylon string

El Anatsui assembles discarded materials into monumental works of beauty. He has explored a variety of media, including woodcarving, ceramics, and drawing, but is well known for sculptural works made from used metal objects, such as milk cans, printing plates, cassava graters, and also the tops of liquor bottles—as in the case of the work on display. The bottle tops are cut into smaller parts and hammered flat to form the basic units for the works. These smaller fragments are then stitched together by Anatsui and his assistants into grand stretches of hard yet flowing material. The first works with bottle tops, produced at the end of the 1990s, bore a striking resemblance to traditional Ghanaian kente cloth, which is characterized by its bold colors and dynamic patterns. Indeed, these first bottle-top pieces were called *Man Cloth* and *Woman Cloth*. But for Anatsui this formal analogy to textiles is secondary to the meaning stored within the work's materials. The presence of imported bottled liquor in West Africa has its origins in the arrival of traders from Europe as it became a substantial import that flowed into the economy of the transatlantic slave trade. The bottle caps are therefore material witnesses to the cycles of violence and exploitation that has marked Africa's relationship to Europe. Anatsui takes these materials charged with this history and transforms them into spectacular large-scale works that speak of regeneration and repair.

**Leonor Antunes**  
**(\*1972, Lisbon)**

*altered knot 5*, 2018  
10 parts, gray leather, aluminum tube, silicone tube, nylon thread, hemp rope

*altered knot 6*, 2018  
11 parts, black leather and natural leather, aluminum tube, silicone tube, nylon thread, hemp rope

Leonor Antunes explores the relationship between places and the cultures, crafts, and traditions that emerge around them. A critical awareness for how this knowledge is recorded and transferred has often led her to engage with the work and life of female figures from art and design history who have been overlooked by institutional narratives, or whose impact and recognition have been confined to a specific cultural or geographical context. Typically, she engages with formal elements of these protagonists' works and translates them into different mediums and techniques to create sculptural environments. *altered knot 5* and *altered knot 6* take the work of Bauhaus weaver Anni Albers as a starting point, specifically her series of drawings of knots created in 1947. Antunes designed the shape for the leather elements by isolating the form of one of the threads in a knot drawing and dividing it into smaller fragments. These fragments were then scaled-up and distorted into the third dimension to create sculptures that hang from ropes in the exhibition space.

**Ouassila Arras**  
(\*1993, Juvisy-sur-Orge)

*Photos de famille* (Family Photos), 2018  
Carpets

For this installation Ouassila Arras has assembled carpets from friends and family members. Among the carpets is the first rug purchased by her parents to decorate their new home in France, which was later cut into two parts and moved to each of the two children's bedrooms. Her interest in carpets began when she visited the weaving workshop where her mother used to work in Algeria. Rather than weave new carpets, it was important for Arras to work with existing rugs and the smells and stories they carry. For the artist, carpets convey information similar to that of a family photograph. Arras opened the carpets at the seams and unraveled them as far as they would allow to create vivacious structures that are assembled into a soft landscape on the floor of the exhibition space. For Arras, the work resonates with her oral history practice in which she conducts interviews with members of previous generations of Algerians who experienced the violence of French colonial occupation as well as the struggle for recognition within the society of mainland France. While some of Arras's interview partners are happy to share their experiences, she notices that her interlocutors often reach a point where they become silent, triggered by thoughts of the past, and close off to her questioning. In a similar way the weaves of some of the carpets allow for complete unravelling, whereas others offer resistance at a certain point or cannot be opened up at all.

**Rufina Bazlova**  
(\*1990, Grodno)

*Saga of Protests*, 2021  
Machine embroidery, linen fabric

Rufina Bazlova applies the visual language of traditional Belarusian folk embroidery to document the recent political history of the country in a series titled *The History of the Belarusian Vyzhyvanka*. The last word of the title is a pun combining the Belarusian words for embroidery and survival, underscoring the continued need for the embroidery to fulfil its traditional role of warding off evil spirits against the backdrop of political unrest and oppression in the country. The seven-meter long *Saga of Protests* is Bazlova's most comprehensive depiction of the events that ensued after Aleksandr Lukashenko was declared victor in the presidential election on August 9, 2020. Lukashenko's main opponent, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, rejected the result and mass protests formed around the country in her support and in protest against Lukashenko's government. Bazlova responded with embroidered patterns that morph into schematic figurative representations of the protests. She released digital versions online that quickly went viral and became a key moment within the protest movement. *Saga of Protests* depicts various events in one combined image, focusing in on important symbols such as the cockroach—which has become synonymous with Lukashenko amongst his critics—as well as the original flag of the Belarusian People's Republic, a red stripe on a white background that has become a key symbol for the opposition and featured prominently in the protests. After the order was given to take down all signs of the opposition, protesters got creative and installed three giant pairs of underwear in red and white in the Kaskad district of Minsk, as can be seen on the embroidery. Other events depicted include mass gatherings and chains of protesters, as well as the performance of DJs Uladzislau Sakalou and Kiryl Galanau, who disrupted an official election event with a song banned for its previous use in protests—Viktor Tsoi's "Changes." Bazlova's activism extends to embroidery workshops in which she and the participants produce soft monuments to the political prisoners arrested during the protests as part of the project #FramedinBelarus.

**Kevin Beasley**  
**(\*1985, Valentines, Virginia)**

*Site XXXII*, 2023

Polyurethane resin, raw Virginia cotton,  
altered housedresses, confetti T-shirts, altered T-shirts,  
guinea fowl feathers, fiberglass

In *Site XXXII* Kevin Beasley captures materials in pigmented resin. Raw cotton from the artist's home state of Virginia, housedresses, shreds of T-shirts, and guinea fowl feathers come together in a vibrant explosion of matter and color. At first glance, the image may appear abstract and resonate with the formal language of a painting. Yet, the work's title, *Site*, alludes to an idea of place and invites us to engage with the work on different terms. Viewed through this lens, the different materials begin to unfold their meanings and to evoke a deconstructed landscape of the American South. This allows for reflection on the historical entanglements between the land, its natural resources and nonhuman others such as plants and animals, and the power imposed upon them by human-designed systems of extraction. Cotton—present in the work both in its raw form and processed into clothing—has become a key material for Beasley in this regard, as he uses it to think through the larger history of the land in Virginia. The work can therefore be seen as an exhilarating snapshot of materials in the present, as the histories they carry emerge to the surface.

**Mariana Chkonia**  
**(\*1969, Tbilisi)**

*The Night of the Wolf-Headed King*, 2022

Felted wool (dry and wet techniques)

Mariana Chkonia engages with the traditional Georgian craft of felting, one of the oldest textile techniques known, to make monumental soft works imbued with a modern sensibility for color and form. Chkonia uses both wet and dry felting techniques, first producing a basic structure with the wet technique, in which boiling water and soap are applied to raw sheep's wool. She then rolls and applies pressure to the material to remove the water causing the fibers to fuse together. Afterward, different colored wools are applied to the surface using a needle. Felting is closely linked to traditional ways of living and animal husbandry, with the material being used to make cloaks for shepherds, for instance. However, as these traditional modes of living cease to exist, the felting technique, too, is disappearing. Chkonia's work is thus also a project of conservation, ensuring the tradition of felting survives by translating it into a contemporary artistic language. The title of the work on display, *The Night of the Wolf-Headed King* suggests a primal connection between humans and nature and is named after a poem by the artist's father, actor Gogita Chkonia (1950–2009).

**Edith Dekyndt**  
(\*1960, Ypres)

*Fragmentize*, 2022  
Glass on velvet

The work of Edith Dekyndt is concerned with light, matter, space, and their interplay. In a recent series of works, she has explored the strength and fragility of glass as a material by taking shards of broken glass and stitching them onto pieces of fabric. For *Fragmentize* pale blue velvet acts as the support for a panel of splintered glass, whose fragments begin to reflect the light in different directions. Dekyndt's work oscillates between material fact and metaphor, offering an opportunity to think about reflection and refraction of light, as well as the contrasting physical qualities of the materials that make up the work: suppleness versus rigidity, transparency versus opacity, sharpness versus softness. At the same time, it can also be read as a metaphor for damage and repair, as well as fragility, with the work being held together by a fine thread.

**Gee's Bend Quiltmakers**

**Ella Mae Irby**  
(1923–2001)

*"House Top" – Twelve-Block Variation*, ca. 1962  
Cotton

**Candis Mosely Pettway**  
(1924–1997)

*Coat of Many Colors (Quilting Bee Name)*, 1970  
Cotton and cotton/polyester blend

**Qunnie Pettway**  
(1943–2010)

*Flying Swallows*, 1978  
Double-knit fabric

The Gee's Bend Quiltmakers are an intergenerational collective of quiltmakers, who have been producing their works as a communal activity since the nineteenth century. The name of the group is derived from the community at Gee's Bend in Alabama where the quiltmakers work, a place that is now officially known as Boykin. The colloquial name makes reference to the surname of the nineteenth-century landowner who established a cotton plantation within the bend of the Alabama river that the ancestors of the current residents formerly cultivated as enslaved people. Through inherited knowledge and continued formal innovation, the group has created a plethora of dazzling and vivacious quilts assembled from offcuts of fabric and clothing. A commonly occurring pattern within the group's output is the "housetop," as demonstrated in *Soft Power* by a work by Ella Mae Irby, which consists of concentric squares joined together to form a larger structure. Further works by mother and daughter Candis Mosely Pettway and Qunnie Pettway demonstrate other patterns: the "Coat of Many Colors" and "Flying Swallows." The "Coat of Many Colors" was a popular pattern offered by the Freedom Quilting Bee, a cooperative initiated in the 1966 and that lasted until 2012, which allowed the works of Quiltmakers from the South entry to the art market and generated income for the artists. While several group exhibitions in the United States during the 1970s featured works by the artists, it was a significant traveling show of quilts by the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers, shown between 2002 and 2008 throughout America, that underscored their place in the art-historical canon.

**Philipp Gufler**  
(\*1989, Augsburg)

*Quilt #15 (Die Freundin), 2016*  
*Quilt #32 (Magnus Hirschfeld), 2020*  
*Quilt #52 (Charlotte Charlaque), 2023*  
Silkscreen print on fabric

Since 2013, Philipp Gufler has been developing an ongoing series of works titled *Quilts*. Inspired by the American *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*, a monumental collective work of art that celebrates the lives of those who died from AIDS-related causes, Gufler's works are rooted in archival research into the history of queer people, places, publications, and other forms of expression that risk being forgotten. Fragments of each research project are brought together to form a visual cosmos that are incorporated into film essays, performances, objects, and artist's books and transposed using silkscreen printing onto mirrors and, in the case of the quilts, fabrics. While each of the quilts documents a different (hi)story, they are not intended as simple memorials or monuments, but rather as complex and multilayered portraits that reflect the often-conflicted biographies they host. In this respect, the choice and arrangement of materials, their varying degrees of transparency, and the symbolic qualities of their material properties all play an important role in how Gufler assembles each story, with a preference for soft fabrics that respond to their environment and the movements of viewers.

*Soft Power* brings together a small selection of the fifty-three quilts that Gufler has produced so far, including a new work dedicated to Charlotte Charlaque (1892–1963). Charlaque was a singer, dancer, and actor who later worked for physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (commemorated here in a second quilt) at his Institut für Sexualwissenschaft in Berlin. Founded in 1919, the sexology research center was the first of its kind worldwide and was the first institution to offer gender-affirming treatment, including surgery. Charlotte was one of the first people to undergo treatment at the institute. After rising to power in 1933, the National Socialists plundered and closed down the institute, burning its library on the Opernplatz in Berlin. As a Jewish woman, Charlaque fled to Czechoslovakia to escape persecution, together with her girlfriend Toni Ebel. In 1942, Charlaque was forced to leave Europe and settled in New York where she made a career for herself as an off-Broadway actress. Toni Ebel returned to Berlin after World War II and enjoyed official recognition as a painter in the German Democratic Republic. The self-portrait on display, which was found discarded on the street in 2017 and came to the attention of the Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft in 2023, represents a more intimate moment in Ebel's work.

A third quilt commemorates *Die Freundin* (The Girlfriend), the first lesbian magazine published between 1924 and 1933 in Berlin by the Bund für Menschenrecht (Association for Human Rights), a queer organization in the Weimar Republic.

**William Kentridge**  
(\*1955, Johannesburg)

*Germanie et des Pays adjacents du Sud et de l'Est*  
(*Pylon Lady*), 2007–08  
Mohair tapestry

The tapestry *Germanie et des Pays adjacents du Sud et de l'Est (Pylon Lady)* (Germany and the neighboring countries in the south and east [Pylon Lady]) is part of the *Porter* series by the South African artist William Kentridge. The motif was first woven in 2001 by Stephens Tapestry Studio, which is based in Johannesburg, South Africa, and Eswatini. The version presented in the exhibition was produced in 2007–08. Kentridge designed the depicted figure by tearing and cutting sheets of paper into the desired shape. The figures in this series typically consist of several parts, which are held together at the joints with pins. The shape of these pins can also be seen in the finished tapestry. The figures are laid upon reproductions of nineteenth-century French maps. This image then serves as a template for a tapestry made from dyed mohair yarn, which takes up to six weeks to weave, depending on the size.

The *Porter* series includes a total of seventeen motifs. They show shadowy outlines of human figures, each carrying or dragging different oversized objects, like a telephone, a megaphone, a pair of compasses, or a shower. In this case, a woman uses electricity pylons as stilts. The series thus evokes the achievements of the modern world and thematizes the connections between the different parts of the Earth—be it through communication technologies or the movement of people and goods around the globe. The map behind the figure prompts us to reflect upon Germany's position in relation to migration and power.

**Maria Lai**  
(1919, Ulassai–2013, Cardedu)

*Millequattrocentonovantadue* (Fourteen-Ninety-Two), 1992  
*Divento onda* (I Am Becoming a Wave), 2004  
Thread, fabric, tempera

*Untitled*, 2009  
Cloth, iron, tempera, twine, wood

Maria Lai used fabric and thread to create a multifaceted body of work that describes human relationships by means of books, maps, three-dimensional assemblages, and also performative happenings and outdoor art projects. The exhibition *Soft Power* attempts to capture the complexity of Lai's practice by displaying works from the later phase of the artist's life that span a number of different media. Downstairs, sewn books act as a metaphor for Lai's interest in the storytelling quality of thread with their form alluding to the grand narratives of history and mythmaking. *Millequattrocentonovantadue* references 1492, the year in which Columbus became one of the first Europeans to arrive in America, initiating a new phase of entanglement between the continents.

Upstairs an unnamed three-dimensional assemblage is one of Lai's series of works that makes reference to the weaver's loom, rearranging the warp threads into impossible and nonproductive constellations so that they begin to speak their own language of order and chaos. Finally, the filmic documentary *Maria Lai: Legare collegare* by Tonino Casula documents the action *Legarsi alla montagna* (1981), in which Maria Lai mobilized the community of her home village of Ulassai in Sardinia to thread a ribbon through the houses, finally attaching them to the neighboring mountain. The sole fabric maker of the village provided thirteen pieces of cloth from which twenty-six kilometers of ribbon were made. Lai drew inspiration from a local ancient legend, in which a small girl took shelter in a cave during a storm. Attracted by a pale blue ribbon floating outside, the girl left her refuge and was saved from a landslide in the process. The ribbon, and the thread in general in Lai's work, thus act not just a symbol for interconnectedness but also for a potential salvation that lies at its end.

**Joanna Louca**  
(\*1974, Nicosia)

Weaves from the series *Colonial*, 2020  
Deep-dyed cotton, mercerized cotton rug warp,  
linen; handwoven

Weaver's notes for *Colonial*, 2020

Joanna Louca intertwines artisanal tradition and material innovation in contemporary works produced on a handloom in her studio in Nicosia, Cyprus. Her practice can be seen as an ongoing research project through which she refines a visual and tactile language to create narratives in thread. The weavings of the series *Colonial* combine linen and cotton, two principal fibers cultivated in Cyprus that have a long historical tradition and a strong metaphorical power: the Greek term *Linobambaki*—translated as linen-cotton—was used, for example, to refer to those who secretly continued to practice Orthodox Christianity during periods of Ottoman rule on the island. The title and materiality of the series allows for further reflection on the historical position of Cyprus as an island at the nexus between Europe and Asia, which has been claimed and ruled by various powers over the centuries, leading to a mercurial and fractured identity which is subject to constant negotiation.

Louca's delicate weavings are paired with historical fabrics and ethnographic photographs from the archive of historian and folklorist Eleni Papademetriou. Papademetriou began using photography to document the production of textiles in Cyprus in 1967, inspired by the spinners and weavers in her hometown of Karavas. Her work was interrupted by the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974, displacing Papademetriou and her collection to the south of the island. Papademetriou set up weaving workshops in refugee camps near Nicosia to allow for artisans from the north of the island to continue their craft. She noticed, however, that this undertaking became a project of reparation and a search for a lost past rather than a future-oriented endeavor. Years later, Papademetriou became acquainted with Joanna Louca, whom she views as contemporary continuation of the Cypriot weaving tradition. In 2021, Papademetriou used a work from Louca's series *Colonial* as an illustration of contemporary craft in a book published on her archive of historical Cypriot textiles. *Soft Power* brings Papademetriou's historical samples and Louca's weavings together for the first time in a physical encounter in the exhibition space.



**Manuel Mathieu**  
(\*1986, Port-au-Prince)

*Transient*, 2021  
Fabric, ink, ceramics, metal wire

The title of Manuel Mathieu's work *Transient* can be seen as programmatic for many of his works, which center the notion of evolution, mutation, and change. Working through a variety of techniques, chiefly in the medium of painting, Mathieu blurs the boundaries between the accepted categories of abstraction and figuration to create a pictorial language in flux. The spectacular swaths of flamed fabric stained with pink ink in *Transient* (2021) move at the edge of painting and installation, rejecting the classical support of a canvas stretcher and allowing the fabric to find its form in space through a sculptural logic of working with and against gravity. The work transforms each time it is exhibited in a new space, as Mathieu installs it in response to its surroundings. For the presentation at MINSK new green ceramic balls were added to the work. Informed by the use of fire known to Mathieu from Haiti, specifically from the context of Port-au-Prince, the work can be understood in terms of protest culture and the material imperative of political change through physical action. Yet, it also represents the metaphysical, the essential, and the intangible power of the elements to alchemically transform or even obliterate material, and, in so doing, to transcend language and reason to open up a realm beyond the world as we perceive it.

**Rosemary Mayer**  
(1943, Ridgewood, New York–2014, New York City, New York)

*Hroswitha*, 1973  
Flannel, rayon, nylon netting, fiberglass rayon, ribbon, dyes, wood, acrylic paint

Rosemary Mayer commenced her work as an artist at a time when female scholars, historians, and cultural producers were breaking through patriarchal structures by centering the perspective of women. Mayer, for example, was one of the twenty founding members of the A.I.R. Gallery in New York, which was the first female-led and artist-run gallery in the United States for women artists. First opened in 1972, A.I.R. (Artists in Residency, Inc.) remains in operation until this day. In 1973, Mayer exhibited the work *Hroswitha* as part of her first solo exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery.

While some of her peers were turning to the figure of the woman, including portraiture and archetypal representations such as the mother or the goddess, Mayer processed her interest in forgotten female histories in the form of spectacular abstract sculptures crafted from ghostly swathes of draped fabric. She assigned her works the name of female figures whose great contributions to history had been almost erased by a male-focused historical canon, exhibiting a preference for ancient figures, which reveals her first training as a Classics scholar. Mayer paid homage to figures such as the late Roman Empress Galla Placidia; Hypsipyle, the mythical queen of Lemnos and the goddess of mazes and labyrinths; Hypatia, the Greek astronomer and mathematician who was murdered by a Christian mob in the Roman Empire; and Hroswitha (ca. 935–973), who is considered to be the first woman writer in the German-speaking world and who produced poems and dramas as well as autobiographical writings that centered female experience in the early Middle Ages.

**Elrid Metzkes**  
(1932–2014)

*Patchwork-Decke* (Patchwork Blanket), 1982  
Various raw silks: mostly tussah, cotton, lined

Elrid Metzkes is among the leading representatives of textile art in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). After studying garment textiles at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts and taking a family-related break, Metzkes set up her own loom in 1963 and began working on tapestry weaving. She often produced early figurative works based on designs by her husband Harald Metzkes. From these beginnings, she developed a dynamic independent visual language that oscillated freely between figuration and geometric abstraction. Metzkes's work was characterized by her interest in techniques that were not common in the GDR, such as warp ikat and patchwork. In 1979, she exhibited patchwork works for the first time at the Berlin district exhibition and was the only artist in the GDR at the time to work with this technique. Sewing together smaller pieces of fabric enabled her to conduct dynamic experiments in creating space with shapes and colors.

**Małgorzata Mirga-Tas**  
(\*1978, Czarna Góra)

*Mire Dadeja Szczawnicate*, 2023  
*One Roma Story PHRALA (Brothers)*, 2023  
Mixed media, patchwork, acrylic paint

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas uses the textiles around her to create a vibrant cosmos of patchworks depicting the Polish-Romani culture in which she was raised and continues to live in Czarna Góra. Aware that the image of Romani, Europe's largest and oldest ethnic minority, is often stereotyped and stigmatized, she has developed a new and self-confident visual language that documents the everyday life and history of her community on her own terms. The works often show the connections between those depicted, whether it be family members, neighbors engaging in collective activities or labor, or the connection between humans, animals and nature. Needlework is the fundamental technique and can be seen as an act of creation, but also as an act of repair that redresses the stereotypical perception of Romani and offers a new means of interaction and understanding. Mirga-Tas often uses scraps of fabric from secondhand stores, the wardrobes of friends and family and also of those she is depicting, meaning that her works become carriers of the history and presence of those portrayed. Her images sometimes stem from photographs, as in the case of *Mire Dadeja Szczawnicate*, which is an adaptation of a photograph of her father, which depicts him together with his cousins in a Roma settlement in the city of Szczawnica in the 1970s. During her childhood, the artist would frequently visit this place to see her grandfather and play with the other children in the neighborhood. The second work, *One Roma Story PHRALA (Brothers)*, depicts the artist's sons, Antek and Ignas, catching rainwater in their mouths.

**Sandra Mujinga**  
(\*1989, Goma)

*MOTTLE*, 2018  
Soft PVC, acrylic paint, PU leather, denim, grommets, carabiner

Textiles are a central element in the work of Sandra Mujinga as she thinks and works through different artistic categories. Her performances, sculptures, and videos are often connected by the presence of fabrics and soft materials, which are sometimes activated by performers and sometimes presented as works in their own right. For Mujinga, textiles act as a skin and are therefore not only decorative or fashion elements, but also essential tools for survival. *MOTTLE* is one of a series of three works by Mujinga that engages with camouflage patterns as observed in the natural world, specifically in cuttlefish and other cephalopods: namely uniform, mottle, and disruptive patterns. While the uniform camouflage pattern describes a skin characterized by little or no contrasting marks, allowing for an animal to disappear against its background, disruptive patterns are characterized by high-contrast patterns on the skin that break up the contour of the animal's body and make it difficult to be captured by the eye. A mottle pattern, which lends its name to the work on display, is characterized by repeating darker or lighter patches across the skin, as can be observed in the milky markings that extend across the red PVC in the piece, which forms a kind of sturdy underbelly to the work. The different pieces of the sculpture, which evoke flippers or fins, are held together by metal carabiners. Mujinga's work invites us to think beyond its zoological references and more in general about the politics and dangers of being visible in an increasingly mediated and surveilled world.

**Gulnur Mukazhanova**  
(\*1984, Semipalatinsk)

*Moment of the Present #26*, 2021  
Brocade, Lurex, velour, pins

In her series *Moment of the Present*, Gulnur Mukazhanova cuts out patterns from Kazakh fabrics and reassembles them into colorful cascading compositions. The different elements are held together solely by pins. The various patterns and textures in the works hold significance in Kazakh culture and are gifted and exchanged to celebrate important moments in life. Once produced locally using traditional techniques, Kazakh textile production was industrialized and outsourced during the Soviet period, leaving a gap in the market after the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s. Now, such textiles are predominantly mass-produced in China, with traditional patterns previously produced by handwork now replicated using digital weaving and printing processes. The works can thus be read as a metaphor for the fragility and the fluid nature of national identity as it crosses different political systems and ways of living, in this case from communism to capitalism, and from the nomadic to the post-nomadic within the context of Kazakhstan.

**Otobong Nkanga**  
(\*1974, Kano)

*Infinite Yield*, 2015  
Tapestry

The works of Otobong Nkanga reveal the entanglements between human beings and landscapes, showing how human-designed systems continually reshape the world around us. The body is a central motif in her work, whether it be the laboring, often anonymous bodies who are imbricated within systems of extractive practices, or the body of the earth itself, which is continually hollowed and modified by these processes, such as mining. Nkanga works through a variety of media to explore these ideas, including drawings, installations, photos, sculptures, poems, performances, and tapestry. In *Infinite Yield*, a human figure stands in the terraced structure of a mine pit. Its feet are submerged in liquid and the face and vital organs—the heart and the gut—are covered by crystalline forms. Nkanga often explores the connection between human labor and mineral extraction, both as a lived reality within a local infrastructure and as part of a large-scale global economy, bringing attention to the webs of trade that move minerals across the world. Many of the minerals needed for everyday technologies and consumer commodities are extracted in Africa, and the artist had recently undertaken a research trip to Tsumeb in Namibia, the site of a large, abandoned copper mine, before completing the tapestry. Given our knowledge that the materials mined in these locations are finite resources, the title *Infinite Yield* is ambiguous. Questions emerge around the sustainability and equity of the processes that unearth these minerals, and around the value attached to raw materials in relation to the value attached to the lives of those who remove them in the service of large-scale capitalist enterprises.

**Willem de Rooij**  
(\*1969, Beverwijk)

*Blacks*, 2012  
Polyester thread on wooden stretcher

The textile works of Willem de Rooij explore the connection between weaving's binary logic and the stability and legitimacy of the images the process produces. Particular attention is paid to color and how it can be modulated through the use of different tones of interwoven threads. For the work on display, De Rooij used ten shades of black that come together in a flickering and textured mass of material that both expands and undermines the notion of the monochrome image. De Rooij is less interested in the supposed opposition of binary logic, and more interested in its duality, primarily the essential interplay of the warp and weft threads. This duality also extends to the production practice around his textile works, which are made in close collaboration with Ulla Schünemann at Handweberei Geltow, near Potsdam. The works are produced on historical handlooms that were brought together by the workshop's founder, Henni Jaensch-Zeymer (1904–1998). The weaves are composed from synthetic yarn usually used for the application of shirt buttons, produced by Alterfil Nähfaden GmbH, a company founded in Oederan, Sachsen, in 1909 that has survived the transition between various political systems. Alongside De Rooij's work, a documentary film by Claus Dobberke offers a portrait of Henni Jaensch-Zeymer from 1992 that serves as a testament to the resilience of Schünemann and Jaensch-Zeymer in the economic turmoil that ensued after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic.

**Ramona Schacht**  
(\*1989, Gifhorn)

from the series *PICTURES AS A PROMISE (p.a.a.p)*

*Sanfte Hände* (Gentle Hands), ongoing since 2022  
Inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag (framed)

*Archive of Female Work (Slide Box)*, 2024

Wooden archive box with oversized slides, printed on acrylic glass

Since 2022, Ramona Schacht has been researching women's working conditions in the textile industry in socialist countries as part of her project *PICTURES AS A PROMISE (p.a.a.p.)*. To date, Schacht has worked with archive collections in Kyiv, Tashkent, and Leipzig, where the artist lives. The focus here was on the history of the Leipzig cotton mill. Known as a prominent art and cultural venue today, the site was founded in 1884 and was once the largest cotton mill in continental Europe. Schacht is interested in the history of its time as a VEB (state-owned enterprise) during the German Democratic Republic. While combing through the archive, she found recurring gestures and snapshots that expose certain hierarchies and visualise how power was exercised in textile production, yet also depict moments of solidarity. For her series, she takes details from the historic photographs and elevates these cropped fragments into new, independent motifs that she classifies into different categories. In the exhibition *Soft Power*, images from the section "Gentle Hands" hang on the wall: a series of knowledgeable, watchful, and careful hands that radiate a lightness and grace that contrasts with the heavy physical labor of the women depicted. In the same room is the work *Archive of Female Work (Slide Box)*, a wooden archive box containing oversized slides displaying other recurring motifs from the archives. In her series, Schacht questions the ideas and ideologies that the industrial photographs were intended to convey and evaluates the promises they made to the workers from a contemporary perspective.

**Gabriele Stötzer**  
(\*1953, Emleben)

*Seher in der Wüste* (Seer in the Desert), 1978–79  
Oil on wood

*Der große Schwanz* (The Big Cock), 1985  
Weaving from recycled cotton

Gabriele Stötzer creates textiles as both utilitarian objects and artworks. In the German Democratic Republic, she wove clothing and repurposed old garments by cutting them up and reassembling them into rag rugs to make a living. She also created works of art on a loom that she set up in a squatted house in Erfurt's old town in the 1980s. Stötzer was part of the nonconformist underground scene there and created artworks in this context that broke with the policies of the GDR's political and artistic systems. In doing so, she denounced the patriarchal structures around her. For example, Stötzer created *Der große Schwanz* in 1985 from cotton found in an industrial accident.

As a student, she came into contact with the dark side of the GDR's power system and was expelled from university in Erfurt for protesting against the exmatriculation of a fellow student who was critical of the system. In 1976, she took part in collecting signatures against the expatriation of Wolf Biermann and was subsequently imprisoned for a year for alleged defamation of the state—first in Erfurt and later in the women's prison in Hoheneck. While at Hoheneck, a prison notorious for its poor conditions, Stötzer and the other female inmates had to perform forced labor in textile production, with Stötzer sewing tights that were intended for sale on the Western market. After her release, Stötzer produced a series of small-format paintings to work through her experiences in prison. These include the painting *Seher in der Wüste* (1978–79), painted after a soiled rag lying on the ground, which had appeared to her like the image of Jesus in the desert.

**Sung Tieu**  
**(\*1987, Hai Duong)**

631, 2021

Screen print on unpolished stainless steel,  
printed with pattern of VEB Vowetex, screws, washers

Since 2014, Sung Tieu has researched the history of the up to 70,000 Vietnamese people who came to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as part of the 1980 recruitment agreement and worked in approximately 700 state-owned enterprises (VEB). Vietnamese contract workers were employed in various branches of East German industry, including textile production and processing. During her research at the Federal Archives, Tieu uncovered a selection of documents. These included the agreement between the GDR and Vietnam, flight lists meticulously recording the influx of skilled workers dispatched by the GDR to VEBs, employment contracts between VEBs and Vietnamese laborers, and the regulations governing the dormitories designated for their accommodation. These documents shed light on the rigorous conditions under which Vietnamese individuals resided and worked in the GDR.

Tieu presents this story in a minimalist formal language by bringing together archival documents and historical objects from East German industrial history that were produced with the support of Vietnamese workers. For the work 631, the artist transferred a bedsheet pattern from the VEB Vowetex line in Plauen onto stainless-steel panels via screen printing. The soft floral pattern starkly contrasts the hard substrate, whose form is reminiscent of the cladding of ships and airplanes as well as electronic data carriers. The work thus refers to the specific history of contract workers, while also reflecting on the continuous movements of people, goods, and information across national borders. The work's title refers to the 631 screws that fasten the panels to the wall: it self-referentially alludes to the artwork's technical specifications, while simultaneously emphasizing the amount of labor involved in relationship to the underlying story.

**Rosemarie Trockel**  
**(\*1952, Schwerte)**

*Made in Western Germany*, 1990  
Carpet (large, blue)

Through her knitted pictures and motifs woven into carpets, which she began producing in the 1980s, Rosemarie Trockel introduced techniques into a painting-dominated German art discourse that were previously marginalized due to their association with handicraft, which often carried feminine connotations. Trockel did not opt for her own handiwork, however. She instead had the patterns executed according to her designs by a knitting machine or—as in the case of the work shown here—by master weavers in Tibet. Political symbols and logos of branded goods are often woven into these works, pointing to the outsourcing of labor processes to other countries within the framework of global capitalism.

This carpet comes from a series of the artist's woven and knitted pictures that were produced with the inscription "Made in Western Germany." In this case, the lettering has evolved into a repetitive pattern and stretches across the carpet in stripes, making it almost illegible and abstract. As the work was produced in Tibet, it raises the question of whether these words can be considered a factual statement or if it has a more symbolic character.

The designation "Made in Western Germany" perhaps represents a certain promise of quality—a reputation that the Federal Republic of Germany was able to build up during the years of the postwar economic miracle, thereby assuming a new position within the global community. The term "Western" points both to the division of Germany during the Cold War and to West Germany's deliberate effort to distinguish its industry from production in the German Democratic Republic. After reunification, Trockel's carpets with this inscription inevitably took on a new meaning, as in the case of the work exhibited here from 1990. New questions emerge around the political and economic relationship between the former West and the former East in reunified Germany that are still relevant today.

**Johanna Unzueta**  
(\*1974, Santiago de Chile)

*Zwisch* 2022, *Berlin 2023*, *Zwisch* 2023 I, 2023  
*Zwisch* 2022, *Berlin 2023*, *Zwisch* 2023 II, 2023  
Watercolor, pastel pencil, oil stick, needle holes on  
watercolor paper tinted with wild berries;  
Display: wood and plexiglass

*Spiral, Composition 1:1*, 2024  
Thread, nails

As a child, Johanna Unzueta would practice needlework, particularly weaving and knitting, and developed at an early age a knowledge of the world through her hands and the process of making things. This sensibility translates into her drawings, which she creates over the course of several months by applying pastels and watercolors to tinted paper. The paper is dyed using natural pigments she finds around her. In the case of the works in the exhibition, Unzueta used dewberries (Kratzbeere) to dye the paper, achieving different color tones in the process. She begins her drawings by puncturing the paper with needles and using the holes as an axis around which to draw the soft and rounded forms of the works. Unzueta then fills these shapes out with varying patterns that she models on textile structures in a kind of weaving with drawn lines. The finished drawings are mounted on wooden blocks in a standing display that is derived from the experimental presentation design of Brazilian modernist architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi. For *Soft Power* Johanna Unzueta has also created a site-specific work across three columns in the exhibition space, for which she has threaded lengths of uncut shoelaces across them. The different threads are wrapped around nails and interlaced and woven intuitively by Unzueta, with the patterns influenced by the time she spent weaving with Mapuche women in rural southern Chile in 1999.

**Hamid Zénati**  
(1944, Constantine–2022, Munich)

Painted textiles, untitled, undated  
Fabric paint on textiles

Over the course of his lifetime, Hamid Zénati produced a myriad of exuberant patterns which he painted onto anything he could get his hands on, including ceramics, the interior and exterior of houses, a boat and even his own body. Textiles, however, would become the primary carrier of Zénati's designs, with the artist painting on scraps and larger pieces of fabric, cushion covers, and clothing, including his instantly recognizable sweatshirts and hoodies. While one can perhaps identify recognizable forms within his works, with some of them evoking certain artistic traditions or places, Zénati nonetheless defies categorization through his work and insists on a unique and free visual language that oscillates between the microscopic and the cosmic.

An autodidact with no formal training in painting (but a trained photographer, translator, and teacher), Zénati began painting relatively late in life during the 1970s while he was waiting for the telephone to ring with new translating jobs. Raised bilingually in French and Arabic, he also learned German, which brought him to Germany for the first time in the 1960s. His work as a translator and the need to renew his visa meant that Zénati moved frequently between Munich and Algiers, as well as to other parts of the world on his travels. Painting on fabric meant that Zénati could carry his pieces with him and work on them in these different places.

## **Zirkel für künstlerische Textilgestaltung Potsdam (Circle for Artistic Textile Design Potsdam)**

*Potsdamer Jagdteppich* (Potsdam Hunting Rug), 1988  
Cotton, felt, wool; Hand appliqué, machine appliqué, sewn

*Textilstadt Potsdam* (Textile Town Potsdam), 1993  
Cotton, felt, silk; Hand appliqué, machine appliqué, sewn

### Archive material

The Circle for Artistic Textile Design Potsdam was founded in 1954 under the leadership of the trained fashion illustrator Ingeborg Bohne-Fiegert. Textile circles were sponsored by the state in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as part of what was called “künstlerisches Volksschaffen” (people’s art) and offered interested people the possibility to develop creatively alongside their work and to further their education in the fields of visual, applied, and performing arts. The Potsdam circle produced a large number of works in different formats, ranging from wall hangings and appliqués to printed fabric and jewelry items. They even created entire fashion collections, such as the famous hunting collection, which was presented over seventy times, including at the Palast der Republik in Berlin. The Potsdam circle was considered a “star circle” due to its strong public presence, its numerous exhibitions at home and abroad, and its many awards. The members were able to finance research trips abroad in socialist countries through state sponsorship and the prize money associated with their awards. Group members were guests in Prague, Moscow, Leningrad, Yerevan, Varna, Budapest, Plovdiv, and Sofia, for example.

At the end of the 1980s the idea arose to collectively design a wall-hanging to celebrate the 1,000-year anniversary of the city of Potsdam. The *Potsdamer Jagdteppich* (Potsdam Hunting Rug) was created. The collective decision to focus on hunting was influenced by the circle’s proximity to the socialist Hunting Association, in which one of the members was active as a dog handler. In preparation, the group made studies of the depicted architecture, including the central Jägertor (Hunter’s Gate), and received an introduction to the subject of royal hunting from a curator of the Prussian Palaces and Gardens. The hunting rug was completed in 1988 and sold to the FDGB (Free German Trade Union Federation) for 4,000 marks with the proviso that it could first be exhibited for the 1,000th anniversary celebrations in 1993.

During the period of upheaval following German reunification, the hanging could no longer be found and was considered lost. The political and social infrastructure surrounding circle activities also vanished at this time, leaving the group’s future uncertain. Although the circle was officially dissolved, a small group decided on its own initiative to carry out one last joint project under the leadership of Ingeborg Bohne-Fiegert—now as the Interessengruppe Textilgestaltung Land Brandenburg (Brandenburg State Textile

Design Interest Group). Over the course of one year and with the collaboration of thirteen participants, a new hanging was made for the 1,000th-year anniversary celebration: *Textilstadt Potsdam* (Textile Town Potsdam). The hanging was ceremoniously presented to the City Councilor for Culture as a gift to the City of Potsdam on October 3, 1993. Years later, the hanging *Potsdamer Jagdteppich* was found in a cellar and exhibited again in the Old Town Hall for women’s week in 1997. Today, both hangings are in the collection of the Potsdam Museum – Forum for Art and History.

Special thanks to Jutta Lademann (former circle member and the group’s indefatigable annalist), Sarah Wassermann (specialist on textile circles in the GDR), Uta Kumlehn (research associate, Potsdam Museum), Franka Schneider and Salwa Joram (curator and conservator, Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Berlin).



# DAS MINSK

## KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

Text:  
Daniel Milnes

DAS MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam  
Max-Planck-Str. 17  
14473 Potsdam  
[www.dasminsk.de](http://www.dasminsk.de)  
Instagram: @dasminsk

Visitor Service  
+49 331 236014-699  
[besucherservice@dasminsk.de](mailto:besucherservice@dasminsk.de)

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