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dan coopey: the double
04.02 – 11.03.2023

The Double
/ Artist's essay

I began to work with fibre by coincidence – a sought coincidence – and have continued with it because it has never disappointed me. As I get to know it better, the better it knows me. In briefer words, it has never stopped arousing my curiosity. Fibre is like an old pencil: one has used it for so long that you take it for granted. I am made of fibre because I have embraced it and because I know it.

(Olga de Amaral, *The Mantle of Memory*, 2013)

Perhaps I would like to write rather than describe with my weaving: the double soul, the double-protection from death, the doubling implied in making a new piece whose traits are so much part of the creator that they become a reproduction of himself. One could think about every piece, every stroke, every small or large, simple or complex form that arises from the person who creates the double.

(Olga de Amaral, ibid)

These words by the Colombian artist resonated as I made this new series of works, each centred around my own personal relationship with weaving. While weaving, the body has to make great effort to tension fibres against their will, and in return the fibres create tension in the body's fibres, the cord like tendons that connect every muscle in our body. The title of this new exhibition is taken from De Amaral, and is also the title of one of the works in the show. This work is the exact same height as my body, though less perceivable as it leans diagonally against the gallery wall, but it is a bodily connection I wanted to make explicit in the work. Each twist and turn in the sculpture is formed by positioning the weaving at specific angles in relation to my body and requires around a month of time devoted to its making. Throughout this process the weaving is very much an extension of the body. I never design my works, rather their form emerges organically out of this intimate and intuitive process. Anni Albers wrote about giving the object a chance to design itself, and I think similarly. I have also been thinking a lot recently about the moment a weaving is completed and when it is no longer a part of my own body, how I still retain some sort of empathy for the object, and what that might mean about having empathy for others. With this new body of works I have also looked at the other external forces that shape the work: the use of a needle to close one of the works for example, which acts as a substitute for my hand, placing it at the centre of the weaving, or the effect of gravity and how that dictates the way each object folds and falls.

On entering into the essence of weaving – its function as a protection from the elements – it is inevitable to look at the landscape and not be surprised by the paradox that arises: landscape, inversely, begins to be perceived as an abstraction of weaving, that it is only a mantle covering the earth.

(Olga de Amaral, ibid)

The latter quote from de Amaral particularly touches me. I grew up in a small rural town in the UK – Stroud – that is famous for weaving, and there the landscape is literally shaped by the industry,

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from the workers' cottages and many small-scale sheep farms, like that of my grandparents, that supply wool to the nearby mills to the canals built for transporting fibres and cloth. A large part of my early education was spent learning about this industry and the consequences of the industrial revolution. A local history society, who used to organise open days and school visits, evocatively described it and how that economy still survives today:

> *The roots of our textile heritage lie underground. The limestone hilltops provide a perfect pasture for sheep and an ideal building material; the clay layers beneath create the springs - fresh water for the cottages and a plentiful supply for the fast running streams that can turn water wheels. And there is the clay, Fuller's earth.*
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> *Explore the landscape – there are hundreds of footpaths, many link settlements to the mills. Before the industrial revolution, spinners and weavers would work in the cottages, supplied with wool or yarn by the clothier to whom the cloth would be returned to for dyeing and finishing. Innovations in machinery expanded the mills. Spinners and weavers became mill workers, along with their children. Steam engines now supplemented water power with the coal that was being transported along the canal. At the height of prosperity, the Stroud area had over 100 mills. Today Stroud cloth still goes around the world, you will see it on tennis balls and snooker tables. The crafts of spinning, dyeing and weaving survive as contemporary artists pass on their skills and keep the thread going, from the past into the future.*
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> (StroudWater Textile Trust, *Textile Heritage*, 2022)

I remember visiting the old mills – one of which my mother worked at when I was young – and being taught to weave with wool on small cardboard looms. It's funny to think back to that time and realise that those techniques still find a place in my work today. Apart from more improvised systems using braiding or binding, my work usually employs simple twining techniques. I like that such a common technique has such an old history that reaches far and wide and has so much potential depending on how it is employed and with what fibre.

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For this show I have twined mostly soft fibres – cords and ropes – on a large scale, that gives the objects a strange hybrid quality somewhere between basket and cloth. Twining has many varieties, from the relatively simple to very complex, and is present in basketmaking and textile traditions all over the world. It can be defined as two or more travelling lengths of fibre that twist around each other, like in cord making, but here we trap stakes between them as the material is twisted. With hard materials it can be called fitching or pairing depending on the direction we are twisting the fibre.

To the untrained eye, weaving techniques might be perceived as purely decorative or even symbolic, and they have the potential to be both – for many indigenous groups in Brazil and elsewhere, weaving is also a mode of community making and storytelling – yet they are born out of necessity. For example, among indigenous people in Brazil the most common technique is plaiting and its many variations, where fibres are overlaid diagonally to create a flat and often smooth surface. This technique is employed as it is the most practical to be used with flat fibres such as the many varieties of palm. Here in the city lapping is more common – the classic over and under laying of fibres used globally – which is much more practical for the limited commercially available fibres, and offers speed for mass production.

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Many of the fibres I use in my work I buy on 25 de Março and the surrounding area of downtown São Paulo. When I visit the UK, I always bring a bag of fibres I can't find here such as rattan and hop twine (which is made from the leftover hop fibres of beer production and which I used to make *Beer Belly* (2022). Other fibres used in the show are much more common to Brazil such as the sisal (most likely cultivated in Paraíba e da Bahia) and jute (from the Corchorus plant, common to tropical and subtropical geographies). When wanting to use natural fibres here in the city options are quite limited and of course it is both impractical (and unethical) to import fibres long-haul, but this limitation often pushes the work in new directions. There are plenty of synthetics of course but often these are more expensive and though I have used them in the past I'm trying to avoid such polluting elements these days.

25 de Março has long had a connection to fibres and textiles**.** In the nineteenth century much loom work in the villages and towns of the state was the preserve of individual families who sold on the cloth, with both genders and older children all employed. The looms would often be installed in cottage kitchens so the weavers could work while simultaneously managing domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning. Gradually however larger factories and corporations lobbied for laws limiting the import of machinery, and these small-time makers were forced into the garment trade, moving their old machines to the city and shops along streets such as Rua 25 de Março, where they made clothing directly for the public to purchase. In his excellent history the sociologist Jose Carlos Durand describes how by the 1970s "increasingly entrepreneurs dedicated to weaving were deactivating their own looms and shifting attention and investment to dyeing and the mending of fabric." The raw textile industry has become the preserve of big business.

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My interest however in weaving goes far further back, towards the beginning of humanity – basketry is believed to be humanity's oldest technology – when the act of weaving evolved and became all pervasive, before it's more recent decline. The oldest known baskets have been carbon dated to around 12,000 years ago, the first spun cord even earlier, predating even ceramics. What we know about the history of basketry is largely from imprints of weaves found in clay fragments – it is presumed clay was packed into baskets to enable the transportation of liquids. In his pioneering 1851 essay *The Four Elements of Architecture*, architect Gottfried Semper insisted that the threading, twisting and knotting of linear fibres were among the most ancient of human arts, from which all else was derived, including both building and textiles. "The beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles," he wrote. "And the most fundamental element of both building and textiles was the knot".

Cardboard was invented just two hundred years ago, plastic even more recently, around one hundred years ago and before then baskets were the most common form of storage and transportation. Any marketplace worldwide would have been a sea of woven vessels in all manner of shapes and sizes. I find it incredible how quickly people living in industrialised towns and cities have become so disconnected from hand weaving. The American artist Ed Rossbach noted in 1976 "Uses of fibre that resisted mechanisation – such as basketry – tended to become the province of non-mechanised societies." Handweaving could now be viewed by city dwellers as a novelty, something interesting, unassociated with the everyday task it had once been. "If a hand technique for constructing with fibre could not be mechanised, another technique was made to suffice or another product was substituted for the original."

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The decline of weaving can be a lonely preoccupation as it is mostly only discussed within specialist craft circles, as the quotes in this essay demonstrate. British weaving expert Dorothy Wright wrote extensively on the decline of basketry, in her 1959 book *Baskets and Basketry*, and she even discusses how the whims of fashion played a big part, noting that short skirts do not agree with shopping baskets and wicker furniture because of the danger to nylon. She insisted that when longer skirts came back into fashion so too would wicker shopping baskets. Sadly, Wright was over optimistic, her note that "there are still many in use in both country and town by builders, fishermen, agricultural workers, postmen, distributors of food and drink and in factories" belonging way in the past by my lifetime. It is funny though, how those plastic things with handles that we pick up to carry goods around a supermarket are still referred to as 'shopping baskets' acknowledging its original historically hand-woven equivalent. There has maybe too been a slight renaissance very recently, with hipster bakeries or coffee shops now likely to have baskets of bread and pastries. It is of course a marketing strategy designed to seduce customers with a sense of freshness, of history, quality and authenticity, and it works, perhaps because people really are looking for this sense of tradition.

In October I spent a month living with the community of La Urbana, a Colombian village along the Caño Mataven and the border of Venezuela as part of a residency organised by Organizmo, a Colombian non-profit. It was a great honour to be able to learn first-hand about their lives, and spend time sharing and co-creating with them. It was clear that the community too feared that future generations will not continue to weave. Nori, one of the most experienced weavers in the village, as we were saying our goodbyes, made an emotional plea to the young men in the village saying *"I want to say something to my nephews, it is a lie that men do not weave, look at Dan, he weaves like us women and you should be weaving also"*. Yet it is a life at risk. Some days I woke at 5am to help the women in the community collect the Yuca from the field, where they told us that they used to start later and spend the whole day working out in the open, but now the sun is unbearably hot by midday. It was sad to see them suffering the devastating environmental consequences of our industrialised, capitalist way of life. As the world is hurtling towards an ecological disaster of our own making, we should all be listening and learning from the ways of indigenous people and seeking a closer, more respectful, more entwined, relationship with nature.

Philosophers often speculate about what people will do if computers and machines take over and the human hand is rendered redundant. I myself wonder if it is at that point people will maybe start to weave again, if only to pass the time.

All progress, so it seems, is coupled to regression elsewhere. We have advanced in general, for instance, in regard to verbal articulation - the reading and writing public today is enormous. But we have certainly grown increasingly insensitive to our perception of touch - the tactile sense.

(Anni Albers, 1965)