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RUTH LASKEY builds her pictures one thread at a time. With a minimum of means—three or four colors of thread—she weaves geometric shapes into a ground of half-bleached linen: a chain of blue trapezoids (*Twill Series [Ice Blue]*, 2007); two differently hued triangles that intersect to form a third (*Twill Series [Deep Orange/Dark Brown/Purple]*, 2007); or green diamonds that overlap (*Twill Series [Khaki Green/Resin Green]*, 2006). The works are not so much explorations as contemplations of color and form, and while they allude to Josef Albers's studies of color interaction, they are too artfully contrived, too singular, to be exercises.

Laskey has only a small body of work; her labor-intensive process—of blending the dyes, then painting the colored threads before weaving the works on a simple loom—precludes any rapid output, to say nothing of rash decisions or expressionist gestures. For her first major one-person exhibition, to open next month at Ratio 3 in San Francisco, the thirty-two-year-old artist will show only seven recent works from her “Twill” series, along with a few studies on graph paper. But, as her work implores, there is no rush.

Unlike the vast majority of the work indebted to crafts that is now enjoying yet another gallery renaissance, Laskey's tapestries are neither ironic nor celebratory. They do not offer institutional critique as do, say, the embroidered samplers of Elaine Reichek, nor do they aim for feminist revisionism, or even sincerity. Laskey sidesteps both parody and commemoration with a deliberate effort. Anachronistic and quiet, her works speak to the often-disavowed possibility of autonomy in art—never daring actually to claim such autonomy, but heralding it nonetheless; they are a form of commitment.

As weft and warp intersect at right angles, Laskey's works internalize the modernist grid. No longer mere support for the artwork, the grid has become the structure of the artwork itself. Her twill pieces are formed through a reductive process that merges figure with ground, integrates shape and field, and fuses design and process. If painting, even at the pinnacle of Greenbergian flatness, still insists on a base

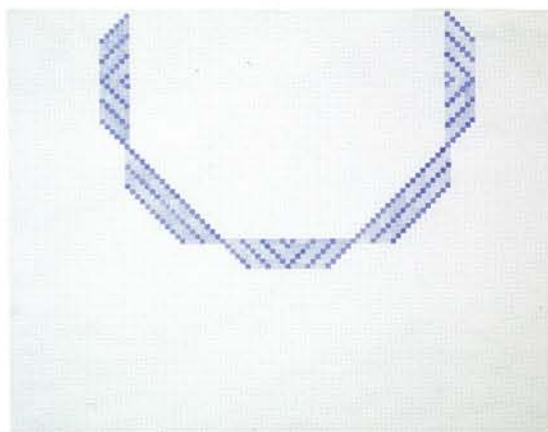
to which color is applied (“the stretched or tacked up canvas already exists as a picture,” Greenberg wrote, “though not necessarily as

a successful one”), these tapestries are not fields for projection, but rather instances of the figure being embedded in the ground itself. Yet the incorrigible flatness of Laskey's work is called to task by the process of twilling, in which the shuttle with the weft thread is passed over one but under two or more threads of the warp, giving the cloth a marked diagonal rib. Not only does the fabric itself reveal depth when examined in close-up, however, but the diamond shapes of *Twill Series (Camel/Golden Brown)*, 2006, for example, themselves shuffle between two- and three-dimensional forms, as the diamonds become pyramids, only to dissolve back into diamonds.

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OPENINGS

Rachel Churner on Ruth Laskey



Opposite page: Ruth Laskey, *Twill Series (Deep Orange/Dark Brown/Purple)*, 2007, handwoven linen, 19 3/4 x 18 1/4". This page: Ruth Laskey, *Study for Twill Series (Ice Blue)*, 2007, watercolor on paper, 8 1/2 x 11".

Laskey trained as a painter at California College of the Arts (formerly California College of Arts and Crafts; that pesky “Crafts” was dropped in 2003), where she received an MFA in 2005. She began mixing her own paints, then started to weave her own canvas and to paint on top of it. Organic forms with scatological references were painted in thick smears of brown, yellow, and pink alongside colored woven patches. Freed from the constraints of the readymade, she has now abandoned painting and bound herself to the strictures of the loom, to the saturation capacity of thread, to the diagonals of twill. She spends her prodigious labor on such an economy of materials in order to control the work's production from its most basic components. This is no small matter, and it complicates Laskey's insistence that Minimalism be seen as her guiding force. Though morphologically related to the precision and regularity of Minimalism's constructive methods—Donald Judd's “one thing after another”—Laskey's work has little of the obsessive repetition at that movement's core. Because she does not permit, let alone rely on, outside production, the “idea” escapes its fate of becoming (per Sol LeWitt's dictum) “a machine that makes the art.”

Even within the self-imposed limitations of the loom, Laskey stubbornly refuses to grant her design prominence over the form or the

materials themselves. The drawings on graph paper that accompany the tapestries may be models for her production, but they do not take precedence over the material process of the works' creation. And while beautiful in their precision—no coloring outside the lines here—these studies do little to convey the complexity of her working practice. Indeed, the diagrams she makes of the weaving plan itself—which shafts to lift, which color to introduce at which string—serve as much more intriguing and exacting documents of her artistic process.

As tapestry, Laskey's work is implicated in the line of “women's work,” both in and out of the art world. Hailing Bauhaus weavers like Anni Albers and Gunta Stölzl, her work retains the feminine implications of delicate handicraft, even as

she refuses to engage explicitly in a feminist critique of modernist painting. Laskey neither denies nor confirms a gendered status of painting, or of weaving, and it is

through this refusal that she strives to neutralize the loaded terms *art* and *craft*.

“The uncompromising radicalism . . . , the very features defamed as formalism” in the works of the most important artists of the age, Adorno once wrote, “give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time.” Out of place and past its time, Laskey's formalist reengagement with color, form, and materiality is a recalcitrant rejoinder to contemporary art. The voice of her shuttle is not just that of the silenced woman, as in Sophocles' description of Philomela's plight; it is also that of a modernism rendered obsolete. □

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