THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Christina Forrer

By Ann C. Collins
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In medieval Europe, tapestries were hung in castle rooms to keep out drafts and cold. Richly decorated with religious scenes or myths, these woven lengths of cloth provided the household occupants, even those who were illiterate, pictorial stories that engaged and enlightened. Swiss-born artist Christina Forrer continues this tradition, weaving textiles that ponder which narratives might best be contemplated by present-day viewers. Eight of the artist's tapestries, for which she is primarily known, along with two works on paper, are exhibited at Luhring Augustine in a show writhing with wide-eyed characters, placed alone or within complicated systems of relationships. Building row upon row of thread, Forrer probes the anxiety of isolation and the conflict of interconnectedness in work that is at once timeless and contemporary.



Christina Forrer, Untitled (brown background), 2018. Cotton, wool, linen, silk and watercolor, 123 x 88 inches. Courtesy Luhring Augustine.

In *Pink Bubble* (2018), a woman stands in profile against a background of densely saturated bands of color. A scarlet tear falls from the corner of her eye and a nebulous form pours from her open mouth and rises in front of her face: a speech bubble, which crowds the composition and obscures the woman's face to whomever she is speaking. The bubble is void of text; the only way to "read" it is through its color—a bright rose-madder which is sometimes referred to as "Barbie pink," a color once relegated only to girls' items. I know that color, and I know this story: Here is someone speaking with urgency, but that pink bubble—her gender—eclipses her face and renders her message unintelligible. Forrer chooses thick yarns full of nubs and variations in color, and the tightness of her weaving gives a sense of weight to the final creation, the warp and weft forming a length of warm and comforting fabric, a blanket that would survive many generations of use. In *Pink Bubble*, this durability casts the struggle of women trying to be heard as both timeless and ongoing.

Untitled (brown background) (2018) is a large piece, made from two separate weavings sewn top to bottom and measuring approximately 10 × 7 feet. Forrer presents a wild mix of individuals who tumble against a russet background. Figures plunge through space, struggling to grab hold of each other, or attempt to climb upward by stepping on the bodies of the

fallen. At the top of the piece, bands of blue and violet form a sky that opens above this muddy earth, a heaven to which this collection of humanity aspires, but the entrance to this peaceful space is guarded by a three-headed monster with sharp little teeth, ready to devour whoever rises towards it. In the bottom right corner, a gray cloud—is it smoke? —spews from one of the mouths of a raging two-headed man. The cloud rises, curls around the waist of a child, then enters the ear of another man whose alarmed face is marked by a rainbow of stripes. Another gray plume reaches up the left side of the picture, entering and exiting the ear of ª man whose mouth hangs open in horror. It is unclear whether these gray forms to which ears are so susceptible is a communication, maybe of lies or bigotry, or an exhalation of some sort of toxic anger. Maybe it is simply the incessant chatter of the age, the vapid information that endlessly cycles through shares, tweets, and posts, keeping us in a state of alarm and rage.

Across the gallery, four white panels of loosely woven threads hang side by side. In *Woman (with eyes open)* (2018), Forrer casts her riotous colors aside to create a bleached-out image of a woman in a prone position, toes digging into the ground as if she is crawling under a cloud-like form that molds itself to the curves of her head and back. She stares into the distance, a worried look on her face. Variations in the tension of the weave create a sense of light and shadow, and in places, the piece appears delicate, as if its threads could be easily undone. I consider the woman may be lying on a bed, that the shape I thought was hovering over her may be the shadow of a partner sleeping next to her, oblivious to her insomnia and whatever thoughts rush through her mind.



Christina Forrer, Woman (with eyes open), 2018. Cotton, 60 x 160 inches. Courtesy Luhring Augustine.

Throughout the show, Forrer offers a view of the human condition distinctly altered from her medieval predecessors. The saints and gods have been banished, and instead it is the ordinary person, enshrined within the tension of her warp and weft, who stares out from the work. The narratives are not noble or even pretty; and yet they are readily understood, reflecting the remoteness of the screen age, and the tumultuousness of living amid narcissistic ambition. These pieces may not inspire devotion, but they do give pause.