

cover

Sensitive Forms: Luam Melake



Luam Melake, Talismanic Quilt, 2020. Personal objects and clothing, plastic packaging, latex, twine, nylon threads, jute fabric and leather, 36 1/2 x 54 x 2 1/2 inches (92.7 x 137 x 6.4 cm).

The solo exhibition ‘Sensitive Forms: Luam Melake’ at Parker Gallery, Los Angeles (30 January – 27 March 2021) debuts the California-born, New York-based artist Luam Melake’s wall-based textile sculptures. Some are handwoven by the artist on a loom while all are augmented with an extraordinary range of materials that are, she says, ‘the most crucial element’ of her works and the ‘building blocks’ for her concepts.

Created during Luam Melake’s 2019 residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, the exhibition coincides with Melake’s participation in the exhibition ‘Objects: USA 2020’ at R & Company, New York. This exhibition revisits the landmark 20th-century international touring exhibition ‘Objects: USA (1969-1973)’. Curators spent two years criss-crossing the USA to select a survey of studio craft artists. Seventy-seven mainly wall-based fibre works were included in the exhibition which introduced the broader public to the textile works of innovators like Sheila Hicks, Lenore Tawney, Anni Albers and Ron Nagle. With a similar

“Sensitive Forms: Luam Melake.” *Cover* (March 3, 2021), accessed online.

objective, 'Objects: 2020' presents the work of fifty 'historical' American artists such as Sheila Hicks alongside the work of fifty contemporary craft-based artists in order to 're-frame the history, present, and future of handmade American arts.'

Insertion of non-fibre elements into weave was an innovation perfected by artists like Hicks. Non-textile elements are a signature feature of Melake's 'handwoven sculptures', but unlike Hicks and her contemporaries who favoured organic insertions, Melake uses unconventional and completely unexpected non-organic elements. Cement and asphalt join a range of materials including plastics to become transmogrified by the complex creativity of Melake's designs. Melake's BA in interdisciplinary Field Studies with a major in Architecture inspires her confidence to collage new forms and build layers with her weave.

Similar to the work of Hicks whose ambitious, exploratory weavings were once described by critic Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* as 'flirting with installation art', one of the outstanding installation-like works in Parker Gallery's exhibition is Melake's *Talismanic Quilt*. Not woven or pieced in a conventional Western fashion, Melake loosely tacked diverse fabric squares and rectangles from 'well-loved' old clothing to a coarse jute backing. Tubes of clear PVC vinyl 'weft' are stuffed with mysterious-looking packages bound with parcel string. The tubes are bound to the jute with black warp strings in a geometric pattern that alternates with the textile patches to create a checkerboard design. Unlike its generic Western namesake 'quilt' where patterns are named and almost always intended to be 'readable', *Talismanic Quilt* is instead a type of contemporary vision board 'inspired by a West African practice of packaging found objects' that possess cultural meaning, and 'stitching them to tunics' to allow them to release a mobile 'energy formula that propels the wearer towards action.'

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