

# Sight Unseen

Luam Melake Weaves Tapestries from Latex, Rubber, Memories, and More

by Jennifer S. Li



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).

Using an impressive range of materials from the industrial to the ephemeral, New York–based Luam Melake creates evocative wall-hangings and sculptural works that draw from personal experience and her multi-layered Black-American, Eritrean, and Ethiopian background. Her sculptures uncannily feel as if they have a life of their own, by design and in material. In *Talismanic Quilt* (2020), Melake borrows from the West African tradition of sewing personal objects into one’s clothing as an amulet that draws good energy and propels the wearer toward positivity. Quilted together from scraps of Melake’s well-worn clothing, the tapestry features bulky sections of personal objects (seashells collected on a beach in Senegal, braided bracelets from a cousin in Ethiopia, a Japanese cat figurine, crystals, movie ticket stubs) wrapped like precious presents in latex and string and then shrink-wrapped in plastic. The work feels confessional and vulnerable, and at the same time, protective and talismanic, as the title indicates. Appearing like a cross

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between an El Anatsui assemblage wall-hanging and an Eva Hesse latex skin work, *Necessary Divisions* (2019) evokes intimacy. Handwritten messages and painterly marks are hidden on the reverse of the woven latex wall hanging, like a tattoo on skin. Just as one slowly becomes acquainted with a friend or lover, these marks will be revealed as the work grows more translucent with time.

*Outpouring* (2020) is reminiscent of the coiled textile works of Sheila Hicks, but Melake's work utilizes industrial rubber tubing, cinched together at the center with nylon string. The expressionistically painted ends of the tubes flop down like freeform locs or traditional hairstyles worn by Ethiopian women. Melake also references Black hair and hoodies — both simple adornments that have been demonized by dominant white culture — in *Black* (2017). Curly pelts of Persian lambswool allude to tightly coiled Black hair, while a black hoodie string interlaces through asphalt and vinyl.

Melake also produces furniture with the minimal, modular sensibility of Andrea Zittel and Donald Judd. With names like *Listening Chair* and *Better Together* (both 2019), they propose a utopianism in the utilitarian. With a background in architecture and design and a vast knowledge of materials, Melake's visual language is redolent with human emotion and the narratives and relationships with objects and people that punctuate our lives.



Luam Melake, *Black*, 2017. Vinyl, Persian lamb fur, cotton drawstring cord, asphalt 28 x 31 1/2 inches (71.1 x 80 cm).

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