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Eileen Kinsella, "6 Textile Works at MoMA That Reframe the Story of Modern Abstraction,"
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6 Textile Works at MoMA That Reframe the Story of Modern Abstraction

A landmark exhibition at MoMA reframes textiles not as peripheral craft, but as central to the evolution of modern abstraction—from Anni Albers to Rosemarie Trockel.



Installation view of "Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction," on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from April 20 through September 13, 2025. Photo: Jonathan Dorado

May 20, 2025

At MoMA, you will find the last stop for an acclaimed show dedicated to the medium that has been touring the U.S. and Canada. “Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction,” which recently opened at the New York institution, is a wide-ranging survey of the medium across the 20th and 21st century and includes artists Sonia Delaunay, Paul Klee, and Agnes Martin, as well as more contemporary names like Jeffrey Gibson. The show presents textiles in a myriad of ways, incorporating other mediums like video or photography in some instances.

It has special meaning at the MoMA, too. Curator Lynne Cooke, who installed the show at each of its touring venues, said in a phone interview that, at each location, the show “has changed in ways that reflect the different locations and the amount of space available.” However, at MoMA, the museum’s “own history plays into it because, of course, MoMA is the founding museum of Modernism,” says Cooke. MoMA is where “the histories of Modern art and abstraction, in particular, were first written, and where textiles were collected from the get-go, as one of multiple departments that were non-hierarchally orchestrated.”



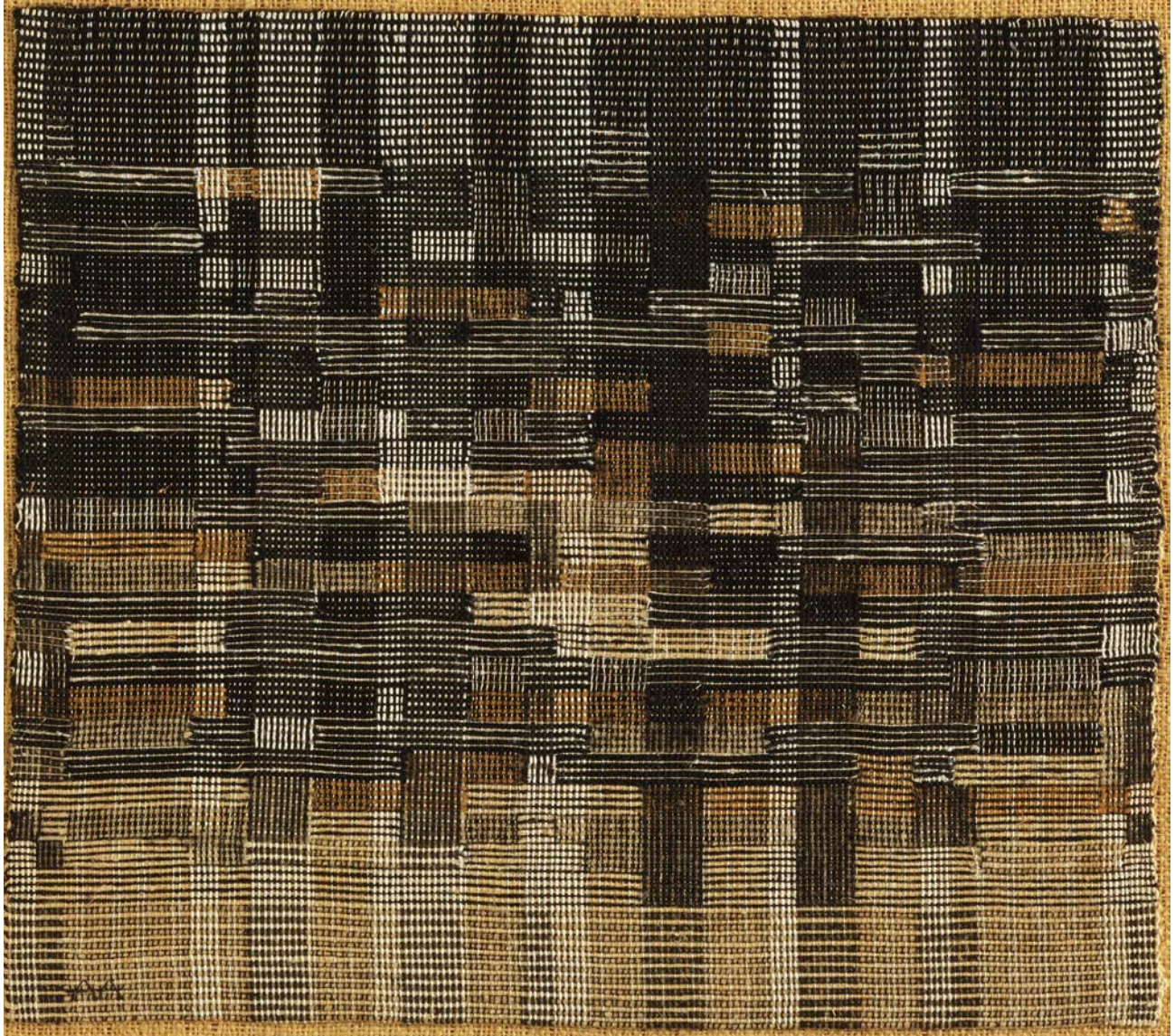
Installation view of “Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction,” on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from April 20 through September 13, 2025. Photo: Jonathan Dorado

For Cooke, the starting point for the exhibition was more than five years ago, when she says she started noticing “the efflorescence in contemporary art practice that utilized textiles. It was from this contemporary perspective that I started to look back and see these moments of exchange across the 20th century, in which textiles galvanized a re-thinking of Modernism, and particularly abstraction. . . Another way of thinking about it is in relation to our digital world and this need, craving, and appreciation for materiality and hand-making.”

The thoughtful show has been drawing attention and acclaim from many corners of the art world. It represents “a global selection of artists that realize abstraction through a different medium—a woven brushstroke so to speak, among other forms of textiles, instead of paint,” said advisor Naomi Baigell, principal of BFA Fine Art Services. “While not, at the surface, political, there are undercurrents of inequities. The materials, textures, and volumes bring a new breadth to abstraction and artistic expression. A welcomed break from seeing fiber and other materials depicted or adhered to on canvas,” Baigell added.

Here are some of the highlights of this exhibition, with insights from Cooke and Baigell about what makes them fascinating.

Anni Albers, *Tapestry* (1948)



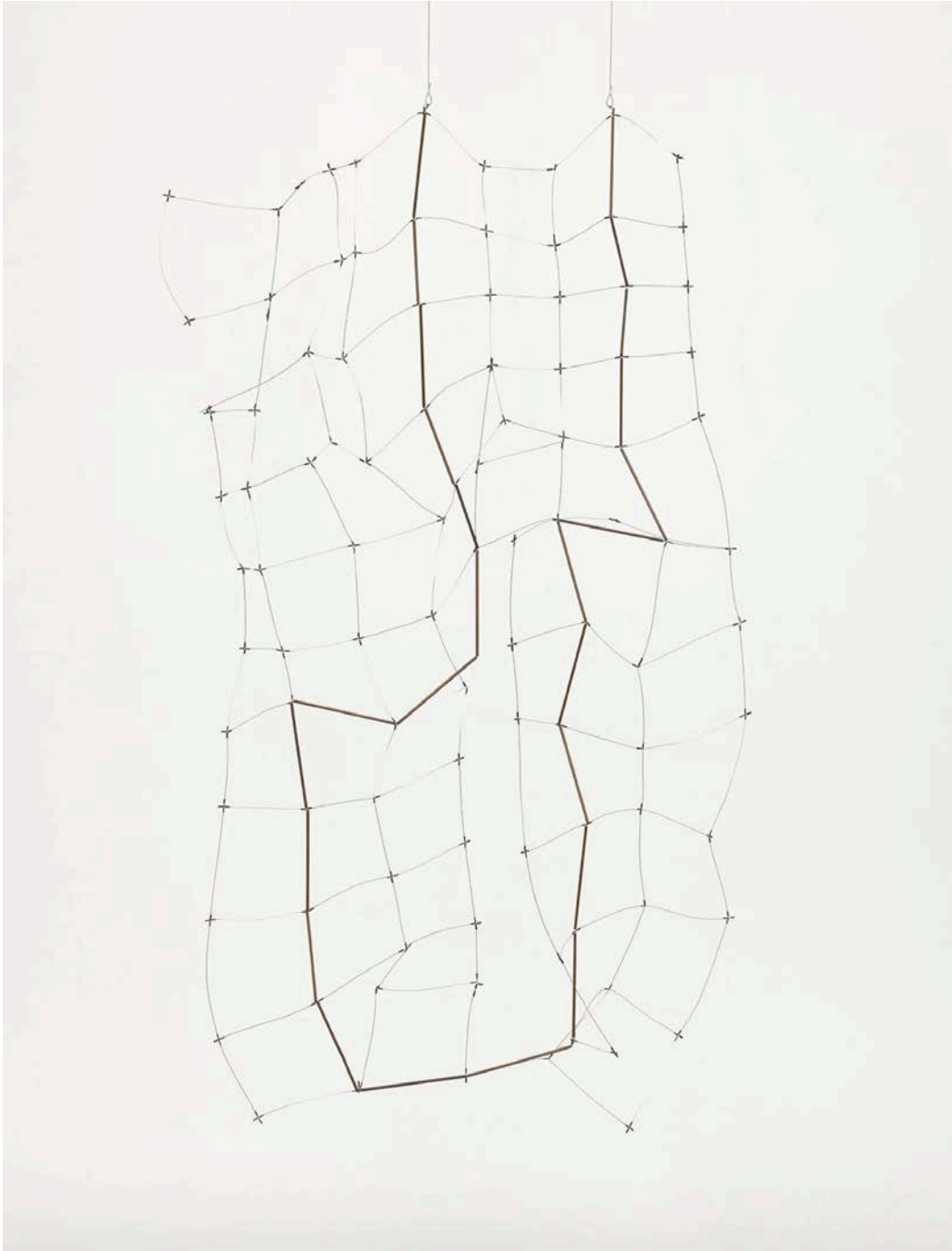
Anni Albers. *Tapestry*, (1948). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. Purchase Fund. © 2024 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

“One cannot talk about textiles and their effect on the history of modern art without thinking about Anni Albers,” said Cooke. Albers and her colleagues fled Germany after the closure of the Bauhaus in 1933. Eventually, Albers settled in North Carolina where she taught at Black Mountain College in the 1940s—that is also where she delved into textile and tapestry.

Of the work *Tapestry*, she told me: “It’s a work made in 1948 at a time when Albers was still designing for mass production and industrial fabrication, but simultaneously had a career in which she was making works of fine art in her estimation.”

Albers called them “pictorial weavings,” said Cooke, adding that they were these very experimental innovative weavings. The artist made them on a hand loom, because that’s where innovation and experimentation took place in textile making for her. Then, the artist stitched them onto a fabric backing and framed them. “They are commensurate with paintings by Sophie Tauber Arp or Paul Klee. She anticipated that they would take their place in galleries of modern art in museums. But they never did at the time. They were seen as textile art and she couldn’t break that glass ceiling. Today we see them differently.”

Gego, *Square Reticulara 71/11* (1971)



GEGO (Gertrud Goldschmidt) *Square Reticulara 71/11* (1971) The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Alexis Lowry.

This work is made with small strands of wire, organized in four-way fixtures pieced together to make a net that hangs suspended in front of the wall. “It bends and shifts as what appears to be a very heavy fiber material,” said Cooke.

GEGO, which was the artistic name for Gertrud Goldschmidt, “really dismissed the idea that the work was sculpture. She talked about it as nets and textile-adjacent. What you see here is a way of shaping space, and thinking about defining space and articulating space in three dimensions.”

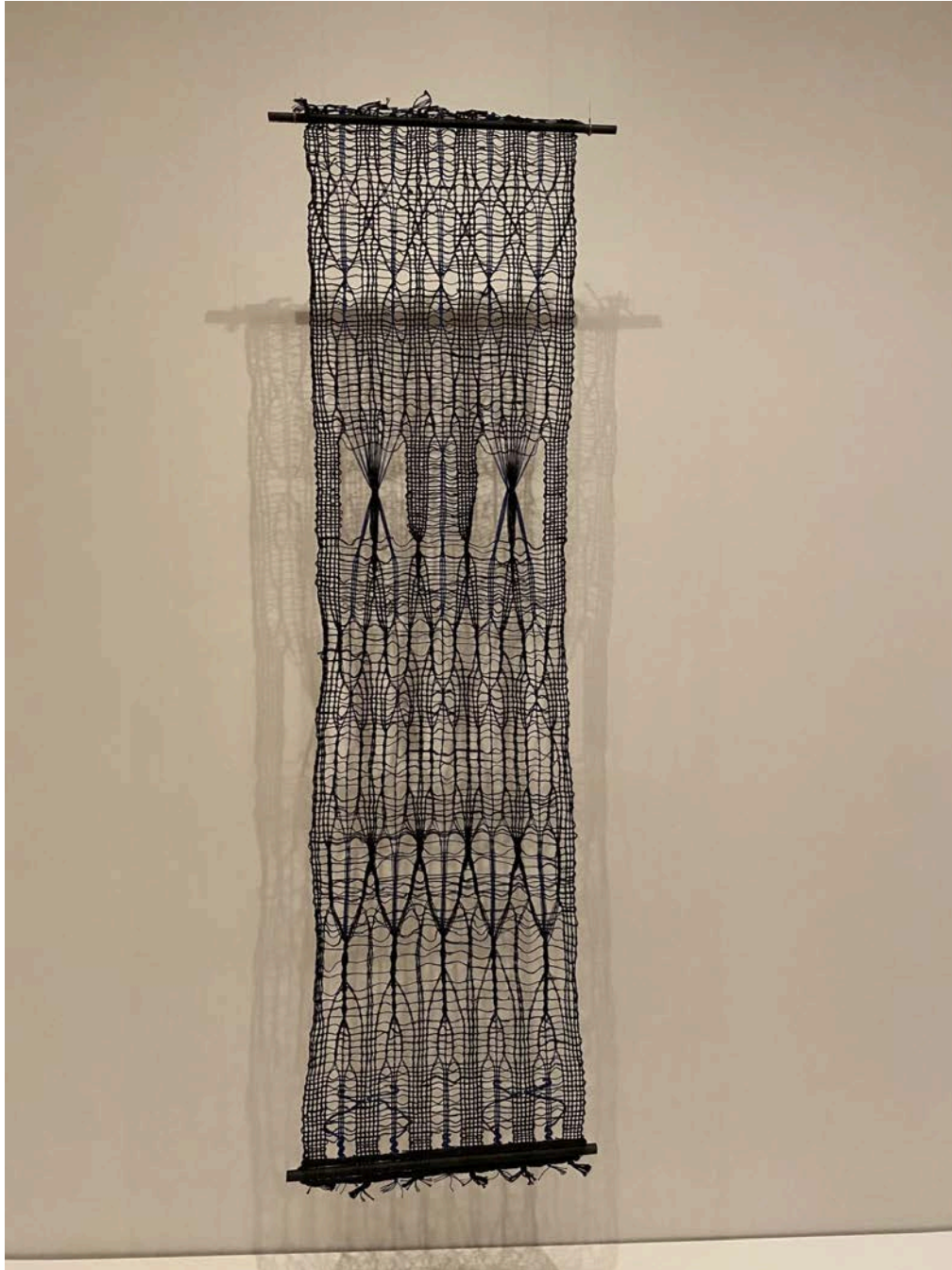
Sheila Hicks, *Peluca verde* (Green Wig) (1960-61)



Sheila Hicks, *Peluca verde* (Green Wig) (1960-61). Photo by Eileen Kinsella

This may have been my favorite work in the show, for the simple reason that this vibrantly colored, green pile of intertwined knots and tightly wrapped ropes, stopped me in my tracks and the title is just plain fun. Hicks is a pioneer in textile art. She taught at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City in the early 1960s. During that time, she immersed herself in the cultural landscape, as she had done on earlier sojourns to Chile and Peru. Her engagement with Latin American textile making is “deeply rooted” as this work reflects. *Peluca verde* was made by binding together strands of emerald-green wool with brilliantly hued silk thread. The rope became a signature element in her oeuvre.

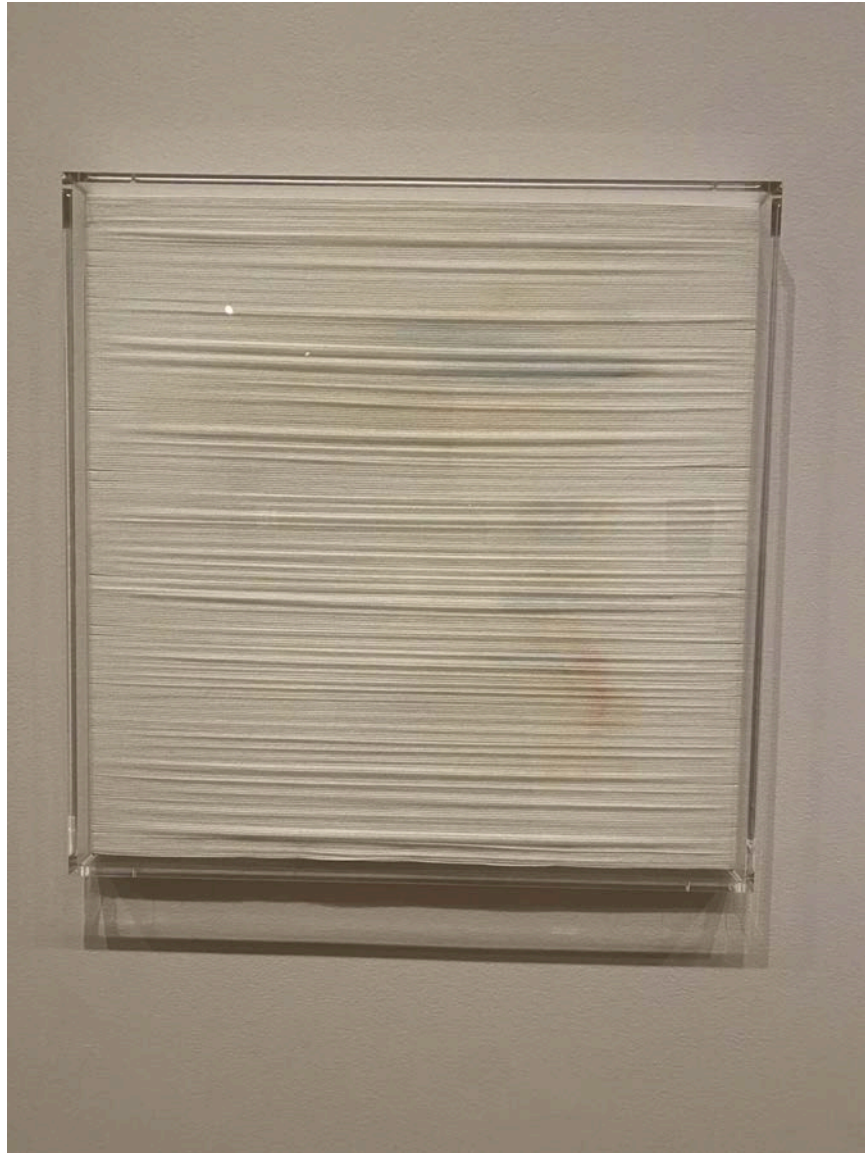
Lenore Tawney, *Vespers* (1961)



Lenore Tawney, *Vespers* (1961) at "Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction," at MoMA. Photo by Eileen Kinsella.

"Leonore Tawney keeps a dialogue between fine art and craft," said Naomi Baigell, Principal BFA Fine Art Services. *Vespers* "hangs majestically, offering variations in color, density, and mood offering the viewer a form more flexible than canvas, commanding its space and our attention," she added. "Tawney wove beyond tradition, turning fiber into poetry with the vision and courage of a true pioneer," said Loretta Howard, a founding member of On This Spot NYC.Org, a nonprofit that studies and promotes feminist art history,

Rosemarie Trockel *Passion* (2013)



Rosemarie Trockel, *Passion* (2013) at "Woven History: Textiles and Modern Abstraction," at MoMA. Photo by Eileen Kinsella

This work, made by securing strands of white yarn across a stretcher, succeeded in making a painting or a painting-adjacent work and it hangs beside an Agnes Martin painting. "Of course for Trockel, Martin has been a mentor and an artist she admired immensely," notes Cooke. "Trockel's status as a contemporary artist is unquestioned." According to the wall text, Trockel was "paying tribute to painter Agnes Martin. . . whom she has long revered."

Andrea Zittel A-Z Personal Uniform, 2nd Decade: Winter 2007/2008 (2007)



Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Personal Uniform, 2nd Decade: Winter 2007/2008* (2007) in "Woven Histories" at the Museum of Modern Art. Photo by Eileen Kinsella

Andrea Zittel's personal "uniforms" are made and worn for an entire season. The second decade of this project, which started in 2003, produced clothing that is both attractive and functional, while questioning the connection between freedom and personal liberation with the market demand for constant variety. The Uniform Project proposes that "liberation may be possible through the creation of a set of personal restrictions or limitations," according to an artist statement.

Cooke points out another poignant fact about textiles which we can apply to Zittel's piece: "Textiles and cloth, and clothing...are the things closest to our bodies and closest to our histories in a way."

"Woven Histories" is on view until September 13, 2025. (<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5733>)