

Alex Greenberger, "Fiber Art Has Officially Taken Over New York's Museums and Galleries,"
ARTnews, May 7, 2025

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BY ALEX GREENBERGER

May 7, 2025 8:30am



Ed Rossbach, *Constructed Color Wall Hanging*, 1965.

Photo : Museum of Modern Art

These days, seemingly everywhere you turn in New York, there are weavings stretched taut, installations spilling forth with wool, and canvases adorned with thread, bridging the gap between textile art and painting. Welcome to fiber art supremacy. It's been a long time coming.

Fiber art's ascent has been brewing for the past couple decades—something that Wendy Vogel pointed out *in America*, referring to the flurry of museum shows devoted to the medium between 2014 and mid-2023, when her article was published. That period saw surveys for Anni Albers, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Gee's Bend quilters. More recently, a retrospective for Ruth Asawa, whose wire sculptures were based on basket weaving techniques she learned in Mexico, has just opened at SFMOMA heading out a national tour.

But now, after taking root in cities across the world, the trend appears to have planted deep roots in the New York art scene. Fiber art has begun appearing not only in institutions but also in blue-chip commercial galleries here, allowing it to infiltrate the upper echelons of the market and join the mainstream. The city has officially been fiber bombed, as evidenced by a Museum of Modern Art mega-survey devoted to recent work in the medium.

Why so much fiber all of a sudden? The simple answer has to do with the changing face of recent art history. Weavings, embroideries, and the like have long been awarded an asterisk in the canon—if they've been accepted into the canon at all. Typically, art in those mediums has been classed separately as craft in the West or denigrated as "women's work." Thanks to the work of dedicated scholars, curators, and critics, fiber art has finally come in for reassessment.

The less sexy answer has to do with savvy dealers, who are reading the tea leaves and responding to the work of international curators. (Notably, however, fiber art is not on view at the mega-galleries and their competitors, who are mainly mounting painting shows this week.) No doubt many of those dealers are looking to the last two editions of the Venice Biennale. Last year's, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, contained a host of textiles and weavings, many of them by Indigenous artists; one alumna of that Biennale, the wonderful Wichí artist Claudia Alarcón, is showing her collaborative works made with the all-female Silät collective part of her New York debut at James Cohan Gallery. It seems likely that similar exhibitions for other 2024 Biennale participants will soon follow.

“Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction” at Museum of Modern Art

Sonia Delaunay, the French modernist best known for her gloriously colored abstractions, once said, “For me there is no gap between my painting and my so-called ‘decorative’ work.” You can easily imagine those very words being spoken by just about any of the participants in this show, which first debuted in 2023 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The exhibition explores how artists across the past century have collapsed any division between paintings and textiles. Fiber works from the 20th century by Delaunay, Anni Albers, and Gunta Stölzl figure early on, enlisted as clear guides for the show’s grande dame, Rosemarie Trockel, a German painter responsible for 10 works featured here. (A veteran of the 2022 Biennale, Trockel is also this week’s grande dame in New York, with a two-venue solo spanning Gladstone Gallery and Sprüth Magers.) Trockel’s *Passion* (2013), featuring white threads gently daubed with red and yellow acrylic, remakes the monochrome in wool, then undermines the purity that artists like Kazimir Malevich held in such high regard. Fiber became Trockel’s tool for revisiting—and defying—modernism’s supremacy. Many others have followed in her footsteps.

But the further the show moves from modernism, the more its tightly knitted threads fray. The exhibition is unclear about the ties that bind many of its artists: what, for example, links an abstract painting from the ’70s by Jack Whitten and a raffia net from the ’60s by Ed Rossbach? They use nets as corollaries to the modernist grid, apparently, though that is only explained in the catalog and largely brushed over within the galleries themselves. The exhibition also stumbles when presenting artists awaiting canonization such as Yvonne Koolmatrie, a Ngarrindjeri weaver who makes sinuous sculptures from sedge, a type of grass. These works are awkwardly lumped together with baskets by Indigenous artists, an awkward, reductive gesture that makes them feel like an afterthought.

The crux of curator Lynne Cooke’s thesis—that modernist subversion birthed fiber fever—is demonstrably true, but the nuances of her argument are less neatly outlined. Yet even if “Woven Histories” unfortunately feels insignificant, its mere existence is important, since it acts as a surefire sign that fiber art has hit the mainstream.

At 11 West 53rd Street, Floor 3, through September 13.