

HARD/SOFT

Textiles and Ceramics in Contemporary Art

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MAK Press and PR

Press Release

Vienna, 12.12.2023

presse@MAK.at

Press Conference

Tuesday, 12.12.2023, 10 am

Despite appearing vastly different at first glance, textiles and ceramics have much in common. They share the same haptic aesthetic language that shifts between hard, unwieldy, soft, and flowing. We associate sculpturally layered textiles with warmth and flexibility, offering a stark contrast to the cool fragility of ceramics formed from soft clay or loam. This fascinating interplay is at the heart of the MAK exhibition *HARD/SOFT: Textiles and Ceramics in Contemporary Art*, which showcases work from around 40 international artists, many being exhibited in Vienna for the first time. The materials, shapes, and meanings of the selected works reveal a broad spectrum of ambiguity, vagueness, and concurrence that even blur connotations of gender.

Present in every culture, textiles and ceramics are closely connected to applied art and symbolize community: Works are often produced collaboratively in ateliers, workshops, and collectives. The materials and production processes are shaped by a diverse range of groups and communities. In contemporary fine art, textiles and ceramics allow interdisciplinary synergies that cross over into architecture, digital art, music, performance, and dance.

In this exhibition, traditional methods and the materials' characteristic features take center stage alongside social politics and feminist ideas. As objects of both material and cultural significance, textiles and ceramics have become intertwined with economic and political systems, making them almost ideal media to explore themes relating to cultural appropriation and post-colonialism. Here these everyday materials serve as a barometer and a mirror of our times. As Anni Albers (1899–1994), a leading avant-garde figure, describes in her 1965 study *On Weaving*, the way in which natural and man-

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made shapes combine in landscapes is reminiscent of woven patterns and the materials and structures of textiles. The exhibition will also examine the significant role textiles have played in cultural and geopolitical contexts.

In the exhibition space, a younger generation of artists appear alongside significant artistic works, including iconic pieces such as *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (1970/73), an installation by American artist Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012). She created a surrealist scene in which soft-sculpture figures appear out of the walls, the furniture, and the fireplace.

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Soft sculpture and its use of non-rigid, flexible materials pushed the boundaries of sculpture and textiles. Since the 1960s, artists have used the medium to debate issues surrounding feminism, corporeality, and gender roles. One such example is Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930–2017), who weaves her sculptural works out of sisal and transforms the two-dimensional designs of traditional tapestries into curved, expressive shapes that hang freely in space. Sonia Gomes (*1948), on the other hand, is inspired by the traditions, narratives, and materials of the Afro-Brazilian community. She twists, sews, and knots vintage fabrics to reveal traces of history. Her sculptures engender a corporeality and a dynamic drawn from her affinity to Brazilian dance. Movement, dance, and music are also central to the quilts of Israeli artist Noa Eshkol (1924–2007).

Textiles can also be used to explore global trade flows and to critically reevaluate colonialism. The geometric pattern in *Repository* (2020), a wall tapestry by Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga (*1978), is created using fabric in a range of earthy tones. Grains of rice made of glass are sewn into the piece, recalling how certain rice varieties were brought from Africa to America during the transatlantic slave trade. In a conceptual work created especially for this exhibition, Dutch artist Willem de Rooij (*1969) brings together two Shirvan rugs, one housed in the MAK Collection and the other from Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, conveying the heritage of local aesthetic languages and trade routes.

Following the avant-garde of the early 20th century, contemporary artists began appropriating traditional techniques such as embroidery, stitching, knotting, weaving, and pottery making, subverting disciplinary and material boundaries. For instance, punch cards that could be used to create any desired pattern on weaving looms paved the way for computer programs and the digital realm that would follow more than 200 years later.

The close link between textiles and architecture had already been acknowledged by Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), who posited in his *Bekleidungstheorie* [Principle of Dressing] that in its most basic form, a building is a structure wrapped in textiles. In his works, the German artist Franz Erhard Walther (*1939) uses the principles of minimalism and ephemeral textiles to rewrite the classical rules of painting, sculpture, and



architecture through an interplay between interior and exterior space that includes the viewer as an actor.

Textiles and ceramics are intimately linked in interior and exterior spaces. According to Semper, clay is a malleable “primary matter” and a material for everyday objects that is at once archaic and modern. Traditional ceramic techniques have been used by many artists to create abstract as well as figurative sculptures in a wide range of forms. For instance, British-Nigerian artist Ranti Bam (*1982) experiments with traditional terracotta vessels, creating impressively sized objects that relate to the dimensions of the human body. British-Austrian artist Lucie Rie (1902–1995) introduced a modern aesthetic language to ceramics through her keen interest in experimentation, creating formally reduced objects that transcended the functional. The ceramic sculptures of Beate Kuhn (1927–2015) frequently draw on nature, while Michèle Pagel (*1985) explores the contradictions of everyday life. A prominent example of art’s critical examination of matriarchal traditions and rituals are the archaic, sculptural ceramic objects of Polish artist Agnieszka Brzeżańska (*1972).

The art of braiding and weaving began with the traditional working of materials found in nature—blades of grass and plant fibers—as Gottfried Semper states in his technical publication *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts; or, Practical Aesthetics. A Handbook for Technicians, Artists, and Friends of the Arts* (1860). An artistic exploration of textiles and ceramics reflects the MAK’s interdisciplinary concept, which is based on a chronologically ordered collection, classified by material, in line with Semper’s logic.

Among the artists shown in this exhibition are Magdalena Abakanowicz, Hildegard Absalon, El Anatsui, Anna Andreeva, Ranti Bam, Maria Biljan-Bilger, Cosima von Bonin, Geta Brătescu, Agnieszka Brzeżańska, Verena Dengler, Noa Eshkol, Gelatin, Sonia Gomes, Nilbar Güreş, Sheila Hicks, Klára Hosnedlová, Dorota Jurczak, Kapwani Kiwanga, Peter Kogler, Beate Kuhn, Denisa Lehocká, Goshka Macuga, Jonathan Meese, Hana Miletić, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Robert Morris, Ann Muller, Ulrike Müller, Michèle Pagel, Lucie Rie, Willem de Rooij, Camila Sposati, Laurence Sturla, Dorothea Tanning, Rosemarie Trockel, Franz Erhard Walther, and Ingrid Wiener.

Press photos are available for download at [MAK.at/en/press](https://www.mak.at/en/press).



Press Conference

Tuesday, 12.12.2023, 10 am

Opening

Tuesday, 12.12.2023, 7 pm

Free admission to the opening of the exhibition

Exhibition Venue

MAK Exhibition Hall, Ground Floor

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

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Exhibition Dates

13.12.2023–20.5.2024

Opening Hours

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

Curators

Bärbel Vischer, Curator, MAK Contemporary Art Collection

Antje Prisker, Special Projects

Exhibition Design

Andrea Lenardin Madden

Graphic Design

Atelier Dreiholz

Supporting Program

Details available at [MAK.at/en/hardsoft](https://www.mak.at/en/hardsoft)

MAK Admission

€ 16.50/15.50*; reduced € 13.50/12.50*; every Tuesday 6–9 pm:
admission € 8/7.50*

Free admission for children and teens under 19

* Price for advance online bookings

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