Melissa Leandro Constructs Narratives of Hybridity Through Experimental Textiles

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Natalie Spicker speaks to Melissa Leandro, based in Chicago, about dissecting and fusing cultural identity through abstract narratives and experimental textile processes.

Using process as metaphor, Melissa Leandro explores her composite identity and misplaced memories by translating her collages, photograms, and drawings into weaving and embroidery. These fiber techniques slow down the active mark-making of Leandro's sketches, transforming them into a contemplative reverie. In her jacquard woven pieces, Leandro creates a material topology flattened into a single plane. A sequence of processes creates abstracted imagery that speaks to ideas of translation and our eroding memories. Similarly, through weaving and heat-fusing non-traditional materials, like plastic and vinyl, elements are physically flattened into a unified textile. Using Ric Rac ribbons and spongy rug stoppers, Leandro creates a hybrid object composed of elements from the domestic environment that complicate their intended utility and refuse to conform to the neat grid of a woven structure.

Collaging both materials and processes, Leandro generates imagery through drawing and composing objects, recording their silhouettes with cyanotype, and weaving the soft bleed of blue through a gradient of weave structures. Leandro's dreamy "weavescapes" depict the fuzzing and unraveling of remembered places. The dense patches of embroidery are at times connected by active, writhing lines or isolated moments of poignancy, suggesting movement and displacement. A change in weft creates a band of brilliant or neutral color that freezes the action and offers a respite of calm amongst the dense imagery. At the same time, these abrupt divisions disrupt the scene and recall ideas of fragmentation. Blobby forms vacillate between being flowers, clouds, or the work of an absent-minded hand. Repeatedly traversing the same path, lines spiral into drooping forms that call to mind rolling hills and smudged fingerprints but avoid a clear narrative, leaving the viewer with only an impression of a place.

Melting Mountain by Melissa Leandro. Image courtesy of the artist.

NATALIE SPICKER: In *El Mar, smokescreen* and *Melting Mountain* there are references to the landscape. In other work you adopt the language of mapmaking, usually used to identify and clarify, to create clouded, amorphous imagery. What do you decide to conceal and reveal?

MELISSA LEANDRO: Most of my work conceals quite a bit of the personal narrative that originally informed the impetus for the work. I prefer to give my viewer more of an opening to enter the piece by omitting many strict parameters on language or concrete imagery. However, I do use language that focuses on movements that are physical, geographical, and time-based. References to water and walking are also quite present. Water is an element that takes on multiple forms (solid, liquid, gas); it can submerge, encapsulate or wash away other materials. I use the concept of water as a metaphor for memory and nostalgia. When I recall past events, visual facts become blurred over time. A distance develops between present and past events, meaning what was once very clear in my memory, becomes submerged in assumptions. I can no longer remember the narrative with certainty, but I continually enjoy playing with this distance of time. My work aims to fill these voids of space with the use of recognizable patterns and printed imagery.

Specifically, in *Melting Mountain*, I used printed, plastic tablecloth of strawberries, and apples trapped in ice cubes. We understand that this imagery is somewhat comical or kitsch, but this humor separates the objects from their intended reality. We are not encountering them, apple and ice cube, in a typical, normalized setting. Reality is skewed, and so I can allow myself to metaphorically melt into the visual space of the weaving. I try to achieve this action by intermittently embedding real world, familiar objects, which remove themselves from their normal or intended purpose. Imagery of objects we consider mundane and part of the everyday like fruit bowls, chili peppers, plates and dishes, can become monumental and otherworldly. These printed plastics, often used for cheap décor in the home have the ability to take on a different cultural status. They are oversized or fragmented, colliding and zigzagging across the plane. They act more like planets and stars in space than they do to disposable home décor.

El Mar, smokescreen by Melissa Leandro. Image courtesy of the artist.

NS: In putting dissimilar materials together through processes like weaving, heat fusing, and cyanotype, you make a hybrid but unified object. How does this relate to the concepts of identity and duality in your work?

ML: I want to twist assumptions on how we perceive kitschy imagery and disposable material (plastic tablecloths, rug stopper, electrical tape, ric rac) and develop a new hybrid object. An object or substrate unified and visually pleasing. There has always been a need to combine unlike materials together in my work, natural with synthetic, refined with raw, etc. I frequently associate this drive with my upbringing in Miami, Florida and my family's place of origin, Costa Rica. These environments are polar opposites; Miami is urban, fast-moving, superficial, while Costa Rica is rural and slow-paced. I bounced back and forth between these two cities for several years and regularly code-switched between English and Spanish. I am not a Costa Rican citizen, but ironically I do not feel a closer connection to my US identity.

Now, as I live as a transplant in Chicago, and identify as a first generation US Latina, I am beginning to understand the duality of my culture and language, and see them as another catalyst for making. My personal experience with a hybrid culture, like many artists, influences the materials, colors, and textures, of the objects I create in my practice. Through repetitive mark making, and layering of material processes (weaving, embroidery, dyeing), I can freely mix sentimentally charged materials within multiple technical processes, without reservation.

In *Fracturada, Blotched Out,* I utilized a plastic doily-patterned tablecloth, something usually found in a low-end general store, which was also a common and familiar part of my childhood home. I decided to cut the tablecloth into long strips, and weave them together with black electrical tape. The original image of the dollie became fractured, blotched out by black bands of electrical tape and rubber vinyl. Our eyes try to reconstruct the original pattern of the dollie, but the newly formed grid (weft and warp materials) has simultaneously dismantled and reassembled a new picture plane.

NS: Line is important throughout the media you use. In some places the embroidery is very expressive and dense, but in other areas the line is static and color is used to disrupt the imagery. Do you use line as a tool for conveying narrative or emotion? How are the concepts of memory and remembering connected to material layering and repetition in your work?

ML: Yes, I definitely use line as a means to convey narrative and emotion. Using stitched line is a method that allows me to draw back into the initial woven picture. I have time to reflect on the memory of the place that the piece originated from, and try to echo the energy of that particular moment. My jacquard weavings are frequently a translation of a cyanotype print of objects gathered in one particular place. This weaving becomes the base layer, whereby I then draw using embroidery/stitching interchangeably to obscure the ground surface. The embroidery/stitching float on top of the cyanotype weaving; each stitched element acting as a unique topographical feature that stands independent or collides with multiple other elements.

In the case of *Scribble on_Tilburg*, titled after a small city in the Netherlands, I reflected on the walks I took while in Tilburg. Each place has characteristics that define or differentiate it from anywhere else. In Tilburg, I noticed the winding roads, gray skies, angular homes, pedestrian street signs, and pockets of wooded areas. There was a strong presence of green and yellow colors, throughout my commutes; this would later take emphasis in the stitched piece. I usually try to sketch right after or during my commute, if on a train or bus. In this way, I can immediately capture the energy of a space as I move through it physically. The people, architecture, sounds, smells can take on an abstract narrative through the composition of the stitched image.

I would say there is no one particular emotion I try to evoke in each piece (happy, sad, excited), instead, I am concerned with the visual noise of a memory. I gravitate towards bright or neon colors for my stitching as a way to give the textile surface a visual energy. The weaving is blurred due to the natural process of translation (cyanotype to jacquard weaving) and by the weave structure itself. A woven image will never be as sharp or clear as a drawn pen line or a solid object, which suits my purpose because my memories of places, people, objects are never as crisp as I remember them.

Still, I aim to pinpoint the characteristics that stood out to me through the use of multi-colored stitching. The stitched lines change color, every inch, as they move across the different planes of the woven and dyed surface. I use this technique specifically because the lines appear as though they are vibrating on the Jacquard weaving. The lines move with their own intention and eventually wander off the woven cloth. When looking at the final image, I want my viewer to feel as though they can walk into my abstract landscapes.

Scribble on Tilburg by Melissa Leandro. Image courtesy of the artist.

NS: Although you use techniques that have linear perimeters, like weaving, your pieces bulge past their constraints. Could you speak to your process of working within and disrupting the grid?

ML: My process of working is additive. I make a substrate by hand, machine weaving, and heat fusing multiple interwoven parts. The piece may stop there, or it is stitched over multiple times until the fabric bulges and puckers. The woven grid (weave pattern) has a structural purpose; it functions as a systematic base to literally build up on. With overlaid stitching, I can record the movements of my hands and use the natural puckering of the cloth to add dimensional and compositional elements. The landscape of the cloth grows outward into space.

My work is an abstract translation of my travels in my daily life. I reflect on my personal commuting, walking, and gathering of small physical objects within those transitory environments. The accumulated marks are what build up on top of the grid, sometimes acting as coordinates on a grid, or landmasses depicted on a “map.” Although the grid is hidden by multiple layers of

stitched imagery, or occasionally exposed by cutting/abrasion, it intact. In a similar way, my practice continues to focus on reflecting and logging my travels through drawing, adding to my personal collection of abstracted symbols related to memories of people/places. Symbols I use repeatedly and intuitively to understand my body's relationship in space.

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