

AKIKO KOTANI

SOFT WALLS



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JULY 12 - AUGUST 29, 2014

AUSTIN, TEXAS

AKIKO KOTANI:
SOFT WALLS

Spanning over forty years and several continents, Akiko Kotani's work has sought to reclaim the architecture of physical space and the psycho-perceptual dimensions through which we inhabit place, memory, and the wagers of identity. Her itinerary has seen solo exhibitions in, for example, Spain, Peru, New York, Maui, and Pittsburgh. Her works dilate collections as diverse as Italy's Citta di Chieri, France's Moulin à Nef, Turkey's Dokuz Eylul University, and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. At times her aesthetic recalls the gestural drawings of Cy Twombly, and his sculptural eye for the overlooked and historical; though Kotani applies her lines and techniques in a different spirit and measure. Having trained as a painter, then applied herself to fiber work and drawings, a study of Mayan weaving, and an increasingly minimalist palette of handmade techniques, Kotani brings to Austin a studied vision that is distinctive among contemporary artists. She reflects: "What has been consistent throughout my work is the use of forms that exist in a rarified sort of space: 'white space' as I imagine it in my reverie." Her objects "are proportioned in a way that activate the space around them," and the result is an altogether welcome conspiracy of purity, stillness, and light.

As a title, *Soft Walls* seems to announce the gradual recognition one undergoes when entering such a space and learning to dwell within its play of displacements and affirmations. If there is a 'simplicity' to the exhibition it is of the kind that obtains on the far side of complexity, depth, and care. One finds here a graceful combination of elemental material, sparseness in form, and a near-infinite pattern of woven ligatures that, in concert, involve the visitor in the work of the work.

First, we are given two walls—and it is easy to overlook this summary inversion of our everyday mode of relating to space. Two walls offer very little in the way of utility, especially when they seem adrift and floating outside the moorings of ninety-degree angles. If these walls are a means to some end, it would have to be more a passage or pathway, less a footing for one's own ascension. But there is still more to consider. Walls, like categories or assumptions, often go unnoticed. They lend a kind of angled firmness to our projects and possibilities, our construction and cognition. Sheet-rock, stucco, or syllogistic reasoning, 'walls' are the material we assume in order to frame, display, or determine still other things. Often, these silent partners dispose us to arrange the furniture of our lives and beliefs in an

honorable and fortunate way. But sometimes they delimit our personal architecture more than we realize, in which case a little remodeling is in order.

Second, the walls themselves give light a plane of textured adherence. Their surface is won from miles upon miles of crocheted whiteness—the single note of a repetition woven with the ribboned sheen of white trash bags overlaid upon wooden frames. Stout, but spilling like water onto the floor, the fabric affords light a form of solidity and vision a form of tactility. One wants to touch the walls the way light does—thread oneself along whatever passage they assure. At the same time one realizes how the particularity and strength of the texture are assured by the quiet endurance of what has been called 'women's work' in our cultural and personal memories. One of Kotani's motives "was to honor my mother's love of handwork and that of other women by employing this technique." The show invites us to notice the caring diligence of so many hands and resolve never again to take it for granted or delimit its grandeur. Stitch upon stitch, the walls reveal themselves as a kind of original meter for the verses that have been and are yet to come. I don't mean to sound romantic. The affect is truly poetic and humanizing for us and for the better 'walls' we have lived by.



The Black Sea, bamboo threads stitched on paper, 30" x 120", 2010. Photo by Joseph Rudinec.

Finally, the space is further activated by a sweeping pointillist surface of bamboo threads stitched on paper—*The Black Sea*. If the walls evoke a sense of the sacrifices that birth the canvases on which our lives unfold, this emerging image punctuates a specific scene threaded to their surface. Kotani does something remarkable here—the experience of viewing the pointillist work summons us, as viewers, to participate in the walls’ crochet work, though visually. The material is threaded but the image implicit, the sea begins to take shape in waves that recall weaving, and what we gradually see is less an object and more a motion—a gesture of place. The work of the hand, one could say, invites its repetition in the watchfulness of the eye. Drawing on her own patterned views of the sea—glimpses stolen through a narrow studio window and amid fog-laced campus walks in Turkey—Kotani reinstates a similar sight-by-fragments in the viewer’s gaze. She worked from the accretions of memory and its walled horizons, building the image point by point. We meet these points and work our way through the moment of a perception unfolding. The recognition comes, but only after we learn to be watchful.



With *The Black Sea* we realize Kotani has trained our gaze to be receptive. And this, to be sure, is the secret long kept by the hands that wove the walls. All the while we are spared the illusion that we have mastered some whole or measured some distance to which we are entitled. *Soft Walls*, then, amounts to a gentle imperative. But one issued in a spirit of affirmation that enables the very recognition it intends.

Locating Kotani’s work within a broader context requires that we revert to an earlier meeting of art and thought. Roughly one hundred years ago a poet and a philosopher inadvertently echoed one another by appealing to the primacy of artistic concentration in an age of alleged techno-scientific progress. Jules Renard called poetry an art of repetition and memory—a mode of recovering the kind of perception that enables us to indwell the world more fully. Of his own practice in this regard, Renard poignantly mused: “it is as though the world were constantly renewing itself for me.” For Henri Bergson, a parallel expansion of perception was precisely needed (and forgotten) within the intellectual world. Great art, he argued, maintained the rare ability to show us those vital things that otherwise “did not explicitly strike our senses and our consciousness.” Where we tend to see the world and ourselves via “dissolving views” that mistake decisive dogma for genuine insight, the artist could materialize a more watchful vision.

Strictly speaking, these ideas would have been ‘useless’ things to endorse, and both men knew as much. However, an earnest sense of necessity drove them to guard the uncanny way in which art (whether literary or visual) can dilate human perception. For Renard, the practice of memory was a desperate counterweight to indifference, neglect, and abstraction.



Gallery View of *Soft Walls*, crocheted plastic, 96" x 216" x 18" and 96" x 156" x 18", 2013.
Photo by Champion McConnell.

For Bergson, an apprenticeship to artistic watchfulness would defy the intrusive illusions of reductive objectification in our thinking. In each case the conviction was that art could, so to speak, displace our attention in an authentic and engaging way. Otherwise, failing memory and watchfulness, we would be walled-in by the calculative haste of a utilitarian era.

It may seem a bit anachronistic to pair these conceptual points of reference with a contemporary Hawaiian-born installation artist working between textile and weaving, drawing and sculpture, Bauhaus and Buddhism. And yet, Akiko Kotani’s ability to restore and deepen our perception has everything to do with that poetic and philosophical urgency through which we seek to find the sites and sights of our world renewed. As well, and crucially so, her practice invites us into a space of resistance—a displacement away from narrowly wrought paradigms of perception.

Christopher Yates—Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Art Theory, Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts

AKIKO KOTANI

www.akikokotani.com

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

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| 2014 | Women and Their Work, Austin, TX |
| 2013 | Artist of the Year @ Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, PA |
| 2010 | Borelli-Edwards Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA (Two-person) |
| 2007 | MX ESPAI 1010, Barcelona, SPAIN |
| 2007 | Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg, PA |
| 2007 | Maui Arts Center, Kahului, Maui, HI |
| 2006 | Arlington Arts Center, Arlington, VA |
| 2005 | A. Jain Marunouchi Gallery, New York, NY |
| 2005 | The Contemporary Museum at First Hawaiian Center, Honolulu, HI |
| 2004 | The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH |
| 2003 | Robeson Gallery, Penn State University, PA |
| 2002 | Organization of Independent Artists, New York, NY |
| 2001 | Associated Artists Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2000 | San Augustin National University, Arequipa, PERU |

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

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| 2014 | <i>Visual Artists Network 2014 Annual Meeting Exhibition</i> , Tulsa, OK |
| 2014 | <i>Contemporary Visions: ArtCloud #2</i> , Multiverso, Florence, ITALY |
| 2011 | <i>Il Mondo Nuovo de Tiepolo</i> , Galerie NegPos, Nimes, FRANCE |
| 2010 | <i>100th AAP Annual Exhibition</i> , Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2010 | <i>AAP @ Fallingwater</i> , Fallingwater Gallery, Mill Run, PA |
| 2009 | <i>3rd International Triennial Miniature-Textile</i> , Szombathely Keptar, HUNGARY |
| 2008 | <i>Zig Zag</i> , Hafiyat Karaköy, Istanbul, TURKEY |
| 2007 | <i>Fiero</i> , Kotani, Kim, Asian American Arts Centre, New York, NY |
| 2007 | <i>Fiberart International/2007</i> , Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2006 | <i>10th Anniversary</i> , Contemporary Museum at First Hawaiian Center, Honolulu, HI |
| 2005 | <i>Q5th Associated Artists Exhibition</i> , Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2003 | <i>Material Songs</i> , Roseline Koener Atelier, Westhampton, NY |
| 2002 | <i>Small Works in Fiber</i> , LongHouse Reserve, East Hampton, NY; SOFA Chicago, IL; Miyaki Design Studio, Tokyo, JAPAN |
| 2001 | <i>5th Baltic Biennial of Weaver's Miniature</i> , Gdynia Museum, Gdynia, POLAND |
| 2000 | <i>Q0th Juror's Selection Exhibition</i> , Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, PA |

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- Citta di Chieri, Torino, ITALY
- Moulin à Nef at VCCA-France, Auvillar, FRANCE
- The Cleveland Museum, Cleveland, OH
- Pittsburgh Public Schools Trust, Pittsburgh, PA
- Congregation Rodef Shalom, Pittsburgh, PA
- Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ
- Pittsburgh International Airport, Pittsburgh, PA
- Bank of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI
- Beecham Corporation, Pittsburgh, PA
- Hawaii State Foundation of Art, Honolulu, HI
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

SELECTED AWARDS

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| 2013 | Pittsburgh Artist of the Year, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2012 | Creative Development Award, Heinz Endowment & Pittsburgh Foundation, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2010 | 100th AAP Gallery Award, Borelli-Edwards Galleries, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2006 | VCCA's Exchange Artist in Residence at Tyrone Guthrie Centre, IRELAND |
| 2006 | Artist in Residence at Vermont Studio, Johnson, VT |
| 2005 | Fellow at VCCA's Moulin à Nef, Auvillar, France |
| 2005 | Terry Smith Juror's Award, AAP Q5th Exhibition, Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 2004 | Vira I. Heinz Fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Amherst, VA |
| 2002 | Robert Storr's Wallace Family Award, Visual Arts Center, Chautauqua, NY |
| 2001 | Fred Wilson Juror's Award, 78th Annual Spring Show, Erie Art Museum, PA |
| 2000 | Jill Synder's Exhibition Award, AAP Q0th Exhibition, Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, PA |
| 1999 | Duane Michals Juror's Award, AAP 89th Exhibition, Carnegie Museum, PA |

EDUCATION

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| 1977 | Tyler School of Art, Elkins Park, PA-MFA |
| 1962 | University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI-BFA |

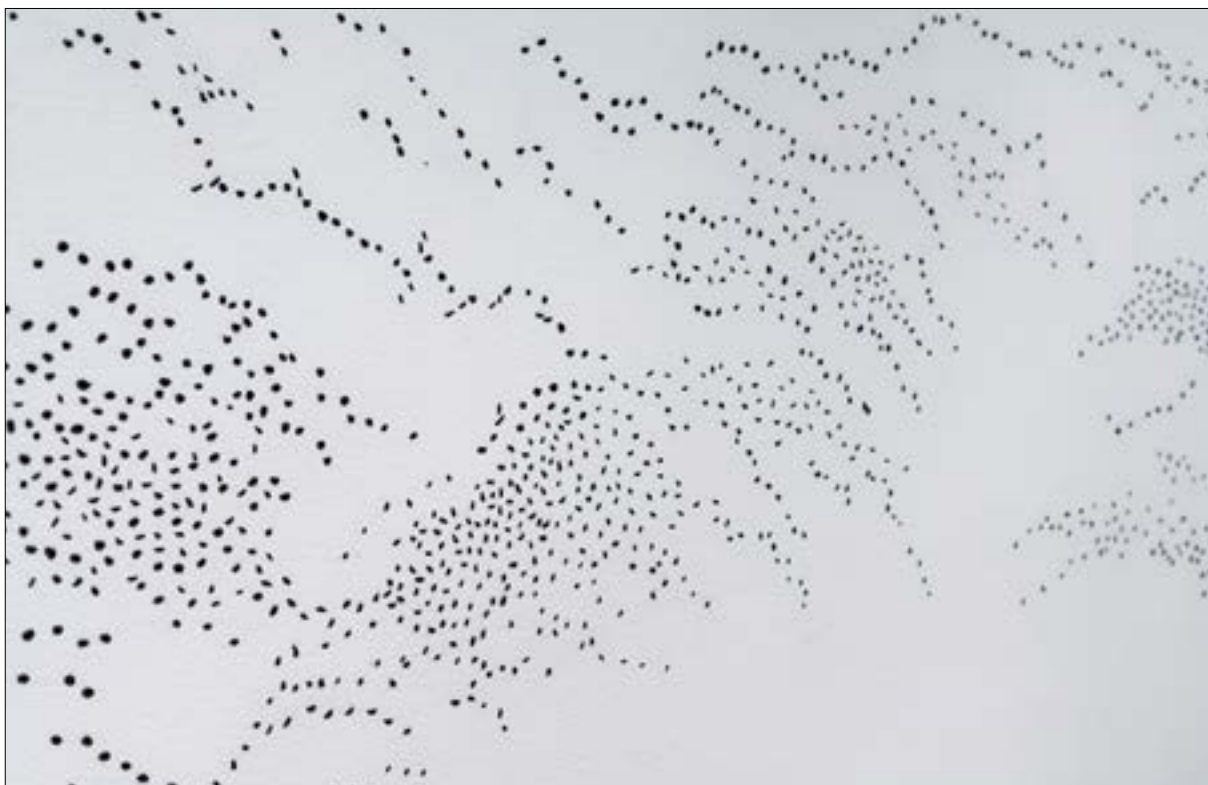
GALLERY REPRESENTATION:

BORELLI-EDWARDS GALLERIES, PITTSBURGH, PA



Detail of *Soft Walls*, crocheted plastic, 96" x 216" x 18" and 96" x 156" x 18", 2013. Photo by Rino Pizzi.

Cover Panel: Gallery View of *Soft Walls*, crocheted plastic, 96" x 216" x 18" and 96" x 156" x 18", 2013. Photo by Rino Pizzi.



Detail of *The Black Sea*, bamboo threads stitched on paper, 30" x 120", 2010. Photo by Rino Pizzi.

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 36th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,878 artists in 290 visual art exhibitions, 121 music, dance and theater events, 15 film festivals, 24 literary readings and 526 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, the *New York Times*, *ArtForum* and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 950 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
their work

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