

The Web of Life

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According to the Spanish poet Juan Eduardo Cirlot, “the phrase ‘the web of life’ is an eloquent expression of the symbolism of woven fabric that is not only concerned with ideas of binding and increase through the blending of two elements (the warp and the woof—the passive and the active), nor is it merely equivalent to creation; rather does it denote the mystic apprehension of the world of phenomena as a kind of veil that hides the true and the profound from sight. As Porphyry observed: ‘The ancients called the heavens “a veil” because, in a sense, they are the garments of the gods.’”¹

If it is the work of the demiurge to link the immortal with the mortal by means of a symbolic fabric, then it is the task of the mystic (and the artist as well) to “reveal” the web concealed in this fabric, in order to access a true consciousness of the real. Reality must then be perceived beyond the opacity of the banal.

I think of the symbolic nature of the double meaning of the word “reveal,” which signifies both “to draw back the veil” and “to cover with the veil,” when I contemplate with admiration how Chilean artists Johanna Unzueta and Felipe Mujica have explored the metaphor of fabric in the work they have created over the last decade. The artists are bound to each other through affection and a twenty-five-year friendship along with a series of elective affinities that have generated artistic collaborations on many occasions, since Unzueta and Mujica share an interest in geometric abstraction, color, and popular forms along with an appreciation for the true nature of the materials they employ. One could say that the connecting thread of their work is an interest in the fabric itself—as a metaphor for the real.

Mujica makes what he calls “curtains” that consist of fabric pieces usually embroidered, sewn, perforated or painted with geometric designs that explore the opposition between figure and ground, which he arranges in constellations throughout the exhibition space. These curtains are suspended so that they seem to float in space, allowing viewers to circulate through them, activating them as aesthetic objects. They also function as flexible extensions of the gallery walls—as dividers of the space. Mujica conceives them as “drawings that occupy the space . . . Temporary walls that channel the public’s circulation and perception of the space, as well as the perception of the other works . . . They are both objects of contemplation and functional objects; they become part of the museography and temporal flexible architecture. They can be used by other artists and curators. These cloth panels are also a direct reference to avant-garde movements such as Russian Constructivism or the Bauhaus, as they intend to recover and reinterpret the modernist ideal of the democratization of the art object.”² Mujica frequently collaborates with artisans he finds in the places he exhibits (Sao Paulo, Zacatecas, Antigua, Cuenca, Gothenburg), who contribute their diverse techniques to the artist’s original designs. Mujica’s curtains are also folding sculptures that can be easily transported. They recall the yurts that nourished

the collective imaginary of the 1960s and were a source of inspiration for artists like Joseph Beuys, Mario Merz, Franz Erhard Walther, and Hélio Oiticica, among others. There is something marginal in their contingency, something of the Third World, of guerilla warfare and agitprop, but also something less immediate, something that belongs to the spiritual world, recalling the colorful Tibetan prayer flags attributed to the Gautama Buddha, said to have written the sutras (threads) on battle flags used many centuries ago by the Devas against their enemies, the Asuras, in a kind of sacred bricolage.

Mujica's curtains form part of a geometric lineage that includes Josef Albers, Blinky Palermo, Lygia Clark, and Sol Lewitt, but they also reference the spatial puzzles of video games, psychedelic graphics, and the designs of the Navajo Nation and other native cultures of the Americas. Although abstract, many of the curtains' designs seem to refer to archetypal signs present in the ancestral cultures that place these works in a critical dialogue with modernity. The fact that the artisans who collaborate with Mujica produce interpretations based on the traditional forms they employ—which depart considerably from Mujica's original designs—adds an essential anthropological dimension to his work. This is where another important affinity with the work of Unzueta can be identified. She shares with Mujica an interest in archetypal signs and the popular arts.

Although it would be imprecise to describe Unzueta's recent works as fabrics, since they are drawings on paper, their textile character is evident in the ornamental designs that the artist traces in her drawings as well as the techniques she uses to make them. She utilizes instruments associated with sewing: embroidery hoops, patterns, stencils, and needles to puncture the paper. She also pre-dyes her paper with pigments normally used for fabric, such as indigo. On the relationship between her drawings and textiles, Unzueta has said, "I've been working with textile since I was five years old. I grew up working with my hands. My mother always said that I learned to knit and embroider even before learning to read and write. Hands are tools for me and I can't disconnect from that. When I draw, I don't think about textiles, and yet the drawings become that."³

Unzueta exhibits her drawings by using a display device inspired by the legendary model created by Lina Bo Bardi: They are mounted between two Plexiglass sheets affixed to the floor by a wooden pedestal, which allows viewers to walk around the work. This presentation emphasizes the materiality of the paper, which like fabric has a front and a backside. (This is yet another feature shared by Mujica and Unzueta, connecting them to an essential aspect of fabric.)

Unzueta's work can be likened to the spiritual drawings of Emma Kunz, Hilma Af Klint, Anna Zemánková and other self-taught artists because, like them, she consistently explores in her drawings a spiritual geometry that generates spaces charged with intensity. Her drawings may be understood as cartographies that represent unknown territories where the micro and the macro are interwoven and where abstraction and figuration occur simultaneously. They are molecular maps that seem to represent organs, plants, and cells—but also planets, galaxies, and constellations—and they appear to be generated by

a nonlinear dynamic. They recall the diagrams that describe social systems, organisms, and ecosystems of expansion, where all forms seem to implicate interrelationships and interdependencies. While Johanna Unzueta drawings are obviously not intended as objects of religious contemplation, many of them do resemble mandalas, the magical circles used in tantric yoga to serve as instruments (yantras) for meditation and concentration in order to achieve a higher state of consciousness.

The mandala is above all a cosmic image that synthesizes the dualism between differentiation and unification, variety and unity, exteriority and immersion. This duality is also found in the traditional symbolism of weaving, of which Unzueta and Mujica are well aware. The weave as the universe is basically the result of two elements: weft and warp, feminine and masculine, fullness and emptiness. On each point of the cosmic weave there is also a weft and a warp woven together: “the warp, formed as it is by threads stretched upon the loom, represents the immutable, principal elements, whereas the threads of the weft, which pass between those of the warp by the to-and-from movement of the shuttle, represent the variable and contingent elements, in other words the applications of the principle to this or that set of particular conditions.”⁴ The task of every artist then is to weave into a delicate balance the immutable qualities or forms of things, into the “material” and contingent substance of the world to “reveal” the web of this infinite fabric we call the universe. This is what Unzueta and Mujica insist upon: to weave in order to undo.

Translated from Spanish by Michele Faguet

Notes:

1- J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (Mineola, NY: Dover publications, 2002), 379.

2- Artist statement, <http://abstractioninaction.com/artists/felipe-mujica/>.

3- Johanna Unzueta, quoted by Valerie Smith, “In Search of Labor or What’s Labor got to do with it? or Labor of Love,” *Where Land and Sea Melt Into Sky*; (Brooklyn, NY: Self Published, 2020), 17-22.

4- René Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, trans. Angus Macnab (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 76.