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Weaving the Threads of Applied and Contemporary Art

Works created with or inspired by textiles and crafting are being showcased at Art Basel Miami Beach and at satellite fairs.

By Ginanne Brownell

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LONDON — Considering her tumultuous early childhood, it is little wonder that the South African artist [Bonolo Kavula](#) craves the meditative mental stillness she gets from working with textiles.

Born in Kimberley, South Africa, she was raised by a foster family after her mother's death (she was 4 at the time). She was later enrolled in an art school where she was the only Black student. In secondary school, she won a [national youth art award](#) and went on to study printmaking at the [Michaelis School of Fine Art](#) at the University of Cape Town.

Ms. Kavula, now 29, is making her debut at [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) with “sewedi sewedi” (Sewedi was her mother's maiden name), an expansion of her first solo exhibition that was [held earlier this year](#) at the Cape Town outpost of [Smac Gallery](#), which represents her. The work, made from shweshwe — a printed cotton fabric — crosses printmaking with weaving and sculpting.

“Personally, it’s my kind of therapy,” Ms. Kavula said, adding that the show was inspired by a dress of her mother’s that was given to her by her great-grandmother. “There is an element of you’ve got to be present so no matter what is going on, you have to demand a stillness.”

That demand of reflection and stillness — from both artist and viewer — is the reason a number of galleries are presenting works created with or inspired by textiles and craft during Art Basel Miami Beach and other satellite fairs this week.

At Art Basel, [Aninat Galeria de Arte](#) of Santiago, Chile, is presenting textile techniques by three prominent Latin American female artists: [Patricia Belli](#) of Nicaragua and [Catalina Swinburn](#) and [Mónica Bengoa](#), who are both Chilean. Meanwhile, [Proyectos Ultravioleta](#) of Guatemala City and [Von Bartha](#) of Basel, Switzerland, will showcase the work of another Chilean artist, Felipe Mujica, who has collaborated with textile artists from countries including Mexico, China, Brazil and Norway to produce his fabric curtains.



A more conceptual textile piece, “Harlem Quilt” (1997), by a Harlem-born Canadian artist, [June Clark](#), will be highlighted by Toronto’s [Daniel Faria Gallery](#) while at [Untitled Art’s](#) Miami Beach edition, [Gallery 1957](#) of Ghana will focus on Serge Attukwei Clottey’s textiles made with duct tape that are then superimposed over photography.

All this fusion between applied and contemporary art is impossible to miss. Mr. Faria said the people who traditionally had worked in textiles and crafts — including women, minorities and Indigenous people — in the past were often left out of the contemporary art canon.

“There has been a shift recently where it has been this broadening up of voices and perspectives that before it was a very straight line of what art history was and continued to be,” he said, “and there’s been this kind of exploding of our understanding of that.”

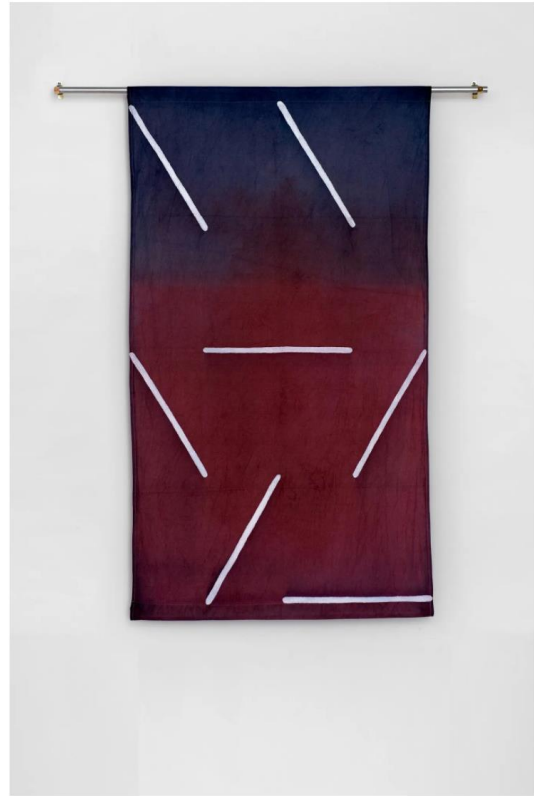
Applied arts like sewing, quilting, embroidery, weaving and knitting have historically been seen in the sphere of domestic practices, and for years they were not given their due by the upper echelons of the art world. However, Iliya Fridman, whose [gallery](#) will be presenting textile works of the pioneering “assemblage quilting” artist and civil rights activist [Dindga McCannon](#) at Art Basel Miami Beach, wrote in an email that the definition of fine art had “grown to include forms of expression traditional to ‘women’s work.’”

Artists like Ms. Belli, who is a sculptor as well as a textile artist, have helped to push that boundary of recognition. Her tangled fabric of used clothing examines the expectations that have historically been put on women.

“I’m thinking about the patriarchy and the role of women,” she said during a video interview, “and how these duties and obligations are interpreted by us women, by my mother, as a source of meaning and joy of her space in life.”



Felipe Mujica's "First Sunrises on Earth (Solentiname), Curtain 1" (2019). via von Bartha and Proyectos Ultravioleta



Felipe Mujica's "First Sunrises on Earth (Solentiname), Curtain 2" (2019). via von Bartha and Proyectos Ultravioleta

Mr. Mujica's work, meanwhile, is to "direct the conversation" toward the domesticity of the production of his curtains. "I think fabric is a tremendous subject and material," he wrote in an email. He added that different cultures in a variety of ways reflected the role that textiles play in everyday life and that his work was learning "to incorporate these different paths" and situations.

In the 19th-century quilts shared [coded messages](#) with passengers on the Underground Railroad, something that inspired the Los Angeles-based artist [David O. Alekhuogie](#) to create draped fabric wall sculptures that the [Yancey Richardson Gallery](#) of New York will be presenting in Miami.

Another New York gallery, [Nicelle Beauchene](#), will be showing four works by Mattie Ross (1903-97) and Rachel Carey George (1908-2011), two quilters from Gee's Bend, Ala. These works date from the 1960s, around the time of the civil rights movement. A number of Gee's Bend quilters were a part of the [Freedom Quilting Bee](#) where, said Ms. Beauchene, "they would meet, they would plan their protests and their marches, they would gossip, they would sing." She added that "so much amazing history" was happening "when these quilts were being made."

Meanwhile, Ms. Clark emigrated to Canada in 1968 and did not return to Harlem until she did a residency at the [Studio Museum](#) almost 30 years later. Her installation, while not a traditional quilt, uses over 200 scraps of fabric from secondhand clothes she procured at Goodwill. Each piece is overlaid with photographs that she took at waist level.

“My mother taught me how to sew, and I began my adult life making clothes,” Ms. Clark said during a video interview. “I found committing imagery to any and every piece of fabric was an incredibly satisfying feeling for me.”

Like Ms. Clark — and Ms. Kavula — Mr. Attukwei Clottey said he understood why a lot of artists were working in textiles at the moment. Fabric, he said, is “part of our celebration as humans” and it is “something that represents who we are.”