

# NOTES FROM THE ROAD: THE STATE OF FIBER ART IN THE NETHERLANDS

BY DIANE FRANKLIN



SUNHI MANG © CHIHARU SHOTA, CO/PICTORIGHT AMSTERDAM, 2017



I recently spent two months in the Netherlands. I went there to teach two workshops at the DIY Textile School in Amsterdam. Other goals were to see as much fiber art as possible and to learn how fiber art was taught in the Netherlands and how it was regarded by the larger art world.

I'd long known of the innovative work of several Dutch art quilters but wanted to branch out to see other forms of fiber art. Fiber art in many forms—wall art, installations, sculptures, fashion, interior design—was everywhere: in museums, large and small; galleries; exhibitions; libraries; and small ateliers. This art utilized a wide variety of materials, including fabric, paper, bag ties, string, and felt, and incorporated techniques such as dyeing, felting, eco printing, embroidery, and photography.

One of the first exhibitions I visited was the Rijswijk Museum's *Textiel Biënnale 2017*. Surprisingly, the exhibition did not include any Dutch artists but instead featured 24 international artists whose work was inspired by personal stories, mythology, and social or political themes. Particularly striking were portraits by Ji Seon Yoon who combines photographs, fabric, and stitching to create haunting and evocative faces, and the work of Alice Kettle who does extensive machine embroidery on painted and embroidered backgrounds.



In the Amsterdam photography museum, FOAM, an unusual installation by Daisuke Yokata, *Matter*, featured large strips of exposed film prints draped throughout the room. In another room were piles of charred film, ceremonially burned by the artist and representing the “overflow of images we are confronted with on a daily basis and the growing indifference among recipients.” The installation was haunting and provocative even before knowing the artist’s intention.

In Rotterdam, at the World Trade Center Gallery, I saw some imaginative constructions by a young artist, Machteld Wylacker, including her piece, *Spookstad (Ghosttown)*, made from discarded twist ties, a material I’d never seen used in fiber pieces.

A small exhibit at the tiny 16<sup>th</sup> century Leiden Weavers House featured the work of well-known art quilter Jette Clover. Her work is inspired by the layered memories found in cities, and often incorporates words, reflecting the influence of her previous journalistic career. The chipped and disintegrating walls of the Weavers House enhanced and echoed Clover’s work.

In den Bosch, the Noordbrabants Museum showed *Between the Lines*, several large installations by the Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota. She, and 10 assistants, spent 12 days creating the installations in situ. Two thousand balls of wool

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Chiharu Shiota, **Uncertain Journey**; 2016; wire (boats), wool. Courtesy the artist and Blain I Southern. BOTTOM: Jette Clover, **The Attic With White Wall 5** (detail).

THIS PAGE TOP: Alice Kettle, **Loukanikos the Dog and the Cat’s Cradle**; 2015; threads, fabrics, glass, copper wire, paint and feather on canvas; 520 x 217 cm.

RIGHT: Jette Clover, **The Attic With White Wall 5** (left); 2009; cotton, acrylic paint; painting, screen printing, collage, sanding, hand and machine quilting; 56 x 53 in. **Words 7** (right); 2011; cotton, cheesecloth, acrylic paint; painting, screen printing, collage, sanding, machine quilting; 43 x 43 in.





wound throughout the space and were attached with ten thousand staples. This affecting exhibit focused on memory and identity.

In addition to visiting museums and exhibitions, I spent time with a number of Dutch fiber artists and teachers. Elly van Steenbeek is a well-known Dutch art quilter whose work is featured in books on art quilting and who exhibits throughout Europe. She and I met for lunch at a lovely arboretum outside of Utrecht. She arrived with a small collage as a gift for me and one of her recent pieces which I was eager to see.

Van Steenbeek's inspiration comes from the world around her. Small things in her environment—a walk with her dog, a poem she'd read, a view of the sun—and recently, a serious illness, lead to abstract renditions of the feelings these experiences evoke. Currently, she works mostly with paper, though her earlier work utilized both fabric and paper. Van Steenbeek emphasized her love of paper, noting that it is cheap, available everywhere, and can be cut or torn, dyed, snow-dyed, or rusted. Her pieces are appealing, thought provoking, and emotionally stimulating.

Very different from van Steenbeek's quilts are the exquisite embroideries of Amsterdam-based artist Alexandra Drenth. In her small living room, Drenth produces museum-worthy masterpieces. Previously a photographer and painter, Drenth turned to embroidery because of her love of handmade objects, her wish to reuse beautiful, but marred, old materials that might otherwise be discarded, and her desire to change her own relationship with time. Working slowly is freeing to Drenth who says that "if I give attention to my work, time disappears and gives me endless freedom to create." Her work is passionate and unusual, inspired by experiences, the natural world, and other artists' work. These starting points are uniquely transformed by her imagination, resulting in lovely garments or table pieces infused with mythical and magical characters.

Fabienne Rey, well known in the eco-printing world, enhances her naturally dyed or eco-printed fabric with intensive hand embroidery. We met in her serene and plant-filled garden and talked about her work and inspiration. Her work is always abstract and generally





TOP LEFT:  
Fabienne Rey,  
**Distorted  
Reality**; eco-  
printed silks,  
naturally dyed silk  
threads (madder and  
eucalyptus); hand sewn,  
freehand embroidered;  
40 x 40 cm.

TOP RIGHT: Fabienne Rey,  
**Talismanic Belt**; 2017; silk  
and wool twill (naturally dyed  
and eco printed), naturally dyed  
silk threads (madder, eucalyptus,  
tansy), found metals, beads, lace,  
and bamboo lacquered button;  
freehand embroidered and machine  
stitched; 56 x 30 cm.

HERE: Alexandra Drenth, **New Gold Dream  
(I Never Promised You A Rose Garden,**  
**Lynn Anderson)**; 2015; antique robe,  
lace, gold embroidery bullion, figures painted  
in oil paint, embroidery and sewing thread;  
hand embroidery, embroidered applications;  
140 x 250 cm (variable in width).



GELURT VAN STEENBEEK

ABOVE:  
Elly van Steenbeek,  
**Dreamland**; 2017, ice  
cube dyed papers,  
shibori cotton, fused  
on cotton; hand  
embroidery;  
90 x 120 cm.

This view was echoed by Karina van Vught, owner of Zijdelings, a school and online store in Tilburg. Van Vught said it was highly unlikely that a major museum in the Netherlands would mount an art quilt exhibit today. She, and all the artists I interviewed, thought it was possible for small groups of fiber artists to find venues for exhibitions, usually in churches or local libraries, but these exhibitions tended to be small, up for only a few days, and organized by the exhibitors themselves. A new gallery, High Five Art, the first devoted to fiber art, has recently opened in southern Holland, and it is already booking exhibitions for the next several years.

originates with the fabric itself. Its meaning comes from an alignment between head and heart. Rey's work is layered, consisting of a loose backing, patches on top, and stitching to bring it all together. The layered nature of her work reflects her layered life. For Rey, also an acupuncturist, the process of creating fiber art is a form of healing. "To stitch is healing. The touch of the fabric brings you into the here and now, and the stitching creates a transfer of energy into the cloth," she says. Rey makes beautiful books as well as clothing and wall pieces.

Throughout my trip, I asked each person I met about the place of fiber art in the overall art world. Nienke Smit, an artist and current head of STIDOC, a coalition of seven textile-related associations, explained that there are about 200 professional textile artists in the country, with a larger group aspiring to that goal. In addition, there are many thousands of hobbyists working with fiber in some manner. Smit asserted that, although there is a renewed interest in textile art, most museums and design and art academies view textiles as incomplete by themselves. Instead, they see them as objects to be incorporated into something else: fashion design, home furnishings, or a conceptual art project. Students may learn some textile techniques in the art academies, but these techniques are to be used in the service of a bigger project.



# BECOMING A FIBER ARTIST IN THE NETHERLANDS

Most of the fiber artists I met on my trip were self taught. But for those who want professional training, there are a variety of options. STIDOC, a coalition of seven textile-related associations, maintains a list of academic art education programs (<http://stidoc.nl/educatie/index.php>). A look through these programs corroborates the stated view that textile art is mainly taught in the art academies and design schools in service to other disciplines such as fashion and product design or textile conservation.

Aspiring fiber artists who want to create work that is itself art, not part of something else, have a few options for learning textile techniques and the skills needed by professional textile artists. Sometimes they can attend workshops sponsored by local guilds or groups, though these options are less available than in the past for both financial reasons and because there are some new private alternatives.

For example, the DIY Textile School in Amsterdam, owned and run for seven years by American Ginni Fleck, offers an intensive two-year program as well as a master year. Students—both Dutch and international—meet 18 times (for 6 hours at a time) over two years, pursuing a curriculum focused on techniques, creative development, and artistic thinking. In between, they do weekly projects that are evaluated in relation to the curriculum. The master year focuses on individual goals and more intense artistic development. When students finish the program, they often exhibit their work in small groups and find new ways of establishing themselves as professional artists.

Zijdelings, open since 1996, provides intermediate and advanced technique-based classes. Its owner, Karina van Vught, recruits celebrated local and international artists who teach high-end and innovative workshops attended by serious artists. Currently, she is developing workshops using new materials or that combine traditional processes with the use of high-tech tools such as large-scale digital printing.

The Dutch Felting Academy offers a two-year course that combines advanced felting techniques with instruction on how to market and sell work as well as on how to become a teaching artist.

The Hawar Textile Institute has existed in various incarnations since the 1980s. It started by developing products, but recently began offering a variety of workshops including spinning, crochet, jewelry design, and dyeing. It also sells art materials and sometimes exhibits the work of workshop participants.



GEURT VAN STEENBEEK

ABOVE: Elly van Steenbeek, **Healing**; painted papers, scrim, pieces of paper; lamination, fused on a rusted cotton background, hand stitched; 100 x 100 cm.

BELOW: Alexandra Drenth, **Soft Wild Promises** (Detail of this work in progress); 2017; antique cotton, eco dye with flowers and rust, embroidery and sewing thread; hand embroidery, embroidered applications; 105 x 70 cm (variable in width).

In a country that reveres and values art and design, it is clear that fiber art holds an ambivalent position. It is shown everywhere and loved by the many people who visit exhibits that incorporate fiber in some form, yet it is valued by the art and design world only when it becomes a component of something else. Many forms of fiber art continue to be viewed as craft, rather than as art, and therefore major museums refuse to show it. There is irony in this perspective, given the number of fiber-related exhibits I saw on my visit. As in the United States, attitudes toward fiber art seem to be slowly changing, though perhaps not fast enough for many.

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