



WEAVING TOGETHER MEANING:
Bev Butkow

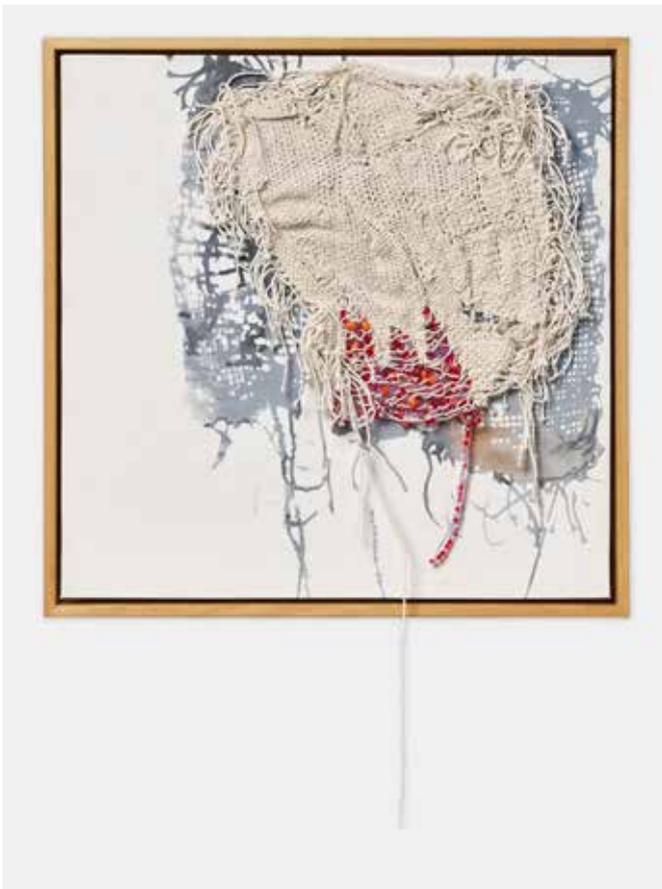
Bev Butkow

By Khumo Sebambo

“Bev Butkow’s practice isn’t just about creating, but about using her materials to make sense of being a woman”

In the realm of textile art, women, queer people and people of colour have historically made progressive and often politically-charged work that challenges the shadowy margins of society. And although textile arts have a distinct cultural legacy, they have found new life in contemporary interpretations both in the global and local contexts with artists such as Asemahle Ntlonti, Billie Zangewa and Bev Butkow.

Butkow’s intervention in this millennia-old practice uses textile and fibre arts to ask complex questions about identity and gender. Taking strips of dishcloth, copper wire, twine, glitter, nail polish and synthetic pearls, Butkow uses the loom to weave together works that elevate the materials from their mundane contexts. These chosen materials, which at face-value could be seen to reinforce stereotypes, are enlisted in a visible act of resistance through the way Butkow destabilizes their reading in the weave. The materials are pushed to take on unrepeatable and unstructured shapes that no longer read as stereotypical, but rather as an exercise in searching to make meaning of her position as a woman



It becomes clear that weaving and textiles are being enlisted as disruptive tools to re-perform 'women's work' or 'domestic crafts' as a way to challenge traditional and often stereotyped roles of women and subvert problematic views of the feminine. Within a society that holds numerous troublesome views of femininity, Butkow is asking questions about what she calls the "pressures, expectations and stereotypes placed on women that guide [them] to behave in ways that aren't necessarily true or real."

She subverts and challenges wider gender expectations, based on the belief that these stereotypes serve no purpose in personal expression. Her practice doesn't claim to know what is real or true, instead the painstaking practise of sitting at the loom weaving these works shows a desire to operate outside of the limits or 'pressures' of convention – and, in so doing, to carve out space in which to search for the meaning of being woman. Weaving is a discipline that supports thinking: it demands an organisation of ideas through

chosen 'threads'. Butkow began weaving after she tore her paintings up into strips – a move that she calls 'unravelling'. With this act of tearing and undoing, Butkow unravelled her 'good girl' and challenged the stereotyped 'good girl/bad girl' dichotomy. In her earliest textile works, Butkow wove the painted strips together crudely to see what would happen. She was instantly engaged with the act of weaving and each successive project became a further experiment in mixing materials and creating works that wove together unexpected and un-traditional materials.



'Unravelling' is a concern in her practise that develops itself into the idea of 'transforming'. "Transforming materials, transforming myself, transforming making practices and transforming our views of stereotypes," Butkow says. She is at once concerned with construction and destruction, simultaneously subjecting both concerns to deep analysis. Today, she has found artistic freedom in her weaving and her technique is refined

to create textiles that are at once beautiful and chaotic. They are 'non-fixed forms' that are hung according to the whims of the artist or curator. Each time her pieces are shown, they take on novel forms that reflect the material in new ways. By integrating copper wire into the works, the works are freed from the flat textured surface created by the loom to rise up and perform as sculptures. The resulting forms have sculptural depth and the effect is truly

beguiling. She has blurred the distinctions between sculpture and weaving in her practise. Using her handmade loom as an extension of her body, coaxing out the possibilities of materials, she explodes the boundaries of traditional weaving. Her studio is a laboratory where she toys with materials, forms and deeply-encrusted surfaces. She creates innovative works that blend fibre arts and sculpture, making her a contemporary artist of incredible texture and visual expression.





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