

Interview: Theresa Knopf

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“I Gave Myself the Challenge of Painting Without Paint.”

Interview by Emily Jaeger, Features Editor



Theresa Knopf Photo/Shawn Michaels

Theresa Knopf is a recent graduate of the California State University at Northridge where she studied painting. Using a mixed medium including paint, textiles, thread, and cyanotype prints, Knopf creates pieces which reflect on women’s histories through restraint, concealing, and revealing.

Jaeger: Your collages appearing in this month’s issue resonate of both fragility and strength through juxtapositions. Large geometric shapes, for instance, are countered with embroidery floss. How did you arrive at this mixed-medium in your ongoing exploration of memory and silence in women’s personal histories?

Knopf: Many of the materials I use are culled from a collection of fabrics and yarns that have been used by myself, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and my great-aunts. So in a very practical sense, these materials are imbued with the personal histories of very specific women. In a more general sense, the techniques I use are rooted in the domestic arts, historically seen as “women’s work,” to obscure and puncture my paintings. Though I call myself a painter, I also believe that we are not just one thing. A multitude of experiences inform

and shape us. My artwork is a reflection of that complexity.

Jaeger: How do women’s histories influence the composition of each piece?

Knopf: Women’s lives, up until very recently, have been private or interior. We are starting to see historical women’s stories emerge in popular culture. I am exploring the stitching together of lost and found narratives to form a complete image. If one builds up all the layers of women’s experiences, hard and soft, a complex portrait of a life lived emerges.

Jaeger: You earned your masters at California State, Northridge in painting. How did working towards your masters begin to shape you as an artist?

Knopf: Cal State Northridge has a fantastic program. All grad students are essentially working in an interdisciplinary way. Faculty encourages students to employ any medium or technique that best communicates their concept. And there is a lot of encouragement, CSUN prides itself on building community where students help guide and challenge each other. I have formed and maintained great relationships, especially with my committee chair, Samantha Fields. She is an incredible, prolific painter of impeccable skill, but her real strength is encouraging tangents and exploration. For me, it was a trail of tangents and her expectation of a rigorous studio practice that led me to working in paint, fiber, printmaking, collage, and alternative photographic processes.

Jaeger: After working primarily in painting, how did you come to work with mixed-mediums, fiber in particular, in your recent work?

Knopf: My grandmother was a home economics teacher who taught me some very basic domestic arts skills. Her influence led me to fabrics and forming an interest in needlework, but painting and drawing were more natural for me. My grandmother still has a set of tea towels that I embroidered when I was about 8 years old. I did quite well stitching smiling vegetables on the first two, but quickly switched to painting directly onto the fabric to complete the set. I suppose falling back into using fiber is a natural progression as I search for new ways to play with my concepts and ideas of femininity and identity.



Quiet Reserve by Theresa Knopf

Jaeger: One of my favorite pieces, “Quiet Reserve,” involves layers of multiple materials including cyanotype, tea, paint, textiles, and wool. Could you walk us through the process of creating this piece? Why did you choose these materials?

Knopf: I wanted to represent the elusiveness of memory in a tangible form. It started with painting photosensitive chemicals onto fabric to make multiple contact prints of a macrame piece. This served as a method of capturing an idea incorporating painting technique without actually painting the object. When I had two cyanotype prints that I felt were strong foundations, I tea-toned one and stitched them together, slightly offset. Having multiples of the same image that are slightly different is like the way our brains reconstruct memories and how they can change overtime or be colored by subsequent experiences.

Once I had that foundation I played around with collaging different materials over the top, including scraps of sheer fabric I had painted with scenes from family vacation photos. Once I felt that the composition was strong, the various elements were pinned and stitched together. I also included abstract stitches that served no other purpose than to disrupt the visual space, creating fissures in the picture plane.

I chose to work with materials that came directly from my stash of fabrics that are my own or have been given to me over time from family and friends. Using materials that already have their own history and reworking them into a larger work about memory just adds another dimension. For me it is comforting to handle these materials and allow that tactility to inform my movements.

Jaeger: Another piece on your website, “Fiber & Memory,” departs entirely from paint and is actually mainly woven textile. How does this piece fit into the series?

Knopf: This was the first time I gave myself the challenge of painting without paint. I was looking for a way to still make a traditional painting, hence the heavy allusion to the AbEx movement, without ever touching paint. I made myself a loom from a piece of cardboard and used one skein of yarn that had belonged to my great-grandmother, one skein of yarn that had belonged to my grandmother, and one of my own. I think at the time I was trying to make up for the generations of overlooked women painters, but in handling such personal and finite materials I was forced to reflect inward. I really think that particular piece was a turning point for me.



Fiber and Memory by Theresa Knopf

Jaeger: You once said that you were intrigued by the “idea of concealing and restraining beneath the flesh.” Could you talk a little more about why this is important to you and how it manifests in your work?

Knopf: It has been my experience that there is silent strength in restraint. There have been so many women and men throughout history who have endured trauma but have quietly carried on. It is very human, yet it is very difficult to find representations of it. My interest is to try to find a way to create a portrait of the many parts that make a life but still preserve it through layering, like a thin skin over the top. I would say that most people are not “what you see is what you get” because how could they be? We have so many experiences, good and bad, that build up over the years and make us who we are. The majority of those influences are invisible to the eye, yet they permeate every fiber of our being. I am compelled to communicate this elusive, interior experience through art making.

Jaeger: In your artist statement you explain that each of your projects is defined by self-imposed parameters. What were the parameters of this recent collection and how did they influence your process?

Knopf: I mentioned earlier that I had challenged myself to make a painting without paint. It's specific rules like this that help me to push ideas or find new ways of working. I really like structure and mapping of ideas. I plan out every step up to the moment I create the work. At this point in the process, I allow the materials to inform the making. It is a bit of a controlled chaos. I give myself very strict rules, yet I allow myself to break them and to allow for intuition to have the final say. Of course this means I have many unsuccessful moments in the studio, but I learn and grow with each experimentation. It is constant discovery that fuels my art practice.



Reunion No. 1 by Theresa Knopf

Jaeger: What does an average day at the studio look like?

Knopf: I start by making myself a cup of tea, put on a podcast, and if I have a set plan for the studio that day, I will get straight to work. If I am at the beginning of the creative process, I will drink my tea and take mental inventory of my work and materials until I am ready to move onto a project. Often it begins with watercolor or gouache and as more ideas come, a plan begins to emerge. I have a studio mate, and we like to make time to critique our work and discuss ideas.

Jaeger: Do you have any projects in the works? What would you like to explore next?

Knopf: I am continuing my "Reunion" series, which are collages of paper, paint, fabric, found textiles tenuously held together by thread. There is something in these fragile compositions that I am still working through. In addition, I have created some unique artist books. I am also in the process of binding a run of limited edition books that include all of the same materials I use in my framed works. The book format allows viewers to physically handle my multi-layered artwork and have a tactile experience with it. There are also larger works in my studio that need to be completed. I will be keeping myself busy for some time yet.