

Maureen McNeil

Light + Material

It's very apt that *Light + Material* is the name of Maureen McNeil's show at Kentler International Drawing Space. Recently I had the good fortune of spending the night in McNeil's studio, where I watched the light and material of her drawings on fabric shape-shift.

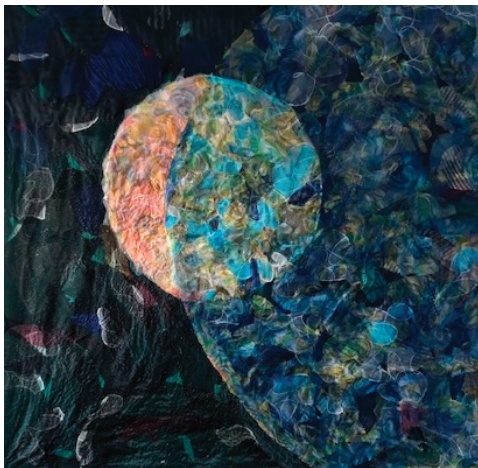
Over the course of that night the work glimmered under the hanging ceiling lights, dimmed as the night took hold, slowly evaporated in the dark, and returned in the diluted winter dawn.

First, as light faded in the evening, I took in the two large rectangular fabric drawings facing me. I loved that their shapes were echoed by the shapes of the two window panes directly above them on the studio wall. The lines of bare gray branches against the white sky seemed to be scratching and pressing against the window glass, much as the world lurking under the top layer of McNeil's drawings was pulsing and pushing up against each piece's surface.

McNeil's statement refers to "the art of our ancestors who stitched stars together to create the constellations," and mentions that she explores "light kindling and infusing the material world." Her words certainly describe my experience when

I got ready to lie down on the bed in her studio, turned most of the lights off, and had the impression in the near dark of being surrounded by agitated fireflies. Flecks of gold became bioluminescent. Figure and ground constantly changed places. Everything was impossibly dense and liquid at the same time. The marks and shapes kept shifting. I was reminded of a phrase that used to amuse me as a kid: "the motility of spermatozoa." The sense of steady metamorphosis is helped by the fact that McNeil sometimes allows fragments of material to flutter about your peripheral vision like when you shut your eyes and can't quite pin down the patterns of light and color.

Morning arrived, and in the even, restrained first light of winter the works sprang to life – a teeming life. This is when I noticed how the colors from the natural world outside spilled into the studio and resurfaced in these hanging artworks: carmine, cranberry, nutmeg, charcoal, ivory. Passages in some of the works resembled cracked ice with gurgling, bubbling water coursing underneath it. It felt as though the nearby frozen streams had found their way in. Some of the shapes even looked like stones glistening after a rainstorm. There were fluttering rectangles, frayed edges, pieces of recycled plastic pushing through, and gold thread and lamé that produced flashes of fleeting iridescence that either sat on top or lurked below.



As morning settled in, the elusive shapes took on a new enveloping materiality. Even the undulating tiles on the bathroom wall with their wavy surfaces reminded me of the artworks' fluidity.

There's motion everywhere in these drawings on fabric. McNeil's stitches aren't small and controlled as in traditional quilt-making. They drip like ink off a sumi brush. She stands on a ladder and moves her whole arm. She takes apart and reassembles. She cuts shapes and colors to follow the chalk lines. She uses pins the way I used to wield a staple gun, "until [as she writes] the piece glitters so bright with pins I can no longer see it." This is her signal to start sewing, the needle being McNeil's drawing pencil as she stitches through the layers and draws multiple patterns with thread.

When you look at this work, sometimes other artists come to mind – the complex, labor-intensive layering found in Julie Mehretu's work, the thread as line used by Ghada Amer, Twombly's meandering scribbles, as well as the alternating jagged and clean edges of Lee Krasner's torn and cut-up collages. And when I read Mathilde Lecuyer on the

drawings that Giacometti made during his surrealist period, roughly 1929-1935, I'm reminded of McNeil's latest body of work *Festooning*. Lecuyer says of Giacometti that "the presence of the white paper as a ground on which he traced his floating forms became one of his stylistic traits, while a framing line bestowed an overall solidity." This tendency to reduce bodies to stylized fragments also plays out in McNeil's *Torso* and *Self-portrait* series, where as she puts it "a few curved lines drawn on a big canvas represent life as she knows it."

I also know that McNeil believes the Pattern and Decoration movement of the seventies and eighties helped to open the door for her as an artist drawing with needle and thread. Among other inspirations or moments of education she cites a conversation with Robert Kushner as they walked through the gardens of Quito, Ecuador; while the gold that keeps appearing in her work was inspired by the Sun-God sculptures at Casa Del Alabado Museum of Pre-Columbian Art, in Quito's historical district.

McNeil clearly enjoys the drama of the horizontal format. When you look at each

panel of *Clover Reach 15* separately, the drawing created by the white triangles is abstract. But if the three panels of that triptych are viewed as one piece, the line of white triangles is a wild sort of tiger or prehistoric creature: on the left are the head and ears, which veer off the edge of the fabric; and its tail is represented by the X on the right. The colors also change in each panel, and the circular shapes, like mountains, add to the piece's symbolic evocation of the Andes. This evocation is echoed in the many varied shapes of *Esperanto 3* and in the thick white blurry lines of *Clover Reach 13*, and can be seen as the formation of a personal language or dance.

Drawing matters deeply to McNeil. She finds the process extremely meditative. She starts by chalking lines on a blank piece of cotton tacked on the wall, as many artists do. She told me that she always tells her students that the blank page is a great place to practice freedom and reminds them that they have to practice freedom to be free.

McNeil practices what she preaches – in her life, as well as in her art. She left home at seventeen with her mother's blessing and set out to explore the world. This independent spirit shows in the work. She doesn't have images in her head when she begins but rather wants to will back to life the feeling that different experiences elicited in her. The black and white in



her pieces emerged after time she spent in Japan noticing how young people were all dressed in black and white on the subway. The colored dots in a *Nakasendo* piece came from the sixty-five miles of ancient path she and her husband walked between Kyoto and Tokyo. The entire path has these painted dots on it: That's how they knew where they were supposed to go.

I suspect that McNeil always knew where she was supposed to go. In a sense, she started making these pieces at the age of nine, when she would get up early and join her mother, who was making a dress to wear to that night's dance. McNeil had the impression of her mother making magic – something out of nothing. Inspired, McNeil sat on the floor and sewed her mom's fabric discards together. When McNeil remarks on how "the tactile experience of sewing addresses human instincts of repair and survival," and that "textiles invoke historic, economic, and gender conventions that go back millennia," I think of this elemental scene from her childhood, and the effort to make a world you could watch through the night.

- **Barbara Friedman** is an artist and a professor of art at Pace University. She has had over forty solo shows, and reviews of her work have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New York Sun*, the *Irish Times*, *Newsday*, *Art in America*, *ARTS* magazine, and *Artweek*.