

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

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VOGUE

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ARTS

In Ruth Laskey's Exquisite Weavings, Patience Is Its Own Reward

BY GRACE EDQUIST

March 11, 2024



Ruth Laskey. *Twill Series (Loops 3)*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

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When the artist Ruth Laskey began her latest weaving series, she was well aware that it would be a whole year before she saw the finished product. That is by design: Her process is methodical, every step deliberate. Once she settles on the design for each new piece in a series, she hand-dyes, dries, and measures her threads, then strings them up on the pegs of a warping board inside her San Francisco studio. Only then does she start on the loom, slowly weaving the reverse of each image, thread by thread. It's not until the whole series is complete that the bolt of linen is cut from the loom, flipped over, and seen face-up for the first time.

"I like how slow it all is," she says. "There's not much that's slow."

Laskey has been working this way for 20 years. She originally trained as a painter, and first tried weaving in order to make her own linen canvases—a way to pump the brakes on what was otherwise, for her, too speedy an art form. She realized weaving itself was her calling, so she bought an old loom off Craigslist and, in 2005, began her Twill series, an ongoing collection of exquisitely plaited, abstract textiles made by the same considered process.

Loops, from 2023, is the latest member of the Twill family. Those works, together with her *Circles* series, from 2022, are on view in a new show at San Francisco's Altman Siegel, Laskey's debut with the gallery, through April 20. The exhibition intersperses the eight *Loops* and seven *Circles*, placing them in conversation. "I like the dialogue that's happening," Laskey says. "There's a really nice rhythm between the two bodies of work."

These textiles have both a quiet playfulness and deep sincerity. The *Loops* are fun. They squiggle and twirl in light, coordinating colors. (The hues are meant to be ambiguous—purpley-gray, tealish-green.) The *Circles* are more saturated, glowing suns dancing around one another. From a distance their subtlety may trick you into thinking the work itself is simple. But up close, they clear their throat, softly announcing their complexity and the painstaking work it took to build them from the idea-up. Every thread, every stitch, is laid by hand, precisely as intended.

The shapes are built into their surroundings, held in place by their neighbor threads instead of applied on top. “In order for the gesture to exist, it needs the enclosing space, the ground holding it,” Laskey says. She thinks a lot about form, starting well before thread is even involved. She works on a grid, sketching out her designs using no small amount of calculation. “Math is not my thing,” she says with a little laugh. But as a process-oriented person, she figured it out, and dove into geometry. Mimicking a circle or a curved line when you must stick to a grid was itself quite the operation. That her *Loops* especially have such fluidity and movement when they start from graph paper is remarkable.

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Laskey follows a deep lineage of women working in craft, elevating what was once considered a mere domestic pastime into high art. Her work calls to mind the reverence for material of Anni Albers, the gridded minimalism of Agnes Martin, the coils of Ruth Asawa. She pulls from many artforms—her background in painting, naturally, especially when it comes to mixing her custom dyes. But her pieces also carry dimensionality. “I like them being objects. In my mind they’re a little bit sculptural,” she says.

By stripping away the noise, Laskey lets the threads do the talking, reminding me of something Albers once said: “We must find our way back to simplicity of conception in order to find ourselves.” Laskey finds a way to do something so thoroughly, but still get at this concept of simplicity. It’s no wonder that when her labor-intensive process is over, her feelings are mixed.

“It’s an exciting moment to pull them off the loom and see that whatever I was doing was working. It’s also bittersweet though, because it’s so much about the process of making them that I’m kind of sad to be done. The process is part of my livelihood. It’s what sustains me as a person.”

“Ruth Laskey: Loops & Circles” is on view at Altman Siegel gallery in San Francisco through April 20, 2024.