



“Wall to Wall: Carpets by Artists” at Katonah Museum Blur Lines between Art, Design, Craft and Commerce

July 31, 2017

by Susan Hodara

KATONAH, N.Y. – Carpet. Rug. Carpet. Rug. The overlapping letters that spell out these two words produce the vibrant graphic configurations in [Carpet Rug](#) by the Austrian artist [Heimo Zobernig](#). The words read right to left and left to right, upside-down and right side up, forming colorful abstract shapes that are simultaneously text and image—not to mention rug.

Carpet Rug is one of 16 carpets in “Wall to Wall: Carpets by Artists” at the [Katonah Museum of Art](#). The works, many hand-woven by artisans in Nepal, were created by 17 contemporary artists from around the world. Organized by independent curator [Cornelia Lauf](#), the show presents an array of visual content, from abstract, to conceptual, to representational, verging on narrative. Both meta and playful, *Carpet Rug* embodies a key theme addressed by the exhibition: the ever-more-blurry distinctions between art, design, craft, commerce and value.

Craft meets the world of professional sports in [Richard Prince’s 12,345,678,910](#). Prince’s irregularly shaped rug is filled with dozens of numbers derived from photographs of American football and baseball jerseys and arranged in a quilt-like composition.

Dog Chew Rag, a round, fringed carpet by [Alan Belcher](#), conflates spirituality and mass-production. The piece’s swirling motif suggests a mandala, but closer inspection reveals that the intricate pattern consists of woven images of dog chews.

[Joseph Kosuth](#) delves into philosophy in his rectangular *L.W. (Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics)*, an homage to Ludwig Wittgenstein. The text and accompanying figures are white against black and easy to read, albeit in an unlikely medium. The work urges viewers to ponder an alternative (and somewhat baffling) logic while gazing at a rug on a wall.



“L.W. (Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics)” by Joseph Kosuth, 2015. Tibetan wool, 118 x 79 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Equator Production, and Golden Ruler. Photo: Jerry Birchfield. (c) MOCA Cleveland 2016.

Lauf, an art historian with an interest in the decorative arts, curated “Wall to Wall” for [MOCA Cleveland](#), where it was shown last fall; the Katonah Museum iteration is a condensed version of the original. The exhibition examines the carpet through the filter of art history rather than carpet-making. The works Lauf selected—most made between 2013 and 2016—are by artists whose practices focus on other mediums. In her catalogue essay, Lauf wrote that the show “proposes that carpets function in a continuum of modern art history as a discrete form that is accelerating in use and application.”

Each carpet demands pause. From a distance, the maze of scarlet lines in [Ken Lum’s](#) *The Path from Shallow Love to Deeper Love* pops against a field of ocher. The muted hues in [Marilyn Minter’s](#) *Cracked Glass* become drops of condensation on a broken window. [Paulina Olowska’s](#) deep purple *Oksza*, the only work in “Wall the Wall” not intended for the floor, conjures a mysterious, perhaps dangerous, landscape.



“The Path from Shallow Love to Deeper Love” by Ken Lum, 2015. Wool, 118 x 79 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Equator Productions, and GoldenRuler. Photo: Jerry Birchfield. (c) MOCA Cleveland 2016.



“Cracked Glass” by Marilyn Minter, 2013. Hand-knotted New Zealand wool and silk, 126 x 94 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Henzel Studio. Photo: Jerry Birchfield. (c) MOCA Cleveland 2016.

Up close, everything changes. These are woven textiles, their surfaces soft and tactile; their shag, no matter how short, offering depth. The splotches and rivulets in *Cracked Glass* stand, unexpectedly, a fraction of an inch taller than the background weaving. Olowska, who lives in Poland, wove *Oksza* from toxic fibers that she obtained from a nitrogen factory. In her tapestry, there are clusters of shiny plastic loops and wiry bulges, their source in blatant contrast to the work’s title, the Polish name for a mountain flower. With its political overtones, Olowska’s piece exemplifies what Lauf called “the agency of the artist.”



“Oksza” by Paulina Olowska, 2014. Gobelin and polyamid, 77 ½ x 44 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist at Metro Pictures. Photo: Jerry Birchfield. (c) MOCA Cleveland 2016.

On a recent afternoon at the museum, Lauf spoke of the growing influence of 21st-century artists in fields including design, architecture, advertising, fashion and décor. “Artists are so versatile and so strong,” she said. “I feel we are at a point in our society where artists should be used to strategize about how to solve larger world problems.”

[Polly Apfelbaum](#)’s *Deep Purple, Red Shoes* is the only carpet in the “Wall to Wall” that museum-goers are invited to walk on (shoes off). Apfelbaum extends that invitation through a circle of red and orange footprints that surrounds a glowing orb. To reach the footprints and set their own feet within their outlines, visitors must cross an expanse of deep purples and blues. Apfelbaum “chooses every gradation of the color,” Lauf said. “She goes to Oaxaca and works with the weavers.”

The weavers—the skilled craftspeople who actualized the artists’ visions to make the carpets on view—are a secondary, unnamed presence in the exhibition. This is where commerce comes in, and the way art is valued in western society. “Here, the oil painting is seen as the epitome of art,” Lauf said. “If we were in a culture that venerated carpets, the painted piece would have far less impact than the woven piece. I feel there is a slippage going on between western and eastern modalities, and that is one of the reasons I wanted to do this show.”

But her primary motivation, she explained, was aesthetic. “They’re beautiful,” she said of the carpets. And they are: some plush, others delicate; some somber, others whimsical; some a subtle blend of pastels, others a mix bold forms and colors.

“For far too long the art world has not placed enough premium on the eye,” Lauf said. “Beauty is not a superficial thing.”



“The Decorator Maligin” by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, 2015. Tibetan wool, 118 x 79 inches. Courtesy of the artists, Equator Production, and GoldenRuler. Photo: Jerry Birchfield. (c) MOCA Cleveland 2016.

BASIC FACTS: “Wall to Wall: Carpets by Artists” is on view through October 1, 2017 in the Righter and Beitzel Galleries at the Katonah Museum of Art, 134 Jay Street, Route 22, Katonah, NY 10536. Docent-led tours Tuesdays through Sundays at 2:30 p.m.; free with admission. Visitors can experiment with carpet-weaving techniques and contribute to a collaborative weaving installation in “Woven, Knotted, and Hooked” in the museum’s Learning Center through the exhibition’s run. www.katonahmuseum.org.

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