Drapery Studies

Glenn Adamson

A skirt on the floor. A hanging curtain, illuminated at its edges. A scrunch of fabric, still holding its stiffened shape. Such is the iconography, apparently slight but extraordinarily generative, of *Drop, Cloth*. This exhibition is about the relationship between painting and textile, two disciplines that have always been closely tied. Since the seventeenth century, most paintings have had a woven canvas substrate; long before that, cloth was already a pervasive presence in art. One could argue, in fact, that drapery is the oldest form of abstraction, for in depicting it, artists only rarely attempted to depict the real contours of actual fabric. Instead, they treated it as a chance for free experimentation, an opportunity to transmute painterly imagination directly into topological form.

I owe these insights - and the animating idea of this exhibition - to my partner, the artist Nicola Stephanie. For the past two years, she has been painting garments in such a way that two and three dimensions become entangled. Her 2023 painting *Alba* is a depiction of a skirt ("a garment typically read as feminine, although there is nothing inherently gendered," as she notes), viewed as if from above and lying flat, piled on itself. It is almost unrecognizable as that, though; the fabric's pattern has become dizzyingly complex, enacting a kind of movement-in-stillness that somewhat recalls the paintings of Bridget Riley. A negative space at the core, where the body would enter if the skirt were worn, could be read as a portal, an emblem of personal transformation.

This idea of fabric as symbolic form - a stand-in for potentiality itself - unfurls throughout the exhibition. Each artist in *Drop, Cloth* has a unique perspective, yet there is also an unusual sense of continuity, as if the whole show were one continuous shape-shifting surface. Some of our participating artists work through direct observation of textile. This is the case with Jenny Brillhart, whose luminous depictions of curtains suggest something unseen beyond, echoing historic trompe l'oeil paintings which simulate their own unveiling; and also with Catherine Murphy, whose *Needs Must* takes us to the moment, or at least the setting, of its own creation. Murphy was making another painting, *Double Bed* (2022), and found that she had to keep adjusting the amount of light in the room. She ended up with a DIY arrangement involving a pulled shade, a hanging towel, and a propped-up tripod lamp. "Every time I was leaving the room after working on *Double Bed*," Murphy says, "I thought, There's another painting here."

For other artists, drapery is observed at a much greater remove, through layered scrims of art history. This is true, for example, of Elaine Reichek, who came to artistic maturity at the time of first-wave Conceptualism and second-wave Feminism. In her *Drapery Studies* (2019, pls. TK and TK), she adopts a citational approach, with passages of textile detached from their canonical sources - classical statuary, Renaissance paintings - and replicated in embroidery. Reichek treats fabric as evidence, shot through with technical and cultural information; her acts of transference dispels the supplementary status of the motif, making it figure rather than ground, and reclaiming

it for the domain of textile. Beverly Semmes's architecturally scaled dresses, marching across the wall in a potentially endless series, are less particularized in their reference, but they also feel art historical, echoing the numberless draped women one encounters in any museum. Somewhat like the red uniforms worn by protestors in honor of Margaret Atwood's novel *A Handmaid's Tale*, they make an imposing gesture of solidarity; it's important that they are, in fact, handmade, the insistent repetition of stitched seams implying a refusal to yield. ("Nevertheless, she persisted.")

In *Drop, Cloth*, Reichek and Semmes, who work skillfully in textile, but are not themselves weavers, are joined by several artists who might more readily be associated with "fiber art." Until recently this genre, which flourished in the 1960s and '70s, was consigned to relative obscurity. It has now assumed center stage through exhibitions like *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present*, curated by Jenelle Porter for the ICA Boston in 2014, and *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, a more recent touring exhibition curated by Lynne Cooke. Our own exhibition meets this corrective effort halfway, including, as it does, mostly paintings that approximate the conditions of textile rather than the other way round. This intersection abounds with possibilities, however, just like the one between warp and weft; in our curation, we wanted to acknowledge the mutuality of the encounter.

This premise is perfectly exemplified by Lia Cook's *New Master Drapery: Artemesia Gentileschi*, in which the two disciplines are physically fused. Like Reichek, she quotes a specific source, but she reinterprets it in a combination of woven and painted colors, so completely enmeshed that they are difficult to distinguish. A supervening pattern further complicates the image, putting fabric into lively conversation with itself. A similar contrapuntal overlay is seen in the work of Adela Akers, who was born in Spain, raised in Cuba, and educated at Cranbrook. She was one of many fiber artists of her generation to be influenced by Peruvian textiles (a topic explored in yet another major institutional exhibition, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Weaving Abstraction in Ancient and Modern Art* in 2024). Her late work *Drape* features vertical striations and a band of metallic foil, recalling the geometrical embellishment of pre-Columbian textiles, juxtaposed with soft, blue-dyed curves.

Akers's weaving, with its motif of draping swags, rhymes visually with the works of Liz Collins and Suchitra Mattai included here. They are two artists of very different sensibilities: Collins an artist/activist who has deftly navigated the spaces of fashion, industrial textile, and studio production; Mattai, an artist/archivist who works mainly with found materials. Yet they share a similar involvement with deconstruction, a process of making through unmaking. Collins's majestically frayed hanging F*loating Lighting Wheel* series embodies pulsing, extrovert, indeed barely contained energy (2023). Technically, the luxuriant hanging curves of the piece are "floats" - wefts that extend laterally across the weave. It's not uncommon to see these unfixed threads on the reverse side of a textile, but Collins has both flipped and exaggerated the effect, a prime example of how she "queers" standard textile structures to post-postmodern effect. Mattai's *Monster Inside* is equally emphatic, but implies a contrary movement into the collective memory (2022). The artist was born in Guyana to a family of South Asian heritage, and aims to

raise visibility about women's labor under the conditions of colonialism, signaled by vintage pieces of sari.

Mattai's intensive collage technique bears some formal resemblance to the works of Greg Smith and Martha Jackson Jarvis, which is not altogether surprising, given that all three are dealing with narratives of excess. For Mattai, fabric is a way to index the freighted legacy of empire; for Smith, the onslaught of current information technology; and for Jarvis, "ecosystems, decay, rebirth, sedimentation, and transformative form," to quote the artist herself. Smith and Jarvis make an intriguing pairing; both work with fabric like archaeologists in reverse, building up richly layered stratigraphies that invite speculative exploration. Their subject matter, though, could not be much more different. Smith thrills to the nonsensical desiderata of coding, blockchain, and NFTs, all circulating around an elusive but decisive void space. As critic Becket Gourlay has commented of his textile *NOW-TIME-FOREVER-VOID* (2025), "a keen eye can discern that these gaps suggest text, each a letter or character, yet their absence makes them illegible." Jarvis is also a poet of the obscure, located in familial histories that cannot be adequately traced. *South of the North Star* (2020) limns the inevitably incomplete story of her great-great-great-great-grandfather's experience as an enlisted free Black militia man during the American Revolutionary War, imagining his uncertain and potentially lethal passage through a long-ago time of conflict. Nominally, Smith looks ahead to the cryptic future, Jarvis to the shadowed past. But by laying hold of fabric the material that surrounds us and clothes us, they pitch their practices decisively in the present.

Collins, Mattai, Smith, and Jarvis, each in their own way, foreground craft as an avant-garde strategy. It is hard to believe that this very possibility was once all but foreclosed; we are honored to be able to include, in *Drop, Cloth*, so many luminaries who played a key part in the revolutionary shift in this state of affairs, which unfolded in the late 1960s and early '70s. None stands taller than Sam Gilliam, who first established himself as an abstract color field painter, then dramatically expanded that genre by activating the latent sculptural potential of canvas. It was a true paradigm shift, and he was not alone: Nina Yankowitz and Rosemary Mayer were also rethinking painterly parameters, breaking free from the stretcher-based, usually rectilinear structures that had previously delimited painting. This made painting's physical identity as a colored textile explicit - a simple fact which they gave the force of revelation.

Lynda Benglis was pursuing a related set of investigations in these same years, pouring resin and casting metal into dramatic floor-based and wall-mounted gestural forms, which both extended and satirized the masculine pretensions of Abstract Expressionism. In subsequent decades, she has gone on to knot, bunch, and drape, adding wire and handmade paper to her repertoire, and sometimes glorious glam touches like glitter. In her hands, as with other artists in *Drop, Cloth*, the conventional barriers that divide textile from painting, ornament from abstraction, are so thoroughly circumvented that one wonders if they'd ever been real at all.

Speaking of hands, let's hear it for Betty Woodman, the leading ceramic artist of her generation, who made her medium contain multitudes. She worked principally with wheel-thrown

and slab elements, which she distorted, cut, and arranged into vessels and tableaux. Though her materials were those of the studio potter she'd once been - nothing more than clay and glaze - she conjured from them unprecedentedly energetic forms, greatly inspired by the interwoven histories of dress and painting, particularly those of Italy, where she spent much of her time. Her *Balustrade Relief Vase #30* (1991), a Matisse-inflected still life, is a wonderful example. It takes a loose, caroming journey down the wall, not depicting fabric in any literal sense, but enjoying a comparable freedom of movement.

What Benglis has done for paper and Woodman for ceramics, Leslie Wayne and Kennedy Yanko have done with "paint skin," a material created by spreading pigment out on a flat surface, allowing it to dry, and then manipulating it through layering, folding, and draping. Wayne's most concise usage of this plastic technique is her seductive yet deadpan series of *Paint Rags*, which allude to the everyday detritus of the studio, and by extension, the self-referential and chance-based procedures of Duchampian conceptual art. At the same time, they are compelling abstractions, with subtle interplay of palette and texture. Wayne is having it both ways, a bivalence that the fold itself could be taken to symbolize. The same can be said for Yanko, whose work stages a consciously visceral and self-revelatory intervention into the history of expressionist sculpture. Her combinations of malleable paint skin and hard metal armatures - "a dance where the materials are leading," as she has put it - cannily disrupt the trajectory of figures like John Chamberlain, who is also represented in *Drop, Cloth*, with a wall work featuring a dramatic twist of aluminum. This conversation across generations and genders continues across the gallery in the work of Anna Fasshauer, whose *Flag* representing no nation is wrought of a single sheet of painted aluminum. None of these artists work with textile, but all emulate its flexibility and mobility.

These same principles motivate one last group of works, which play out the logic of drapery in purely optical space. Al Held, known primarily as a "hard-edge" painter, turned unexpectedly toward the end of his life to the serious study of drapery. This interest may not be immediately evident; Held's vibrant polychrome and razor-sharp execution can seem to cut across anything in its path. But his fascination is evident from *Hawkeye I* (1998), with its dominant sweep of pleated, striped fabric, which fills the picture plane with vertiginous, pinwheeling movement. Paige Beeber and Kenichi Hoshine fragment and expand this strategy, realizing a visual correlate to our digitally-saturated, topsy-turvy moment. In their compartmentalized paintings, we leave the unified textile surface behind, instead entering a world of half-seen incidents, each with its own distinctive space - a reminder that drapery can articulate not just a singular body, but a whole complex architecture.

These concluding thoughts about textile's pliability return us full circle to Nicola Stephanie's *Alba*, which, despite the destabilizing sublimity of its concentric vortex, began with a very simple decision to lay fabric on the floor. The intentionally offbeat name we have chosen for our exhibition, *Drop, Cloth*, echoes that gravitational gesture. Taken as an imperative statement, the title could be something said by an artist to their material, or perhaps a theater director to a stage curtain. Alternatively, read as a short list of two items, it might be the start of a much longer itinerary, an imagined alternative to Richard Serra's famous 1967 verb list (which does include the

infinitive *to weave*, but conspicuously lacks to sew, to stitch, and to knit) that encourages adaptability rather than assertion.

Across the length and breadth of art history, drapery has served many concurrent purposes. It has been mimetic depiction, narrative complement, symbolic equivalent, free form. Our exhibition is intended to be similarly multivalent, taking on all these guises and adding others that are coming into being. What better metaphor could there be for the great fabric of aesthetic possibility, after all, than fabric itself, which yields new shapes so readily just a fold here, a tuck there, and a flick of the wrist?