

Randi Reiss-McCormack

A Visceral Pursuit

Cover Image: *Blue Velvet (crop)*, 2019

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Essay by Amy Eva Raehse

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547 West 27th Street, Suite 500, New York, NY 10001
Tues-Sat, 11-6 pm, 212-343-1060, www.thepaintingcenter.org

Looking begets Seeing

There exists an elusive word in the Anangu Aboriginal people's vocabulary of the Ayers Rock region of Australia – a culture that is estimated to have existed somewhere around 50,000 years (plus or minus) – that comes to mind when I enter the studio of Randi Reiss-McCormack.

Tjukurpa.¹

It is an unusual reference, admittedly. To unpack the reference, one would need to know that the word itself often evades proper translation. It is not a state of dreaming or a time of dreaming as some translations erroneously suggest. Rather, as it was explained to me, it refers to the Anangu's belief that Tjukurpa is the *foundation* of all things. It is the past, the present, and the future. It is the relationships between things, and people, and plants, and animals, and the land. It is a system by which to live, and by which to make choices. It governs morality and integrity. It is non-linear, but inclusive. *Tjukurpa*, it would seem, escapes exact translation. It is everything, and therefore, it simply 'is.'

Randi Reiss-McCormack's work develops in this way. It is imbued with a startling complexity and humanity that is about seeing because it reinforces a basic tenant: The more one looks, the more one sees. Similar to the implication of *Tjukurpa*, McCormack's paintings and textile works resist the containment of a singular category. The effect of looking is instant, but the works reveal themselves slowly – bringing along a plasticity of natural forms, meandering line, shape, pigments, texture, and volume; combining to create multidimensional abstract, gestural compositions. No matter the origins of her forms or her points of departure,

Randi Reiss McCormack's practice is the pretext for seeing as an active, rather than a passive, act. This is why she has remained open to experimentation in both subject and material, making her work an affecting reminder of our own ephemeral reflections and emotions, bounded to our own materiality – our own flesh – as much as our cultural foundations. And so, the deep but elusive nature of her work, the “push and pull” of space, and her metamorphosed forms that appear as quickly as they dissolve back into their luscious surfaces cause ruminations on *Tjukurpa*.

In her studio, McCormack – like most artists – ask questions of herself and subsequently searches for answers in her work. For McCormack, there is a visceral level embedded in the pursuit. How to make a painting is just as important as why. It is this underpinning that seems to have given McCormack the license and freedom to vacillate between and through various media, which has become a hallmark of her practice. To say that McCormack's return to printmaking influenced her painting would be an understatement. Printmaking, unlike certain types of abstract and expressionist painting, often relies on building layers more calculatingly – the process is protracted through the necessary systems of the technique. Where previously her paintings would subvert the division that the mind and the eye naturally want to make between foreground and background, one could note that her return to printmaking brought back to her painting a sense of separation between layers. Where as the artist's paintings are improvisations, opening onto infinite space, in contrast her supplementary practices require more precision.

Sanctioning this crossing of disciplines allowed the paintings to develop a more physical presence that eventually lead McCormack to integrate textiles back into her work. In doing so, McCormack's searches became equally productive explorations of both material culture and psychological culture.



The works became tangible, residing more in the material world than previously and it is that relationship that better allows the viewer to be present and aware, grounded by the physicality of the work. It is in this space – the physical space – that McCormack takes the biggest leap, courageously deciding to 'paint' through crafting wall rugs. The fascination with this type of textile is not unique. Indeed, we are aware of recent works by Kiki Smith, Chuck Close, Gary Hume, Rose Wylie, Anish Kapoor, Maya Lin, Ellen Gallagher, Reena Saini Kallat, Raqib Shaw, William T. Wiley, Mel Ramos, Alex Katz, April Gornik, Ed Moses, Nancy Spero, and others,² all who have temporarily drifted from their characteristic practices to engage with the revived and revitalized media of rugs, tapestries, and/or weavings in a contemporary way.

Interestingly, many of the aforementioned artists have worked in the media of printmaking as well, which makes this author wonder if there is a deeper connection between printmaking and fibers, or if the returned focus of important makers such as Anni Albers, Lenore Tawney, Ruth Asawa, George Wells, Katherine West Phal, Eva Peri, and the Fiber Art Movement of the 1970's in general has more so been the connection. Regardless, McCormack found her way to focus on textiles or "Fabstracts," a word coined by Eva Peri in the 1930's to represent Fiber Abstracts.

In McCormack's example, each fiber protrudes resembling a soft cylinder, punctuated by its tip – its dot, if you will. Less we dip back into the history of pointillism, the late 19th century style of painting in which an image was created by painting dots of color that visually blend, from a distance, into recognizable forms. No, rather than pointillism, to a greater degree, McCormack's textiles suggest the pixels and digital display screens that have now become pervasive features of our lives. Yet those units, the pixels, are flat. They are created from light in a space where we cannot feel their existence. They remove us from the physical world. In contrast, McCormack's use of material makes us want to touch the work. It makes us aware of our own bodies. It brings us closer to the real world and elevates the works as if the paintings were rising from and beyond their allotted space. The viewer is hyper aware of their physical surroundings. In this case, we look, so we may see...and seeing reminds us we are human.

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1. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/tjukurpa>. Note: This author was introduced to *Tjukurpa* by the Fiber Artist Claire Campbell Park in December of 2018 during a discussion at Art Miami Art Fair.
2. The listed artists have been identified as making tapestries, rugs and/or weavings by their representing galleries or through various public venues and media including but not limited to: The Armory Show, NY; Guild Hall exhibition space in East Hampton; contemporary rug maker Christopher Farr; Artnet, ARTWISE, Haywood Gallery London.

Lift Off, 2019

Rug tufting and punch needle, yarn and canvas on board

60 x 43 inches



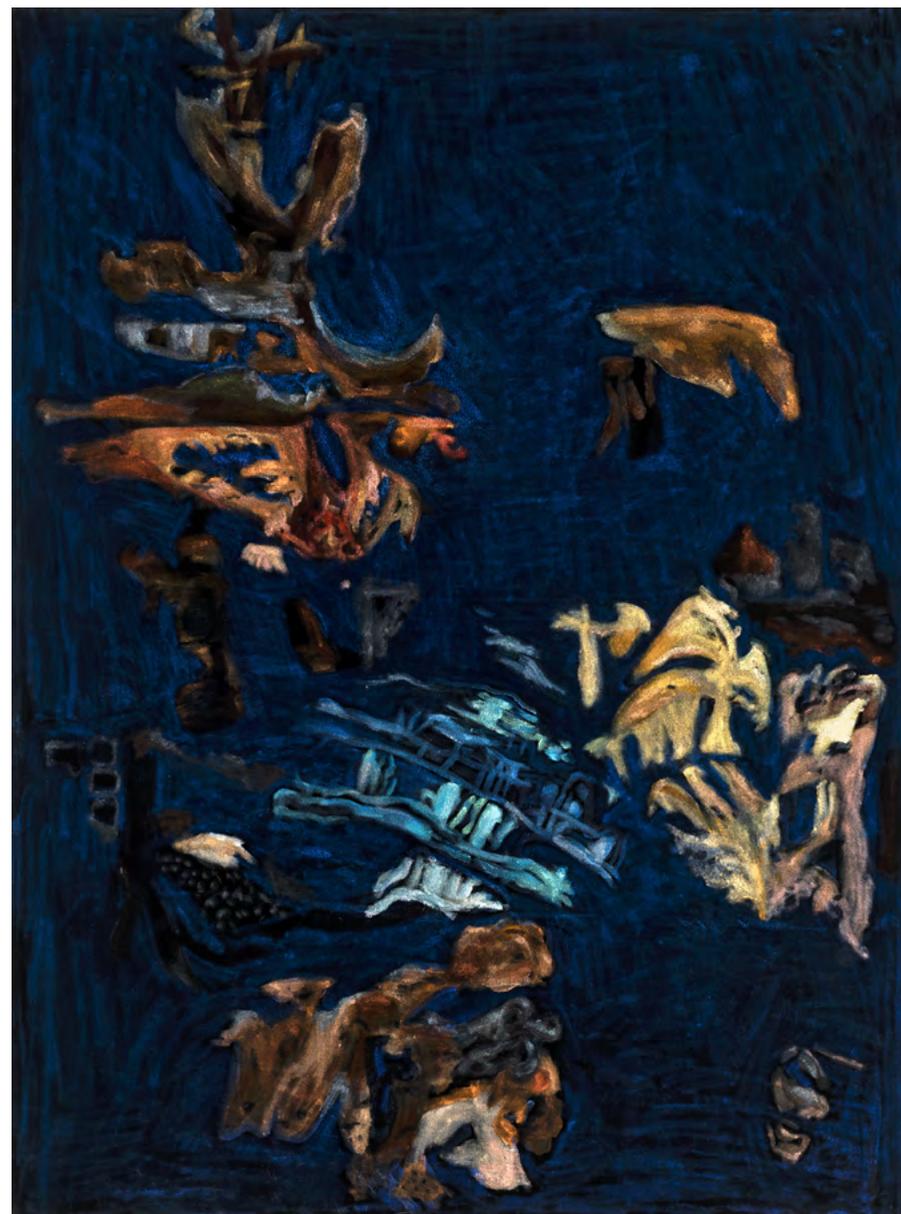


Boing, 2018
Pigment and oil on canvas
60 x 48 inches

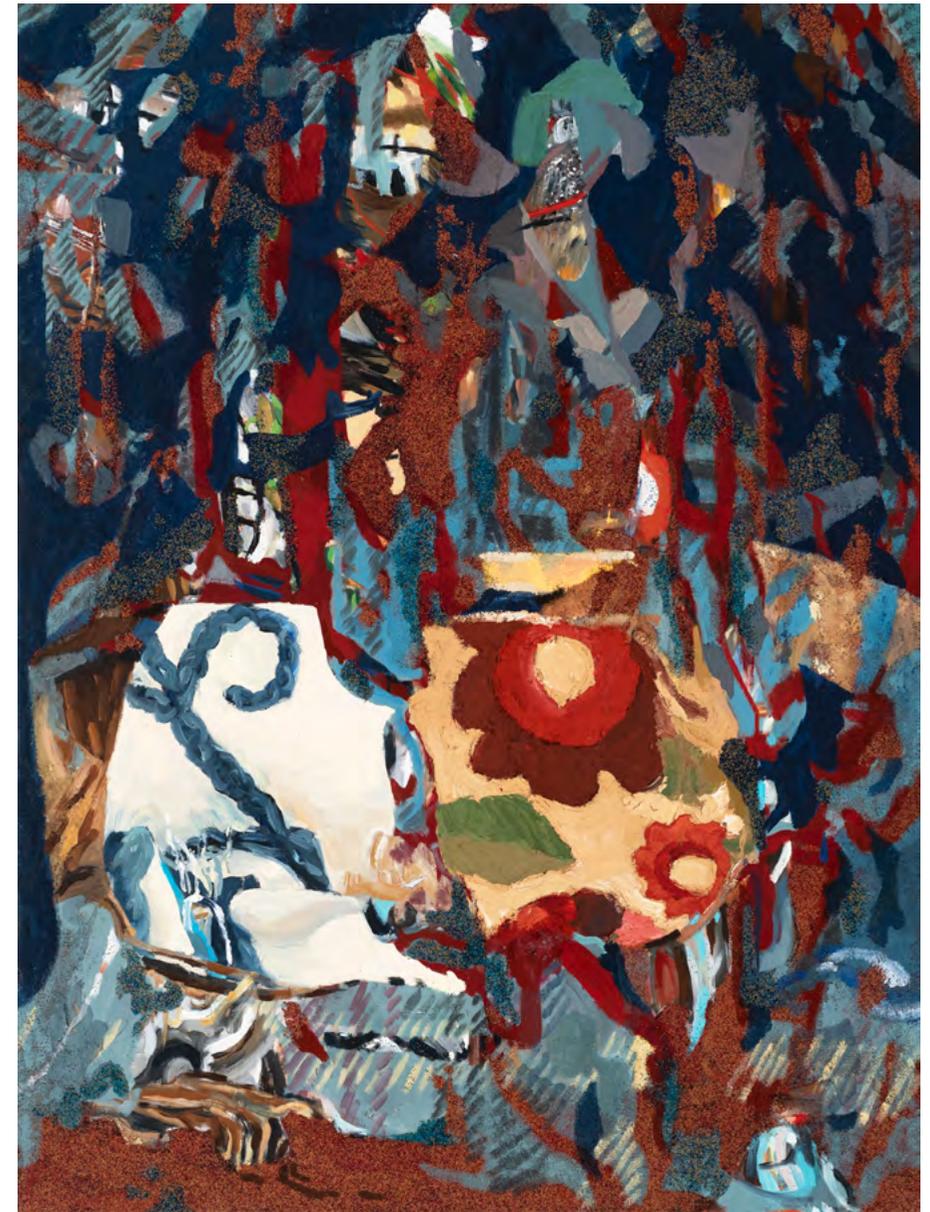
Gingerbread Man, 2018
Collage and mixed media on canvas
48 x 36 inches



Blue Velvet, 2019
Oil paint and pigment on velvet on canvas
40 x 30 inches



Dorothy's Table, 2019
Oil paint and micro beads on board
40 x 30 inches





Fool's Gold, 2019
Rug tufting, yarn and canvas on board
24 x 24 inches

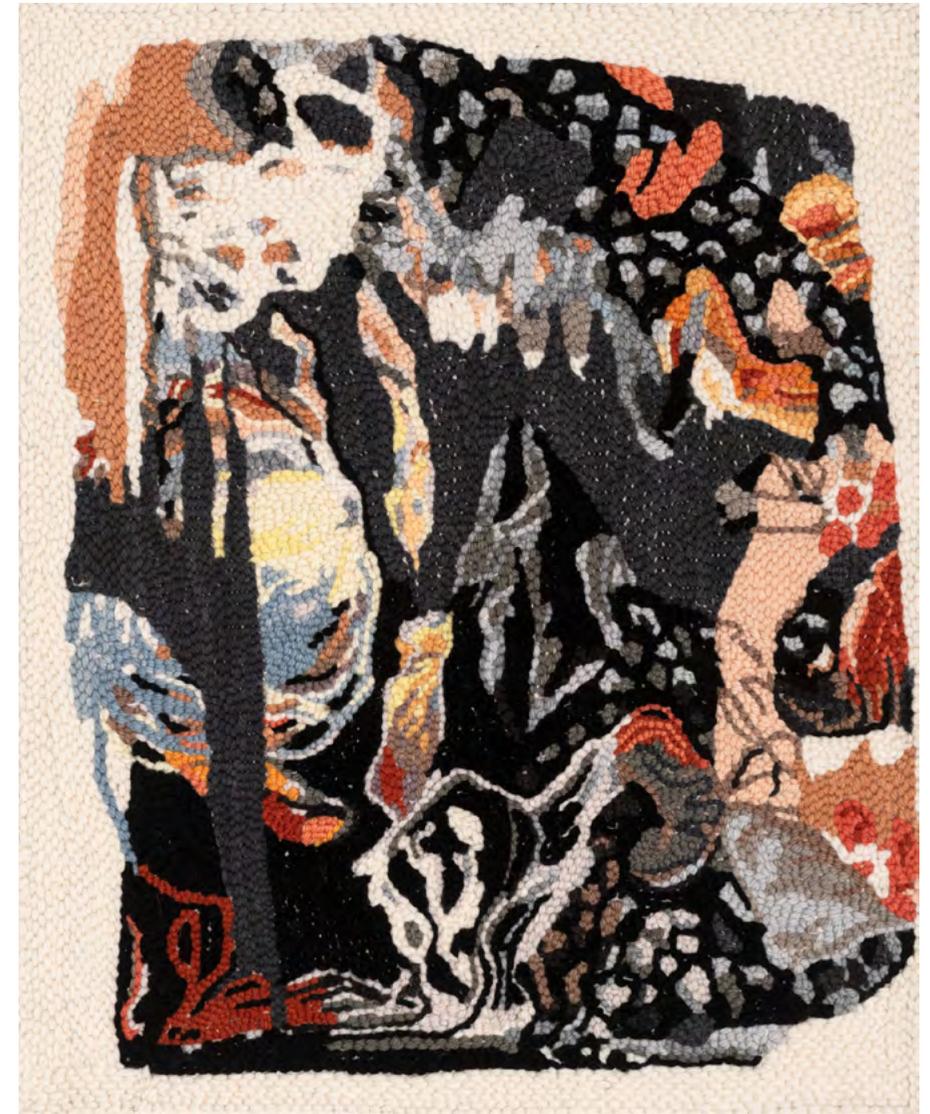
Intercession, 2019
Pulp painting on handmade paper
50 x 24 inches



Unremitting, 2020
Oil and pigment on canvas
64 x 52 inches



Moonlight, 2019
Punch needle embroidery
27 x 22 inches



Sauntering, 2018
Oil paint on canvas
24 x 30 inches



Tufted Terrain, 2019
Rug tufting, yarn and canvas and paint
18 x 18 inches



Randi Reiss-McCormack

Originally from Boston Massachusetts, Randi Reiss-McCormack is an artist working between various processes, namely mixed-media painting, printmaking and textile. After earning an undergraduate degree in Painting and Printmaking at Cornell University, she spent a year working in various Printmaking and Painting Studios in Paris, France until relocating to Baltimore, Maryland to earn a graduate degree at The Maryland Institute, College of Art. Currently, she lives and works as an artist in Maryland, teaching, working in print studios, and as an Artist-in-Residence at the St. Francis Neighborhood Center. She has won a Maryland State Arts Council Award multiple times in different categories, a Trawick Prize, and is published in various publications including twice in *New American Paintings*. Reiss-McCormack has exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions across the country and internationally.

She works with wide ranging images from an array of sources, led by an intuition that emerges from the subconscious. The world between the conscious and subconscious is where most of her work resides. Working in a collage sensibility, no matter the media, images coalesce and collapse almost simultaneously, sometimes veering into a narrative then fleetingly moving on. The system of working deeply in different media is fed by an interest in the transformative effect of the different processes. Each process brings in an elaborate system that intervenes with the images and ideas, leading to a new work. Always led by a strong intuitive pull for things just outside of understanding, Reiss-McCormack finds a type of alchemy as new rules and games are set up between various disciplines and tactile qualities of each material reveal a new solution.

www.randireissmccormack.com

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