



Randi Reiss-McCormack



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*Traveling Sideways*

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Essay by Cara Ober

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Being creative is not so much the desire to do something as the listening to that which wants to be done: the dictation of the materials.

- Anni Albers

Right image: *Talk, Talk*, 2022 (crop)  
Rug tufting and reverse punch needle on cloth  
63 x 127 inches

Cover image: *Talk, Talk*, 2022 (crop)  
Rug tufting and reverse punch needle on cloth  
63 x 127 inches





## Materials and Meaning: The Fiber-based Paintings of Randi Reiss-McCormack

A blank canvas is a metaphor for limitless possibilities. It is widely accepted to be a passive and neutral space, an empty slate waiting for the painter's mark of inspiration. And yet, all materials carry meaning.

The tradition of oil painting on stretched canvas goes back to the 16th century, and has been the cornerstone of European and American painting since Venetian painters realized it was more versatile and affordable than frescos or wood panels. During the Renaissance, canvas was made of tightly woven hemp (the word canvas comes from cannabis) and was used to make sails for the Venetian naval fleet, and thus, readily available. Since then, painting on canvas has become widely accepted as a pinnacle of painterly legitimacy and the material adds prestige to the medium. Stretched canvas is an indication of seriousness and resources, so well established within academic and cultural circles that the substrate for a painter's vision appears to be a neutral space, just waiting for the artist to add meaning through imagery, color, and gesture.

And yet, a cream colored roll of cotton duck, recognized as such, is a material that speaks to the history of agriculture and labor, cultural values, race, and class. Canvas is cloth, with a variety of historic and contemporary uses, largely domestic: clothing, quilts, curtains, home decor, all kinds of soft and comforting things. In academic settings, painters are never taught to consider the stories embedded within their materials, and working in oil on stretched canvas has long been assumed to be a given if you want to be taken seriously.

I was academically trained as a painter, and it was important for my college professors to instill in me the ability to properly stretch canvas, rather than purchasing the thin and pasty white pre-stretched versions. Each punch of the staple gun was a reinforcement of a long and illustrious, largely masculine tradition. Measuring and cutting the canvas or linen, flexing pliers to make it taut, and pinching wrinkles out to the edges of the rectangle to eliminate any distraction from the seamless vision I aimed to embed, layer, and scumble on this cloth surface reinforced the male-dominated individualistic tradition of Western painting. I learned to make my surfaces even smoother and less clothlike with gel mediums and gesso, the strangest and most exotic also the most barbaric: rabbit skin glue, which could be sanded down in between layered applications into a perfect white glasslike surface.

The idea that our materials are neutral is a false one, but as artists we are so entwined with our process, it's difficult to view any of it objectively. However, sometimes an artist is able to disrupt our assumptions and enliven our artistic traditions. Thanks to a variety of painters working in fibers and fiber artists employing the language of painting, the realization that paintings are objects based in and on CLOTH has finally become obvious, and with that comprehension, the possibility for painting and textiles, needlepoint, weaving, clothing, and home decor to merge into something more relevant and interesting.

It's strange that more painters don't sew onto their canvases, but fiber art has historically been considered a woman's craft, and kept completely separate from the powerful masculine space of painting. The recognition that the painter's primary material is soft, fibrous cloth is an opportunity to transform a medium synonymous with toxic masculinity and the cliché of genius into a visual space for hospitality, accessibility, domesticity, community, and softness, all necessary adjustments to the tradition of painting through the integration of fiber-based practices.

Randi Reiss-McCormack is a painter whose practice sits at the cusp of painting and fibers. When you see her tufted, flocked, and embroidered surfaces, her training and skill as a painter is obvious. Reiss-McCormack has long been inspired by the colors and shapes of nature, especially the earthy hues of fall and spring. For over three decades she has honed a style of narrative abstraction that suggests dappled light and meandering pathways through the woods, occasionally slipping human figures into these landscapes to complicate and energize these scenes. Although she still paints in oil on canvas and her thinking sits squarely within the tradition of painting, for the past decade the painter has focused on other processes and materials, arriving at innovative hybrid combinations of materials.

Printmaking, paper pulp relief, and stencils have played a significant role in the evolution of Reiss-McCormack's thinking but learning Peyote stitch beadwork, weaving, needlepoint, embroidery, flocking, and punch needle rug tufting have elevated her practice into truly personal and integrated visual outcomes and in prints like *The Twenty Four Hour Man*, we see the artist combining disparate materials unto unlikely relationships that somehow, visually coalesce. Her new fiber-based paintings deeply reflect the artist's evolving experimental relationship with these materials, not just for their formal qualities but also for their ability to shape meaning.



It's not uncommon for beautiful rugs to adorn walls in homes and museums, but it is quite unusual for a painter to execute their vision through the vocabulary and techniques of rug-making.

What does it mean for a painting to look and feel like a painting but be crafted from woven, hand-tufted, and traditional flocking—domestic, decorative, craft-based practices—instead of oil and liquid and gesso? What do these materials say to the viewer about the evolution of painterly concerns, the illusion of space, the allegorical nature of abstraction? More importantly, what do Reiss-McCormack's use of domestic materials say about who these concerns belong to and include?

While the Bayeux Tapestry has long been considered within the context of the greatest art of Western achievement, we can all benefit from acknowledging that the quilts of Gee's Bend, Mark Bradford's rope and caulk sculptural assemblages, the painterly quilts of Stephen Towns, and the Persian rug-based oil paintings of Kour Pour, and so many others, all enrich the tradition of contemporary painting, making it less exclusive, less white, less academic, and less exclusively Western than previously believed.

Reiss-McCormack's new works prove that painting is equally a visual and a conceptual process, a way of seeing and reducing images to their essential components, while also revealing their poetic nature—but that it's not rooted in any one material. For anyone who has taught painting to beginners, you understand how shadow and light makes color shapes, but that the ideas one expresses through this technique are more successfully realized through innovation. The Western tradition of painting has excluded so many talented artists, many trained through family tradition rather than art school, and this dichotomy has kept painting largely white and male. Integrating fiber-based materials and traditions into painterly process creates new opportunities for the medium to become more inclusive, relevant, and interesting.

For Reiss-McCormack, keeping her color palette and reductive abstraction based in nature is a key element in expressing the kinds of ideas that she is drawn to. However, by allowing fiber-based domestic materials, traditionally used to make a home feel warm and luxurious and safe, to dominate her technique and with that, her thinking, the artist invites a host of feminine, familial, nostalgic, and craft-based notions onto the canvas, questioning and expanding the the tradition of painting itself.

In *Talk Talk*, the largest fiber-based painting in this series, all of Reiss-McCormack's material based techniques come into play in a visually complex surface that is compelling in its' ability to engage and surprise. From a distance, the painting reads like a traditional abstract composition where color and form harmoniously interact and several bulbous, seal-like figures lounge and frolic. You have to come in closer to experience their wild three-dimensionality, its surface exploding with tufted ponytails and pompoms and bunches of yarn. In *Talk Talk* and other works, the artist follows an investigative logic. Not only is she crafting an image, she is sharing clues about her unusual process and materials, inviting the viewer to marvel at their harmonious composition and color, but also to solve a visual puzzle. They immediately ask the viewer to completely reexamine their notion of what painting is and question: Is this a painting or not? What is a painting actually? Who are paintings for? They speak to other painters, but also to a much broader audience, especially those with "domestic" skills like needlepoint, weaving, rug making, sewing, and embroidery.

The artists who are most innovative with their technique, process, and materials pave the way for others to envision their own practice in a myriad of new alternatives. Making it look easy and fun, Reiss-McCormack's works are an enticement to anyone who experiences them to sew, to bead, to weave, to tuft. They invite the viewer to consider the materials that surround them in their own homes as useful and full of potential as a blank canvas. If a rug can be a painting and a painting can be a rug, then what about a skirt, a chair, a pillowcase, a quilt? Of course, women have been making art out of these materials for centuries, but it largely hasn't been considered art.

Perhaps we can all benefit from a readjustment of our values and perception, giving ourselves permission to make art out of the materials that surround us, especially when we consider the enduring significance of material culture. Painting has long been loved, despised, alternately dead and undead. Painting is polarizing and this is part of its' power, but it is a toxic polarity steeped in a history designed to glorify the powerful. By so expertly and seamlessly incorporating fiber-based materials and techniques into a painterly vocabulary and dazzlingly beautiful objects, Reiss-McCormack enlivens and enriches the art world's most exalted medium, and imbues it with hospitality, domestic tradition, diversity, and accessibility.

Cara Ober, May 2022

*Cara Ober is an artist, arts writer, and Founding Editor and Publisher at BmoreArt, Baltimore's Contemporary Art Magazine.*



*A Yellow Plunge*, 2022  
Oil paint and paint stick on velvet on canvas  
40 x 30 inches







*Magenta Mountain, 2022*  
Acrylic and oil paint with flocking on canvas  
60 x 42 inches



*That Hour, 2021*  
Rug tufting and reverse punch needle on cloth  
34 x 27 inches





*Hue 350, 2022*  
Rug tufting and reverse punch needle on cloth  
75 x 63 inches





*Ebullience*, 2022  
Acrylic and oil paint, flocking and yarn on canvas  
60 x 44 inches







*Talk, Talk, 2022*  
Rug tufting and reverse punch needle on cloth  
63 x 127 inches



*Voyeur*, 2021  
Acrylic and oil paint with flocking on panel  
40 x 30 inches





*A Glimmering Shift, 2022*  
Oil paint and microbeads on panel  
40 x 30 inches





*Ceremonial*, 2022  
Acrylic and oil paint with flocking on canvas  
58 x 58 inches





*The Flying Trapeze*, 2021  
Artist made paper with pulp painting and needlepoint inclusions  
31 x 25 inches





*The Twenty-four Hour Man*, 2021  
Artist made paper with pulp painting and needlepoint inclusions  
31 x 25 inches





*A Stone from the Sky*, 2022  
Acrylic and oil paint with flocking on canvas  
64 x 52 inches





## Randi Reiss-McCormack

Originally from Boston, Massachusetts, Randi Reiss-McCormack is an artist working between various processes, namely mixed-media painting, textile and printmaking. After earning an undergraduate degree at Cornell University, with a BFA in Painting and Printmaking, she spent a year working and studying in Paris, France until relocating to Baltimore, to earn a graduate degree at The Maryland Institute, College of Art, (MICA).

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*, editions #21 and #39. Reiss-McCormack has exhibited widely



in solo and group exhibitions across the country and internationally. Currently, she lives and works as an artist in Maryland. [www.randireissmccormack.com](http://www.randireissmccormack.com); Instagram @randireissmccormack

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