

A Fresh Direction for Printmaking

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Sarah Amos, "I Stop, I Look" (2017), collagraph and thread on felt, 84 x 66 inches (all images courtesy the CUE Art Foundation)

Currently, there are a number of artists who are combining different processes and materials to push a traditional form or medium – painting and printmaking, for example – into a fresh place.

One area where that push is proving productive is printmaking. Among the artists whose work should be singled out, I would include Sarah Amos, Didier William, and Tammy Nguyen. I don't think it is purely a coincidence that all three of them have spent considerable time outside of the US, as well as steeped themselves in other traditions of art making and artisanship.

If you are curious about the direction that one of the aforementioned artists has taken — and you are ready to be mesmerized by densely tactile work unlike anything else being made today — you should go to the exhibition *Sarah Amos: Chalk Lines* at CUE (October 24 – December 11, 2019), curated by Barbara Takenaga.



Sarah Amos, "Blue Isabelle" (2018), collagraph and thread on felt, 84 x 66 inches

The breadth of what Amos does is impressive. And yet, what makes her work more than the combination of its different processes and materials is the animating power of the artist's imagination.

The works in the exhibition came in two sizes, either 66 by 78 inches or 84 by 68 inches. She prints on colored felt or, in one work, felt and canvas. In contrast to canvas, which offers a smooth, resistant surface, felt – a man-made fabric that has been in existence for thousands of years – is prized for its softness; it absorbs the ink and resists change.

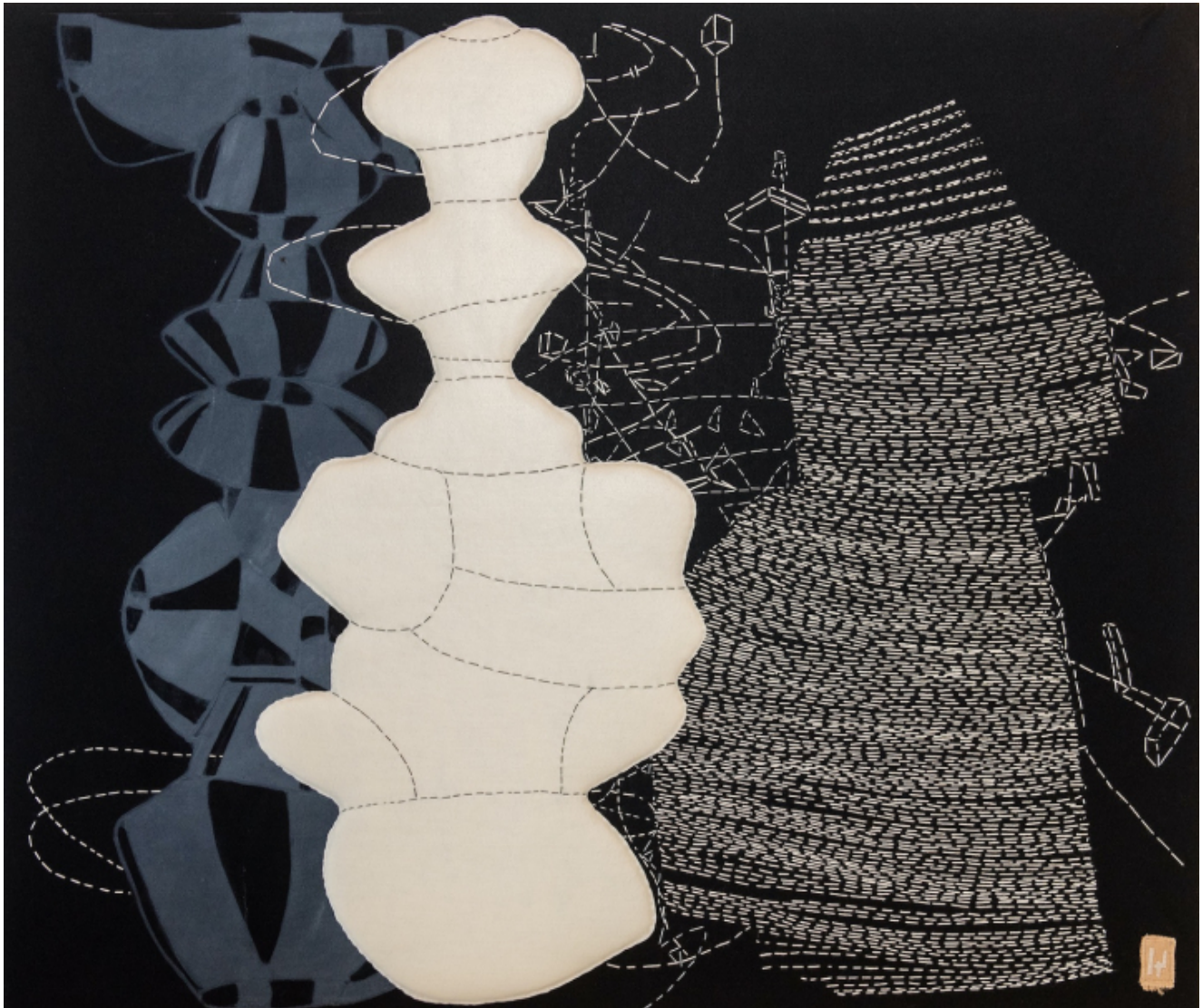
One of the processes used by Amos to mark the felt is collagraph, a form of printmaking that can be done without a press. In a collagraph, the artist affixes different materials to a rigid substrate, which is then inked and printed. The other process is hand stitching, essentially drawing with thread. Her stitches are basic – dots and dashes – but the patterns and lines are rich and varied. Together, the collagraphy and the stitching function as Amos's way of drawing, with each process embodying a different sense of time's passing.



Sarah Amos, "Black Tausi" (2016), collagraph and thread on felt, 66 x 78 inches

Amos's work may be labor-intensive, yet it conveys neither labor nor the consumption of time, but a meditative joy. In this, you sense her rejection of the art world's alignment with capitalism, and its use of outsourcing, infinitely repeatable means of production, and the exploitation of others to carry out one's "ideas." Again, I would stress that what transports the artist's labor to another level is her chimerical ingenuity with her materials and painstaking processes. The ordinariness of her stitches becomes extraordinary in their configurations.

Sitting in a chair, entranced by the six equally sized, black felt works commanding one wall of the gallery in two stacked rows of three, I had to remind myself that there were other works in the exhibition I needed to look at. In all of these works, associations are stirred up but nothing is pinned down. They could be dress diagrams or instructions on how to build a space suit; the stitches recall chain mail; scarification; hatch marks, weaving, and grids. They combine into patterns and shapes that evoke fantastical creatures, Japanese prints, African masks, and much else.



Sarah Amos, "The Narrows" (2014), collagraph and thread on felt, 66 x 78 inches

Amos uses stitching in often divergent ways, as in the largely black felt print, “The Narrows” (2014), in which the two stitched forms are radically different from each other. The one on the left is white, vertical, and sectioned by black thread, while the one on the right is made of rows of short white horizontal stitches. Add to these two the printed pale blue form (the color is reminiscent of cyanotypes) on the far left, and something inexplicable happens.

Amos further complicates our reading of the three forms by stitching white lines and geometric shapes between them. Is this a diagram from an ancient, unknown civilization, possibly one inhabiting a different galaxy? Her ability to control the density of the image, from the tactile stitching to the ghostly collagraphic shape, creates a layered, atmospheric space that comes close to painting. Formally, I think that this is the standout achievement of these works. The forms are neither flat nor defined solely by the stitching.



Sarah Amos, "Double Dutch" (2019), collagraph and thread on felt, 84 x 66 inches

In “Double Dutch” (2019), an ominous form rises up from the bottom edge, suggesting a portrait seen in profile from left to right, with a brown, neck-like section and a larger blue, yellow, white, and brown head-like orb above. But once we accept this apprehension, things get really interesting. How are we to read the six stacked rows of sharp, tightly packed, fang-like triangles, which come in white, yellow, black, and brown? Are we looking at the mouth of some ocean-bottom creature, or rows of tattoos?

It is possible to translate the composition’s concentric forms as eyes, coils of hair, pieces of clothing, or a decorated face. All of these interpretations are feasible, or perhaps none of them. It is a vision of otherness made visible by familiar materials.

Because Amos divides her time between Vermont and Australia, where she is originally from, a number of observers have connected her work to Aboriginal art. That is certainly there, but so is much else. What I want to stress here is that what she has done with her many sources is hardly derivative — everything has been transformed into an element that is particular to the individual work and to Amos’s artistic enterprise. She does not look back but, like the portrait heads, forward. We don’t know where art is going and we never have. Amos knows this and, through her combination of stitching and collagraphy on felt, she has enlarged its parameters.

Sarah Amos: Chalk Lines continues at CUE Art Foundation (137 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 11. The exhibition is curated by Barbara Takenaga.

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