

Les Ramsay's VISION OF POP ART

This exhibition focusses on a part of Les Ramsay's practice that has received less attention than his well-known pattern paintings. Between 2011 and 2018, Ramsay was intensively engaged in making largescale works assembled from sections of fabric which, once complete, he affixed to stretchers like paintings on canvas. Using everything from beach towels to various printed fabrics obtained from different sources, Ramsay produced an investigatory body of mainly abstract work that invokes the modern history of collage, surrealism and painterly abstraction in a manner that is resolutely and identifiably his own. During this time, he was also introduced to needlepoint, a vernacular art that appealed to his artistic adventurousness. Smaller and often more complex than his large fabric collages, Ramsay's explorations in needlepoint are still ongoing. The exhibition brings together these two unique aspects of the artist's textile practice, which has evolved as a parallel conversation with his painting.



The Sunflower Still Grows, 2018, 72 x 54 in.

Ramsay uses the term “fabric assemblage” to label his large textile works. Notwithstanding this art historical nomenclature, the images have a close technical affinity with the domestic practice of quilting, an influence he readily acknowledges. Ramsay recalls having seen quilts featured in an exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 2010. It was the first time he had seen such works installed in an institutional setting, and the experience affected him profoundly. It was still fresh in his mind when, the following year, Ramsay and his then partner Colleen Heslin began working in ways that resembled quilting by piecing together sections of fabric to compose abstract images (both artists were studying at Montreal's Concordia University at the time). Ramsay also knew about the quilted works from Gee's Bend in the

American South, which had been getting more art world attention at around the same time. Ramsay was drawn to the idea that everyday utilitarian and domestic materials could be repurposed and combined to make fine art, ideas that have influenced his work ever since. The notion that different materials could be joined and juxtaposed also appealed to his strong interest in collage and surrealism.

In speaking about the inspiration behind these works, Ramsay cites the influence of Robert Rauschenberg. Although he didn't create quilts, the American artist's manner of combining materials and mediums served to reaffirm Ramsay's own natural tendency to blur distinctions, such as those between sculpture and painting and between fine art and vernacular expression. Rauschenberg's technical sloppiness also made a strong impression on Ramsay early on. He cites in particular Rauschenberg's prints with their obvious registration "mistakes," reflecting a lack of perfectionism that resonates with Ramsay's enthusiasm for expressive imprecision and calculated untidiness in art. Other artists whose lack of precision has influenced him include Andy Warhol and Mary Heilmann (the latter's loose hardedge paintings have been a keystone for Ramsay's practice).

Several of the fabric assemblages incorporate needlepoints that Ramsay has come across while thrifting, purchasing them from thrift stores and other venues. He has long been drawn to these vernacular images, appreciating them for their humour. By appropriating these works, Ramsay found that they could become the story around which he could construct his large images. Shortly after he started repurposing existing needlepoints by other makers, he began creating his own versions, teaching the technique to himself by consulting Youtube how-to videos for instructional tips and closely examining the ones he found. Although he never received any instruction when he was growing up, he did observe his Métis aunt making cross stitches, a pastime that imbued Ramsay with an appreciation for methodical hand-made work. The exhibition contains several of his small needlepoints, many of which present painterly abstraction within a tactile medium that is in many respects the opposite of painterly. It is in part the force of that juxtaposition of compositional language and expressive means that makes Ramsay's needlepoints so compelling and surprising.



Peace Spider, 2020, needlepoint, 23 x 21 in.

Ramsay thinks of his largescale fabric works as being essentially paintings. “The way I assemble them is the way I would assemble a painting,” he states. Indeed, the works in the exhibition, despite frequent traces of a surrealist sensibility, are most clearly in dialogue with abstract painting’s modernist history. The work entitled *Calm Before the Storm*, for example, resembles a composition by Hans Hofmann (the irregularities of the skewed geometries also recall works by the Gee’s Bend quilters, whom he sees in relation to the modernists). Similarly, the textured monochrome work entitled *Tundra Towels* playfully invokes Jasper Johns’s all-white paintings. There is a practical element to his way of working with fabric, too: “I can go bigger because of the speediness of collage compared with painting.”

By contrast, Ramsay sees needlepoint as more akin to drawing. “To me, needlepoint is a slow form of drawing.” Certainly, embroidery threads are in their essence linear. This affinity with drawing hasn’t stopped Ramsay from transforming many of his needlepoints into large paintings, making alterations, including colour changes, to the original image in the process. He has also translated his own images from one medium into another in the reverse direction, turning large paintings into much smaller needlepoints. For Ramsay, as for many of the pop artists whose works he has for so long admired, there are no rules.

—Robert Kardosh