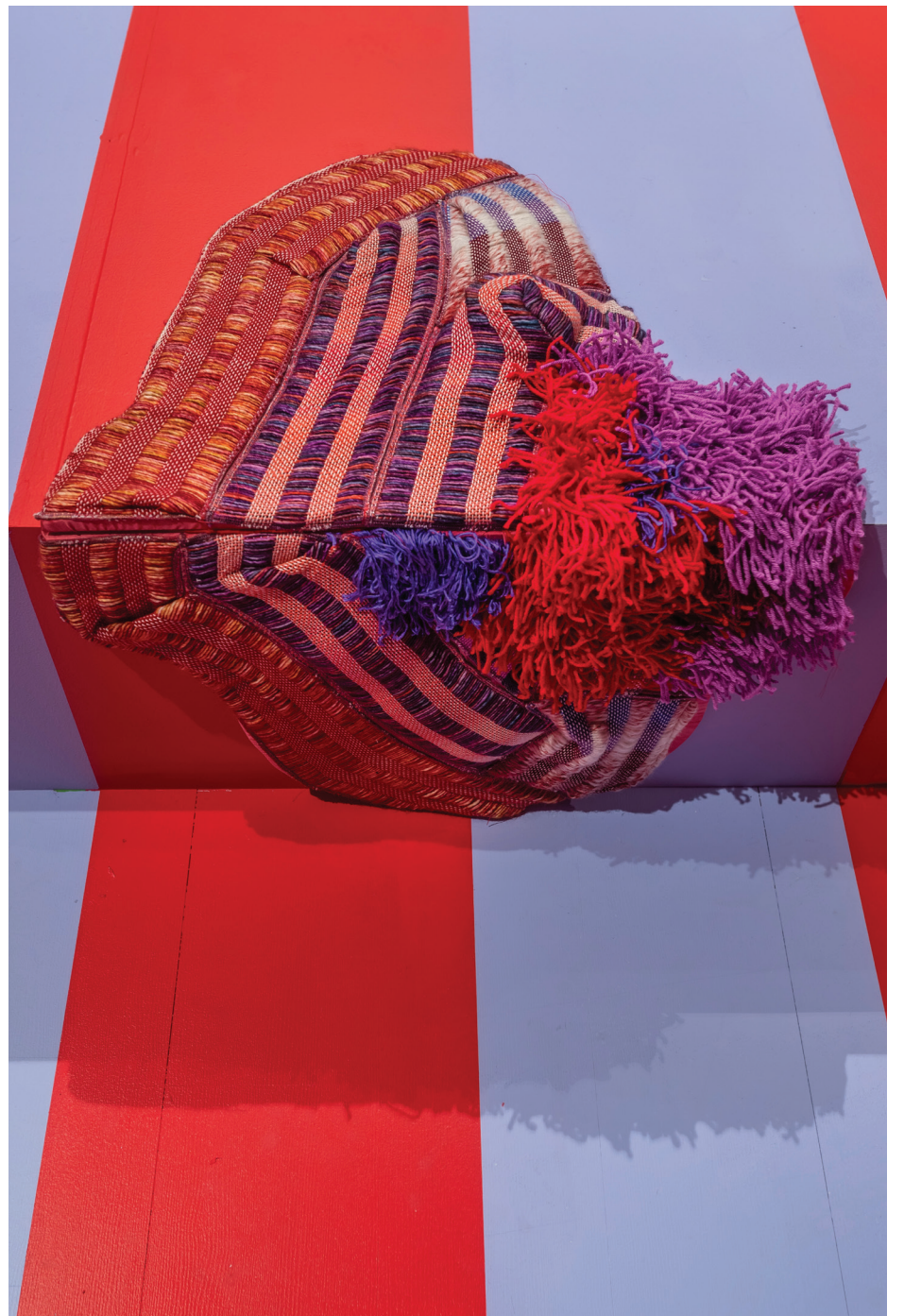




Sarah Zapata: a resilience of things not seen

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**John Michael
Kohler Arts Center**

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“We as queer people are never to settle for the pleasures of here and now; rather, we are constantly working toward a new reality. I think that’s why I’m so attracted to working in installations: it employs the use of fantasy. I want to create these otherworldly experiences in order for the viewer to access ideas of potential and futurity.” In this comment about her practice, artist Sarah Zapata expresses her hope that the spaces she creates are liminal and transportive.

Her hand-woven fantasy worlds rely on a combination of the familiar and the disorienting to produce spaces that ask viewers to suspend their assumptions of time, gender, definitions, and expectations. They are in-between, not-quite-there, not-yet places.

Much of her desire to create spaces for exploring potentialities comes from her upbringing. Raised as a Peruvian-American evangelical Christian in Texas, Zapata moved to New York after college. Suddenly she had to grapple with her sexuality and the guilt that could come with exploring this aspect of her identity. Rather than reject these past influences, she leaned into them, through research and reflection.

Her work frequently has two major touchstones: traditional textile practices and symbols of Christianity.

Textiles are ancient and ubiquitous. Some of our earliest interactions are of cloth draped around us as babies. Throughout our life, textiles shape our experiences and memories—clothing, blankets, and objects of hobby craft carry our emotions. They hold associations of family, serve as reminders of milestones, and provide comfort and warmth.

Zapata is interested in further imbuing textiles with power. Consistently deploying them in large-scale, architectural installations, she wants them to impact, inhibit, and control the body’s movement. She uses them to connect with her femininity and her South American roots. She probes their meanings throughout history—as luxury objects, symbols of oppression and colonialism, and expressions of power. She says, “Textiles are incredible signifiers of one’s experience. I remember reading that rugs did not come to South America until after Spanish colonization. Rugs from these countries are so ubiquitous now, but it’s interesting to think of them as an erasure of the politics of power and change. They are seen as a symbol of tradition but, rather, are indicative of how tradition survives and changes through colonization.”

Just as ancient as the creation of textiles is humanity’s quest for meaning and understanding. Christianity, one of the most enduring legacies of that pursuit, provides Zapata with a wellspring of inspiration. Drawing on its architectural forms, biblical verses and their interpretations, and its iconography and symbolism, she integrates the religion’s traditions into her work.

Zapata also sees the two practices as interrelated. “The intricacies and patience needed to hand make textiles speak to devotion, and there is biblical text outlining that. In Psalms, there are verses about the good woman who works with her hands and with wool, and that is how she celebrates her faith.” Thus, Zapata’s weaving and coiling are testaments to her own kind of faith—her hope for a more positive future.

For a *resilience of things not seen*, Zapata employs several symbolic elements to create her world. The striped gallery draws on several meanings of the popular pattern. She says, “Stripes have a very contentious history: there are biblical texts that talk about how one should not wear a fabric that’s made of two [different fabrics], so from the medieval period onward stripes were used to delineate people who were on the fringe of society, like jesters and prostitutes. That’s actually where the jail stripe comes from as well as the American flag. It’s sort of been a way for me to access this untrustworthiness within a specific cloth as well as exalting those who are on the fringes of society.”

The gallery layout draws on the dichotomy of the book of Revelation. According to this apocalyptic text, there is good and evil, heaven and hell, and strict and eternal consequences for sinners. The mirrored arrangement of her tufted ruin sculptures that occupy the floor and the ceiling of the gallery position the viewer in the middle—on Earth, with choices to make about what could come next.

Knowing that in Revelation, black represents the absence of God, while white equates to spiritual purity, Zapata combined the tones in erupting and suspended latch-hooked sculptures. Equally striking is the sharp contrast of red, signifying blood and war, with stripes of purple, illustrative of wealth and status. In addition, this is her first time working in neutral colors; colors she said she has always hated. Woven panels, suggestive of gargoyles, guard the edges of the gallery.

Zapata’s installation engages her relationship to fear—particularly as stoked by the pandemic and other events of the past year. Ultimately, the work is her vision of an undetermined but optimistic in-between space: a *resilience of things not seen*, or, hope.

Laura Bickford
Curator



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