



## **In Stitches: Contemporary Approaches to Needlework**

September 23, 2020 – February 13, 2021

For some, needlework and other fiber-related techniques are pastimes, while for others they are used for professions. For still more, these practices are employed to depict ideas. The contemporary artists whose works are included in this exhibition prioritize these processes and use handcraft techniques like embroidery, sewing, crocheting, and quilting to explore a wide range of subjects. They investigate labor, gender, memory, history, and popular culture as well as personal and social issues.

While there are complex and layered histories associated with various techniques, in the hands of makers, styles and processes are sometimes blended. Rather than employing one technique, someone like **Renie Breskin Adams** could embroider, crochet, latchhook, or knot—or utilize all of them individually or in combination. Similarly, contemporary quiltmakers such as **Joan Schulze** might combine stitching with painting, image transfer, and collage. Also, some artists have chosen to break down dimensional boundaries, using techniques routinely associated with two-dimensions to create or embellish three-dimensional forms.

Primarily drawn from RAM's collection, the works featured in this exhibition survey contemporary approaches—representing a variety of modes for working with needles, hooks, and hands to create with materials like fabric, thread, yarn, and embroidery floss. The works on loan from Milwaukee-based artists **Sharon Kerry-Harlan**, **Rosemary Ollison**, and **Rosy Petri** expand this conversation even further. Incorporating African influences, Kerry-Harlan uses textiles, as well as other media, to explore the potential metaphors and meanings of the human face and figure. Ollison collects glass, leather, bracelets, beads, bones, and jewelry that she then incorporates into all manner of works, including quilts. Interested in personal and cultural heritage, and often linking her work to her African roots, Petri uses traditional quilting techniques to create contemporary portraits.

Diverse examples shown next to one another offer opportunities for comparison and contrast. Large-scale quilts using found linens are shown alongside small-scale photo-realistic embroideries, crocheted earrings, and stitched baskets. In whatever form, these works reflect how handcraft traditions can be incorporated—and expanded upon—to make creative, aesthetic, thoughtful, symbolic, and/or practical statements.

Artists whose works are featured include: **Renie Breskin Adams**, **Linda Behar**, **Mary Bero**, **David R. Harper**, **Cindy Hickock**, **Michael James**, **Rosita Johanson**, **Ai Kijima**, **Anne**

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Kingsbury, Mark Newport, Joan Schulze, Susan Shie and James Acord, Carol Shinn, Felieke Van der Leest, and Anne Wilson.

## **Biographies and statements from select featured artists**

With degrees in psychology, anthropology, and her MFA in textiles from Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana, artist **Renie Breskin Adams** taught fiber arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and then, the School of Art at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb. Utilizing knotting and embroidery techniques, Adams creates “embroidered pictures” of both the imaginative and the everyday. She is also the author and illustrator of the children’s book *Catato and Friends*. Adams has taught fiber arts workshops at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee; the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Michigan; and the Penland School of Crafts in Penland, North Carolina. Her work can be found in the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago; the University of Wisconsin–Madison; the Museum of Art and Design, New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian, Washington, DC. RAM is fortunate to have an archive of 82 pieces of Adams’ work including sketches and preparatory drawings.

**Linda Behar** began her career as a graphic designer in the early 1970s and turned to quilt making in the early 1980s. After embroidering a postcard in 1992, she combined her lifelong love of photography with embroidery to begin creating photo-realistic fiber pieces. Working on a small scale—most pieces are four by six inches, the largest to date is seven by nine inches—Behar lays down an initial layer of machine stitches. Then, she painstakingly stitches over the piece by hand, often in multiple layers, to produce a detailed and nuanced replication of her own photograph in fiber. Notably, she uses a combination of traditional embroidery floss and its finer cousin, sewing thread, to achieve an aesthetic that is both painterly and precise. Her work includes mostly two-dimensional landscapes and still lives, though she has occasionally created three-dimensional embroidered sculptures. A native of Northern California, she graduated from Harvard University in 1968, specializing in architectural design. Her work has been featured in *American Craft Magazine* and she has been in numerous solo and group shows, including an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Within the context of contemporary art jewelry, **Arline Fisch** pioneered the combination of fiber techniques and traditional jewelry materials, such as gemstones and gold, to create unique wearables. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Fisch received her BS in Arts Education from Skidmore College and her MA from the University of Illinois at

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Urbana-Champaign. In the late 1950s, after two years teaching at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, Fisch received the first of four Fulbright grants she would receive in her lifetime to study metalsmithing in Denmark. Upon returning to the US, she started teaching weaving at her alma mater, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York. It was there that Fisch began using fiber skills, such as knitting, in her jewelry. Fisch went on to found the metals program at San Diego State University, where she would work for 40 years, teaching, mentoring, and influencing generations of designers and metalsmiths. Fisch is also a founding member of the Society of North American Goldsmiths (SNAG), and its president from 1982 to 1985. Fisch has been a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow. Her work can be found in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; the Vatican Museum, Rome, Italy; the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England; and the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. She was named a Living Treasure of California in 1985. RAM holds an archive of her work, with 21 pieces in the collection to date.

A member of the Kiowa Tribe, artist **Teri Greeves** earned her BA from the University of California, Santa Cruz. However, the beading techniques she employs in her work were learned from her mother, **Jeri Ab-be-hill**, who ran a trading post on Wind River Reservation in Greeves' native Wyoming. With the skills and knowledge handed down from grandmother, to mother, to daughter, Greeves became an accomplished beadwork artist by the age of eight. Mixing indigenous and pop imagery in her work, Greeves also blends traditional materials like deer hide with modern items like sneakers. A 2018 Mellon Indigenous Arts Visiting Fellow at the University of Virginia and a 2017 United States Artists Distinguished Fellow (Traditional Arts Category), Greeves' work can be found in museum collections around the world including the British Museum, the Denver Art Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum.

**Ai Kijima** was born in Tokyo, Japan, and now resides in New York, New York. In high school, while a foreign exchange student in Wisconsin, a teacher encouraged Kijima to attend art school. Kijima went on to earn both her BFA and MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Though she specialized in fiber and material studies during graduate school, Kijima already knew how to sew, crochet, and knit, having been taught these skills as a child by her grandmother. Kijima's current body of work uses traditional sewing and piecing techniques to create fabric collages from found vintage bedsheets, t-shirts, pillowcases, curtains, and other printed household fabrics. The results are colorful narratives peopled almost exclusively with commercial and pop culture figures, particularly those associated with modern American childhood, such as

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the Power Rangers and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Head of the Fiber Department at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, **Mark Newport** creates both large-scale knitted works and smaller-scale embroidered and beaded pieces. Often employing recognizable, pop culture imagery, Newport uses methods and materials closely associated with “women’s work” to address ideas of masculinity. Newport holds his BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, Missouri, and his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Having exhibited nationally and internationally, Newport was the recipient of a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award and a Creative Capital Visual Arts Grant. While RAM owns beaded trading cards and embroidered comic book covers, RAM audiences have also seen Newport’s over-sized, knitted superhero costumes which were featured in the 2015 exhibition, ***A Whole Other World: Sub-Culture Craft***.

**Felieke van der Leest** attended the Technical School for Gold and Silversmithing and studied jewelry design at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, both in her native Netherlands. Her work combines the techniques of beading and crochet to create whimsical—perhaps risqué—pieces of wearable art. Full of bold color, and often incorporating found objects, she frequently employs animal imagery to address a variety of social issues. Van der Leest has exhibited throughout Europe and the Americas, including solo shows at the National Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, Norway; the Textile Museum, Netherlands; and Mobilia Gallery, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is a 2018 World Crafts Council laureate, and has received multiple artist grants from both the Arts Council Norway and The Netherlands Foundation for Fine Arts, Design, and Architecture. Her work can be found in the collections of the Cooper Hewitt Museum, New York, New York; the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland; the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, United Kingdom; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. Van der Leest currently lives and works in Norway.

## **Milwaukee Artists**

Born in Miami, Florida, artist **Sharon Kerry-Harlan** currently divides her time between Florida and Wisconsin, where she received her BA from Marquette University and studied at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, both in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Kerry-Harlan often quilts in her work, a skill she learned from her mother, and dyes her own custom fabrics. Her work focuses heavily on figures, most notably her *Black Eyed Peas* series—doll-like objects created from fabric she designed and made. Kerry-Harlan has taught textile courses at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and has exhibited nationally and internationally, including the Nelson Mandela Gateway Museum, Cape Town, South Africa; the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York; and the Milwaukee Art Museum. After a career in academic services at Marquette University, Kerry-Harlan now focuses on her art full-time.

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Milwaukee artist **Rosemary Ollison** grew up on a plantation in Arkansas. Self-taught, she began her art career in 1984, after escaping an abusive marriage. She works with numerous media, incorporating a variety of techniques including stitching and quilting. Most of her work focuses on themes of identity, particularly her own as a woman of color. Ollison has exhibited at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Union Gallery (which held her first public exhibition in 1994); the Indianapolis Public Library; the Walker's Point Center for the Arts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and multiple times at the Outsider Art Fair, New York, New York. Her work is included in the collections of the Chipstone Foundation and the Milwaukee Art Museum. Recently, she designed an entire room at Milwaukee's latest arts destination, Saint Kate – The Arts Hotel. Ollison was also the recipient of the Mary Nohl Fellowship (Emerging Artist Category) in 2018. Early in 2020, she received a Black Excellence Award and was named City Artist of the Year by the City of Milwaukee Arts Board.

Born in 1986, **Rosy Petri** was raised in both Racine and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Today, Petri calls Milwaukee home—after having lived in many places, such as a farm in Dodge County, a Catholic Worker Hospitality House on the south side of Chicago, and a Franciscan friary and interfaith arts center in Detroit, Michigan. As a self-taught artist, she primarily creates portraits using wax prints, batik, and reclaimed fabric, employing a traditional quilting technique called raw-edge appliqué. Raw-edge appliqué—which may incorporate either machine or hand stitching—involves the application of a cut-out shape to the top of another piece of fabric. The edges of the shapes are raw, with no extra fabric to be turned under. Petri's artwork reflects aspects of her life about which she is passionate, including social justice, art, and storytelling. She draws on her heritage to highlight and honor it. Petri states, "Using photographs, mixed media, textiles and storytelling, I hope to contribute to the creation of long-term social equality and a truly free society. I am proud of my diverse background, as well as the gifts and traits passed down to me through traditional and non-traditional avenues." Petri was the artist-in-residence for 2019-20 at the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee. She was the first woman of color to fill this position.

**For more about Sharon Kerry-Harlan, Rosemary Ollison, and Rosy Petri:**

<https://www.portraitsocietygallery.com/sharon-kerry-harlan>

<https://www.wisconsinacademy.org/magazine/summer-2019/watrous-gallery/many-faces-sharon-kerry-harlan>

<https://www.sharonkerryharlan.com/home>

<https://www.portraitsocietygallery.com/rosemary-ollison>

<https://www.thisisparadisehome.com>

<https://midwestfiberartstrails.org/project/rosy-petri/>