

G A I L R O T H S C H I L D

Homages to Wari Weaving
Summer 2022 exhibition at the
German Textile Museum, Krefeld



Esquina Decorada, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
52 x 62 inches (132 x 157.5 cm)



Homage to Wari Weaving, 2022

Acrylic on canvas

78 x 44 inches (198 x 112 cm)



Black Hole, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 48 inches (122 x 122 cm)

Catalogue Essay: On Painting Homages to Wari Weaving

The year I entered Yale College, 1976, was the year Josef Albers died, but his influence could still be felt throughout the school. I stood squinting before his *Homage to the Square* paintings at the Yale University Art Gallery lost in their optical play of space. When I began my portrait of the Wari tunic from the collection of the German Textile Museum, I discovered within it what looked like an exercise right out of Josef's *Interaction of Color*: "As a practical study we ask that two small rectangles of the same color and the same size be placed on large grounds of very different color."

Anni Albers had not intended to become a weaver, but the Bauhaus had sexist notions about what women could and could not do, and so she was pushed, against her will at first, to join the weaving workshop. Years later, she would share her theories about the "pliable plane" of textiles with architecture students at Yale. How I wish I had known her when we were toiling in separate Connecticut studios just a few miles apart. The first women had only been allowed to enter Yale College as undergraduates in 1969, and I searched for female guides through what was still a male-dominated school. My introduction to this great teacher/weaver/theorist came through a friend, the art historian, T'ai Smith, who has written insightfully about Bauhaus weaving theory and about my *Portraits of Ancient Linen*.



Anni invited her students to literally pick apart small fragments of Mesoamerican textiles to figure out their construction. I am not a weaver like Anni. Instead, I investigate the structure of ancient weavings through paint, exploring how they were made and how time is un-making them.

If you take a deep dive into the world of historic textiles, as I have, it is easy to forget that this material remains an underrated, gendered medium and devalued as women's work. While some contemporary artists challenge this prejudice through the subversive use of fabric and needlework, I choose to do so by making paintings on canvas of textiles—heroically scaled paintings that celebrate fragile remnants of the past.

By the time Anni and Josef met at the Bauhaus in 1920s Berlin, the Museum für Völkerkunde had the largest collection of Andean textiles in Europe. We know for sure that Anni frequently visited, but I like to imagine the two of them hand-in-hand studying the rectangles of bright color and learning form and structure from first millennium master artists.

As I delve deeper into these Andean textiles, I feel Josef looking over one shoulder and Anni looking over the other. Josef points out that the Naples yellow rectangle within the Phthalo blue one isn't quite right, while Anni reminds me that "a painted face obeys other laws of formation than a woven face." "But Anni," I insist, "my subject IS a woven face!" Searching out the complex interaction of threads in the subject gives an order to my process. "Limitlessness," Anni reminds me, "leads to nothing but formlessness, a melting into nowhere."

Perhaps all geometry begins with the grid of the loom and the intersection of warp and weft threads. Whether I like it or not, geometry pervades my work. I use it. I embrace it. And (sorry Josef) I resist it. Each painting begins by gridding a canvas and lettering each box. It is not lost on me that I am thus setting up a kind of loom. The Wari told their stories through abstracted human and animal symbols. In my portrait of an ancient Andean textile, the taut geometry has softened, relaxing over time as threads have unraveled. This fabric once communicated complex ideas about society and personal identity, but it has long outlived its makers and its meaning. We who privilege written language over images, cannot decipher the message in a Wari cloth.

Although I have seen Andean textiles in other museum collections, I know the three subjects for my portraits in this exhibition through digital images on the internet. I've never been to South America; yet I collaborate with the Peruvian archaeologist Rommel Angeles Falcón, working from detailed high-resolution images he has generously shared from Huaca Malena. The resulting two paintings, *Black Hole* and *Esquina Decorada*, imagine new narratives for these artifacts.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin observes that photography "substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence." Even as he celebrates photography's ability to make art available beyond an elite few, he also mourns the loss of the work's "aura," its "unique existence where it happens to be." The artifact's "aura," Benjamin would say, is missing from the photographic close-up I study while making a painting. The challenge for me is to invest the canvas with the magic I attribute to the original object.

From their many trips to Mexico and South America, Anni and Josef brought back samples of the Pre-Columbian art they loved, keeping them at hand in a basement cabinet. But the inspiration for my paintings comes via photographs, and I accept that most people see my paintings via digital images on a screen. My iPad is speckled with paint because I zoom in on details of twisted and linked threads. This dissection endears my paintings to textile conservators and art historians who also journey slowly across the landscape of the fabric that only under the microscope reveals its mesas and huecos, mountains and plateaus.

My relationship with Pre-Columbian textiles takes place through museums and their digital extensions. The fragments I am drawn to show their age and so are often not the ones selected for museum display. I am aware that what I see is the result of active decisions on the part of archaeologists, dealers, curators, and conservators. The deterioration of the fabric has been arrested—if only temporarily in the greater scheme of time—each thread held in suspended animation.

I have more experience painting portraits of the "Coptic" textiles of Late Antiquity. But Anni showed me that at the same time and across the world from Egypt, Andean artists were employing similar tapestry techniques. In her book, *On Weaving*, Anni celebrates both Late Antique Egyptian and Andean textiles as true "works of art" that never seek to hide their structure, preferring them to Western tapestries that are simply woven versions of paintings. As someone who paints homages to textiles, I find this to be a provocative idea.

Maybe it's the rock-climber in me, maybe it's the former sculptor, but I am more concerned with the haptic than the optic, leaning more toward Anni than Josef. "We touch things to assure ourselves of reality," Anni wrote, "We touch the objects of our love. We touch the things we form." Since I cannot handle the ancient textiles, my brush must invent pliability and movement, carving out a muscular reality on a two-dimensional plane.

Because my subjects were buried in a dry climate for centuries, they retain much of their vibrant color. I can't help but be seduced. Once again, I pull Josef's *Interaction of Color* off my bookshelf. "Good teaching", he reminds me, "is more a giving of right questions than a giving of right answers." I smile as I brush another layer of Alizarin Crimson glaze over Naphthol Red. I am curious about the rich dyes the Andean artists made from plants and insects. In the studio, I respond to the relationships of these dyes using synthetic pigments. I

ask Josef and Anni if they appreciate the irony. The weavers' dyes penetrated the fibers of alpaca wool becoming part of them, while the pigment from my brush sits upon the white-grounded surface of a mechanically woven canvas.

These are all paintings about time and the process of decay. Each fragment of textile has a history. I imagine the alpaca whose wool was shorn; the cochineal insect whose body produced the bright red dye; the weavers; and the users of these textiles, who were buried with them. Color is fugitive. Life is too. The process is only temporarily halted. Without question, these tenacious textiles are worthy subjects of portraiture.

ROTHSCHILD'S PORTRAITS OF ANCIENT LINEN: REVIEWED

"Rather than superseding its subject, Rothschild's painting urges the viewer to return to the textile with a keener eye and more open mind. Its large scale facilitates an immersive experience, drawing the viewer into the complex architecture of the textile's woven structure ... The comparison enhances appreciation of the early Byzantine fragment as both a resilient survivor of time's ravages and a fragile remnant of intricate beauty."

– Alicia Walker, PhD., Professor, Bryn Mawr College

"Skillfully executed with a strong technique and bold palette underscoring the linearity of the subject, the series stitches together time, art and archive. *Portraits of Ancient Linen* proves that textiles are closely intertwined with our collective history and understanding of the world around us."

– Cynthia Roznoy, PhD., Curator, Mattatuck Museum



Rothschild's *Portraits of Ancient Linen* at the Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, CT

"By magnifying the scale and taking up multiple perspectives within her composition, Rothschild invites the viewer to take a journey across telling expanses that are simultaneously minute and vast. By such means, she addresses the long life of the artifact, its ever-changing three-dimensional sculptural presence, the dynamic relationships between these aspects of the things, and our visual impressions of it ... Rothschild's paintings seem to stop time like a snapshot to capture a moment in the textiles' ongoing deterioration."

– Thelma K. Thomas, PhD., Professor, New York University

"Like the delicate remnants of an ancient artifact, Rothschild's finely spun threads appear to conjoin and unravel simultaneously ... Rothschild's oeuvre invokes the digital coordinates of warp meeting weft, the matrix of yarn. And yet it also draws our attention to the insubordinate nature of this woven fragment, rebelling after centuries of wear."

– T'ai Smith, PhD., Professor, University of British Columbia

Gail Rothschild collaborates with museums internationally creating paintings that breathe new life into archaeological fragments of textiles. Over the course of a long career, Rothschild has become intimately familiar with the effects of time and decay on art. After graduating from Yale with a BA (cum laude), she embarked on a peripatetic career creating site-specific sculptural installations for colleges and museums. From Jeffrey Lord Amherst and Biological Warfare at the University of Massachusetts to Margaret Bourke White's clandestine steel mill photographs for Cleveland, each one addressed an under-recognized aspect of local history. A few public sculptures such as *Muted Belles* for the University of Memphis were permanent, while her finalist design for a Boston Women's Monument remains un-built. Most of these commissions, however, for institutions such as the Bronx Museum, The Hudson River Museum, The DeCordova Museum, MOMA PS1 and the Socrates Sculpture Park were impermanent, or even destroyed by the artist at the end of installation, simply due to the cost of transporting and storing their elements.



Considering her role in the construction and destruction of her own work, and her interest in the ancient world led Rothschild to the Odyssey and Penelope's cycle of weaving and un-weaving. By utilizing archaic textiles as the subjects of her *Portrait of Ancient Linen* series, Rothschild alludes to her affinity with Penelope's struggle.

In 2018, Rothschild was invited to create five monumental portraits of the Coptic Textiles in the collection of Godwin-Ternbach Museum (New York City). The resulting exhibition and catalog have opened the door to a new and exciting level of collaborative projects, in which the artist works directly with curators and conservators in the secluded storerooms of major museums to interpret the objects, rather than simply pulling source images from online searches as she had done previously. In summer of 2022, Rothschild will exhibit nine monumental paintings that celebrate the collection of the Bode Museum in Berlin, as well as three paintings inspired by the collection of the German Textile Museum in Krefeld. These new bodies of work will all be exhibited alongside the objects they pay homage to, and both exhibitions will feature a catalog. Further projects are in development with the Huaca Malena Museum in Peru and the Israeli Antiquities Authority. Recent presentations at international conferences include *Textiles of the Nile Valley* in Antwerp and *The Color Blue in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* in Copenhagen. Available works can be seen on her website:

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GAIL ROTHSCHILD

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EXHIBITIONS, PUBLIC PROJECTS & COMMISSIONS

- 2022 German Textile Museum, (*scheduled*). Krefeld, Germany.
Bode Museum, *Think Big*. Berlin, Germany.
- 2020 Centre for Textile Research, *The Colour Blue in Ancient Egypt and Sudan*. Copenhagen, Denmark.
- 2019 Village West Gallery, *Slow Art*. Jersey City, NJ.
Two Walls Gallery, *Gail Rothschild's Portraits of Ancient Linen*. Falls Village, CT.
Katoen Natie, *Textiles From the Nile Valley*. Antwerp, Belgium.
- 2018 Village West Gallery, *Ancien Régime: the pre-revolutionary world*. Jersey City, NJ.
Textile Society of America's 16th Biennial Symposium, *The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan* Global.
Vancouver, BC, Canada.
Godwin-Ternbach Museum, *From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles*. Queens
College, Queens, NY.
- L'Atelier Berkshires Gallery, *Viva La Femme*. Great Barrington, MA.
d'Art Center, *Material: An Exhibition of Original Fiber Artworks from Across the Country*.
Norfolk, VA.
- 2017 Daughters of Elysium, *Women's Work*. Brooklyn, NY.
Site:Brooklyn, *Text & Image*. Brooklyn, NY.
Village West Gallery, *Four Seasons*. Jersey City, NJ.
- 2016 Arc'teryx Soho, *Climberscapes*. New York, NY.
National Arts Club, *Contemporary Figures: Form Beyond Function*. New York, NY.
- 2015 Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery at John Jay College of Criminal Justice,
The Missing: Rebuilding the Past. New York, NY.
National Arts Club, *Portraits of Ancient Linen*. New York, NY.
- 2014 Westport Arts Center, *Perception Illusion MAGIC*. Westport, CT.
Chace-Randall Gallery, *Curator's Choice*. Andes, NY.
Bollinger Projects, *Gail Rothschild's Portraits of Ancient Linen*. Brooklyn, NY.
- 2013 Mattatuck Museum, *Weaving and Knitting: The Art of Gail Rothschild and Daina Taimina*.
Waterbury, CT.
Westport Arts Center, *Home Sweet Home*. Westport, CT.
Joy Reed Belt Gallery, Solo show. Oklahoma City, OK.
Chace-Randall Gallery, Solo show. Andes, NY.
Pierogi Gallery, *Unhinged*. Brooklyn, NY.
Westport Arts Center, *SOLOS exhibition*. Westport, CT.
- 2012 Old Stone House, *Fabrications: An Exhibit by Artist Gail Rothschild*. Brooklyn, NY.
Eckert Fine Art, *Unexpressible Paradoxes*. Millerton, NY.
Joy Reed Belt Gallery, Solo show. Oklahoma City, OK.
City Without Walls, *Knot Your Average Knit*. Newark, NJ.
- 2011 ArtHamptons, with Eckert Fine Art. Bridgehampton, NY.
- 2010 Littlefields. Brooklyn, NY.
Eckert Fine Art. Kent, CT.
SHO Gallery, *Summer Exhibition*. Brooklyn, NY.
- 2009 PS 122, *Yarn Theory: Knitting, Crochet, Math and Science*. New York, NY.
Kentler International Drawing Center. New York, NY.
Hewitt Gallery, *Viridis I*. New York, NY.
Pierogi Gallery. Brooklyn, NY.
Oxfam, *Human Countdown*. In collaboration with Christopher Caines. New York, NY.
- 2008 Susan Eley Gallery, *Summer Show*. New York, NY.
Susan Eley Gallery, *Red Dot Art Fair*. New York, NY.
Freddy's Backroom, *Found in Brooklyn*. New York, NY.

- 2007 Kentler International Drawing Center, *Works From the Flat File*. New York, NY.
 Little Cakes Little Gallery, *Drawings for NYC Animal Care & Control*. New York, NY.
 Artex, *Global Contemporary*. Kyrgyz Republic, Central Asia.
 PS1/MOMA, *Emergency Room*. NYC/Berlin/Athens.
 Stitch Therapy, *A Graphic Investigation of Knitted Plane Topology*. Solo. Brooklyn, NY.
- 2006 Eastern Parkway Associates, *Traymore Courtyard*. Solo. Brooklyn, NY.
 Prospect Owners, *Oasis*. Solo show. Brooklyn, NY.
- 2004 New York Fringe Festival, *Operation Knockout*. New York, NY.
- 2001 Private Commission, *Design for a Horse Farm*. Solo. Hatfield, NA.
- 2000 Private Commission, *Piano Garden for a Composer*. Solo. Durham, NC.
- 1999 Private Commission, *Gillian's Garden*. Solo. Brooklyn, NY.
- 1998 City of Boston, *Women's Memorial*. One of 5 finalists invited to develop design.
 Boston, MA.
- 1997 Mead Art Museum, Amherst College. Amherst, MA.
- 1996 Henry Street Settlement. New York, NY.
 Chesterwood, *Monument*. Cur. Lisa Dennison. Stockbridge, MA.
- 1995 Jamaica Arts Center, Solo show. New York, NY.
 Operation GreenThumb, *The Nature of New York*. Solo. New York, NY.
 New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, *Mackintosh Macbeth*. New Jersey.
- 1994 Memphis State University, *Muted Belles*. Solo. Memphis, TN.
 University of New South Wales, *Medea Material*. Solo. Sydney, Australia.
- 1993-1996 ICA Traveling Exhibition, *Monumental Propaganda*. Curated by Komar & Melamid.
- 1993 Spaces Gallery, *Margaret Bourke-White Photographs the Flats*. Solo. Cleveland, OH.
 The Painted Bride Art Center, *Earth Woman Room*. Solo. Philadelphia, PA.
 City of Memphis, *Windows of the Dream*. Solo. Memphis, TN.
 City Gallery of Contemporary Art, *Hot Spot*. Solo. Raleigh, NC.
- 1992 NICAFA Yokohama, *International Art Fair*. Yokohama, Japan.
 deCordova Museum, *Woman in the 19th Century*. Solo. Lincoln, MA.
 University of Arkansas, *People From Off*. Solo. Little Rock, AR.
 University of Akron, *Rubber Union: Akron/Amazon*. Solo. Akron, OH.
 University of Massachusetts, *Hot Spot*. Solo. Amherst, MA.
- 1991 Rotunda Gallery. Brooklyn, NY.
 Hillwood Art Museum, *Original Sin*. Brookville, NY.
 Socrates Sculpture Park, *Ploughshares into Swords*. Solo. New York, NY.
- 1990 Municipal Art Society, *Garbage Out Front*. New York, NY.
 Bronx Museum of the Arts. Bronx, NY.
 Artists Space, *Artists Space Underground*. Solo. New York, NY.
 Out of the Woods. Fairmount Park. *Acid Rain*. Philadelphia, PA.
 Hudson River Museum, *Souvenirs of Nature*. Solo. Yonkers, NY.
- 1989 Long Island University, *Making Time in Steps*. Brooklyn, NY.
 Art Awareness, *Shadow of the Last Beast*. Solo. Lexington, NY.
 Henry Street Settlement, *The Hay People*. Solo. New York, NY.
 Boston University Gallery, *Terra Firma?* Boston, MA.
- 1988-1990 Bread & Puppet Theater. Glover, VT.
- 1988 Museum of Art, Science & Industry, *Brick Triptych*. Solo. Bridgeport, CT.
 Bronx Museum, *Burning the Jungle, the Rainforest Burns*. Bronx, NY.
 Gladly Run, *Four Views: Muskingum Valley*. Summerfield, OH.
 NYC Dept of General Services: Operation GreenThumb, *Gaia/Mother Earth*. Solo.
 New York, NY.
 Clocktower Gallery, *Engaging Objects*. Cur. Tom Finkelppearl. New York, NY.
- 1987 Wexner Heritage Village, *Sculpture at Heritage Village*. Columbus, OH.
- 1986 The Albany Institute of History and Art. Albany, NY.
 New York Capital Area Women's Caucus for Art, *Cycles*. Albany, NY.

SELECTED REVIEWS, CATALOGUES & MEDIA

- German Textile Museum, (Forthcoming exhibition catalogue). 2022
Bode Museum, (Forthcoming exhibition catalogue). 2022
Studies in Late Antiquity, *From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles*.
Essay by Alicia Walker, 2019.
Textile Society of America Blog, *Ancient Textiles at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum*. Essay by Ann Peters, 2018.
Godwin-Ternbach Museum, *From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles*. (Exhibition catalog). Essay
by Warren Woodfin, 2018.
New York Textile Month, *New York Textile Month 3*. Essay by T'ai Smith, 2018
Anya & Andrew Shiva Gallery, *The Missing: Rebuilding the Past*. (Exhibition catalog)
Essay by Erin Thompson, 2015
National Arts Club, *Portraits of Ancient Linen*. Essay by Cynthia Roznoy, 2015
Art in America. International Review, 2009
PS 122. *Yarn Theory: Knitting, Crochet, Math and Science*, (Exhibition catalog) 2009
Interweave Knits. Spring, 2007
Knitting. UK, December, 2006
deCordova Museum. (Exhibition catalog) Essay by Nick Capasso, 1997
Chesterwood Museum. (Exhibition catalog) Essay by Lisa Dennison, 1996
University of Memphis. *Muted Belles*. (Exhibition catalog) 1994
New Art Examiner. 'Hot Spot' at City Gallery of Contemporary Art. 1993
Raleigh News and Observer. *The Art of Biological Warfare*. Chuck Twardy. August 13, 1993
City Gallery of Contemporary Art. *Hot Spot*. (Exhibition catalog) Essay by Eleanor Heartney, 1993
Painted Bride Art Center. *Earth Woman Room*. (Exhibition catalog) Essay by Ed Brown, 1993
Windows of the Dream. (Exhibition catalog) Essay by Leslie Luebbbers, Memphis, TN, 1993
Boston Globe. *Sculpture Finds It's Place in Nature*. Elaine Senay. August 9, 1992
Art Papers. *Gail Rothschild: People From Off*. Mari B. Lee. July/August 1992
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. *Sculpture at UALR*. Susan Pierce. January 17, 1992
Little Rock Public Radio. Interview with Lloyd Benjamin. January, 1992
deCordova Museum and Sculpture Park (Exhibition catalog), 1992
Staviniger Aftenbled. *Natur og kultur I dialog*. Trond Borgen. Norway, July 23, 1991
Art New England. *Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood*. Marty Carlock. November, 1991
WBAI. *Surviving As An Artist*. October, 1991
Art In America. Eleanor Heartney, May 1991
Daily Hampshire Gazette. *Sculpture That Moves Us*. Patricia Wright. 11.14.91
Union News. *Artwork Tailored to Amherst*. Anne-Gerard Flynn. 10.10.91
Amherst Bulletin. "Installing a Different View of Lord Jeff." Bruce Watson. 10.11.91
Daily Hampshire Gazette. *Sculpture Hits the BIG Time*. Patricia Wright. 9.5.91
The Schenectady Gazette. "Chesterwood exhibit..." Peg Churchill Wright. 7.11.91
The Berkshire Record. "Living Sculpture." Honey Sharp Lippman. 8.23.91
Mud. Hirsch Farm Project. (Exhibition catalog) Essay by Mitchell Kane, 1991
The Philadelphia Enquirer. "Sculpture in Fairmount Park." Marie McCullough. July 30, 1990
WNYC-TV. "Artists in the Gardens." November 1990
The New York Times. *Sculpture For Troubled Places*. Michael Bernson. October 15, 1989
Dallas Times Herald. "Connemara Airs Outdoor Sculpture." Ann Jarmusch. March 19, 1989
Dallas Morning News. "Connemara Inspires Sculptors' Works." Janet Kutner. 3.18.89
The Boston Phoenix. "'Terra Firma?' at Boston U. Gallery." David Bonetti. March 16, 1989
Dialogue. *Earthworks...* Gary J. Schwindler. March-April 1989
The Daily Free Press. "'Terra Firm?'" Monica Siems. 3.16.89
The Marietta Times. *Glady Run: Sculpture, Earth Meet*. Roger Kalter. 5.28.88
The Phoenix. *BACA Shows the State of the Art*. A.B. Hsuan. July 30, 1987
Newsday. *Taking Part in Downtown Art*. Karin Lipson. May 9, 1986

EDUCATION

- 1981 Yale University. B.A., Cum Laude
1979 Yale in Norfolk Painting Program