

Facing the Maze

by Wendy Weiss



Lia Cook pauses at her loom long enough for a photograph. Her *Cindy* weavings from early 2009 flank her,

and her hand is on the loom where she produces a prodigious amount of work. To her right is a worktable with the subject, a childhood doll, face down. Above her is a computer-generated composition of a future weaving, merging a face in the background and the *Cindy* doll in the foreground.

In February of 2008, on behalf of the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery, I invited Lia Cook to exhibit her work in Lincoln, Nebraska. Over the past two years, we worked together to develop a traveling exhibition and catalog titled *Faces and Mazes: Lia Cook*. On April 4, 2009, she spoke on the University of Nebraska campus.

“The latest work I have been doing is with dolls,” said Lia Cook, “and this happened by accident. I was in London in a toy museum and I was photographing dolls. I was drawn to a particular face and how it connected to the real faces that I was using. At first I thought the work was about dolls, so I found my childhood doll and started photographing her. I decided it really wasn’t about dolls; it was a hybrid between a human and a doll. It is the place in between that interests me.”

In the *Faces and Mazes* group of weavings, eyes gaze outward or stray from a full

front view. The faces create a feeling in the viewer that is at once intimate and distracted. It is difficult to distinguish which faces are human subjects and which are inanimate objects. The doll face takes on a life and history while history seems all but erased from the human face.

When Lia Cook talks about her weavings, she notes key features that have preoccupied her over the years. She describes how “...one of the things that runs through all of my work is the subject matter of textiles. Whether it is the image of the textile or whether it is textile structure, something about textiles is in the content of the work.” Cook goes on to describe the importance of pattern. She says she uses “pattern that changes. Not a static pattern but a pattern that is continually changing, so it has a movement to it as you move by it.” Textile structure and pattern are essential tools Cook uses to build her work. Exploring the dynamic between weave structure and pattern, as well as scale, helps to gain insight into how and why this in-between place is so compelling.

At a more basic level, Cook says she started “...cropping the face—cropping as much of the information out of the face so I was just left with the indication of the features and a certain expression. It seemed like the more I pared them down, the more powerful they became and people connected with them even more.”

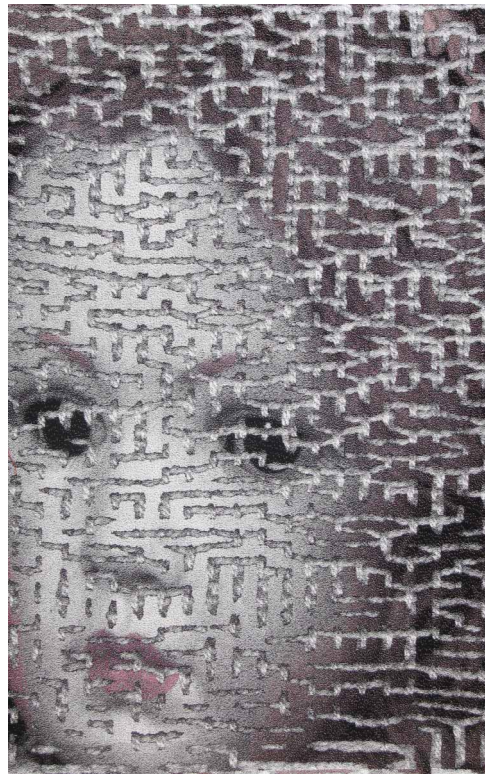
In these recent weavings Cook uses textile structure to create modulations of light and dark and, in some cases, to draw a superimposed maze. She describes this second meandering grid as “the overlay of the maze in a physical and an illusionary way.”

She uses weave structure to establish value shifts that produce the impression of the image, for example, in the *Binary Traces* and *Doll Face* series from 2004-2005 and 2007-2008, respectively.

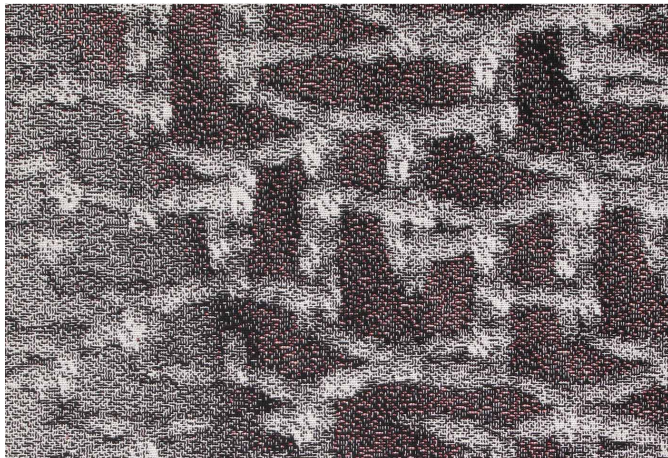
In other weavings she uses the weave structure to both describe the image, but also to create a maze-like grid on top of the image. Thus, in *A-Maze Doll*, 2008, and *China Maze Doll*, 2008, within a single layer of cloth, she builds an irregular grid of a maze layer, which separates visually from the image of the figure staring out. In these examples she has represented a weave structure as a visual element that is a super-imposed, magnified grid. She crafts this grid with weave structures similar to the background weave. The maze has multiple readings



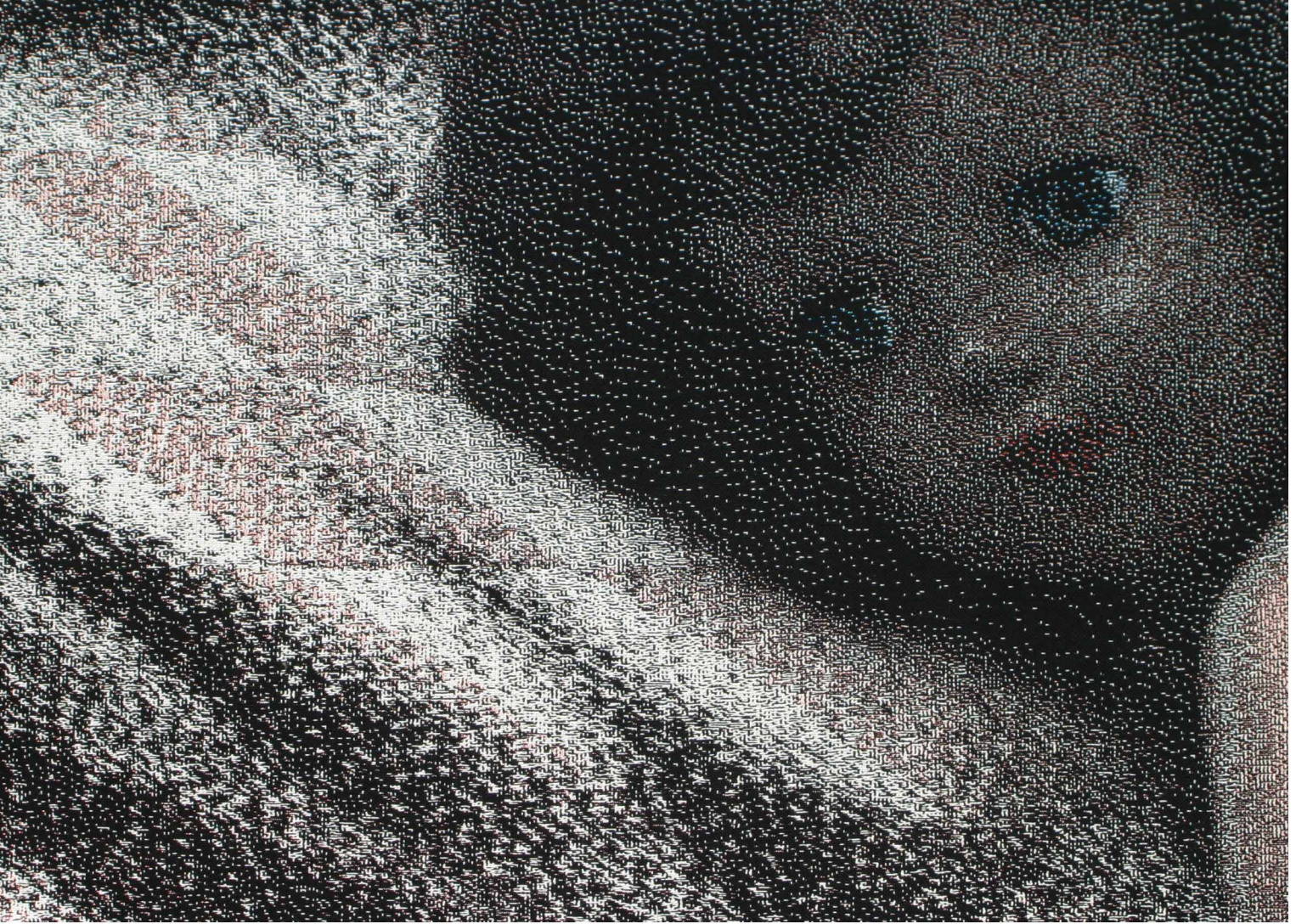
Binary Traces: Memory, 2004. Woven; cotton; 52 by 50 inches. Photograph by ?



A-Maze Doll, 2008. Woven; cotton; 80 by 53 inches. ??



A-Maze Doll, detail, 2008. Woven; cotton; 80 by 53 inches. ??



Cindy Lay, 2009. Woven; cotton, rayon; 37 by 52 inches. ??



Maze Girl, 2006. Woven; cotton; 80 by 53 inches. ??

such as window screening, a veil, or a barrier. The result of this technical feat is a haunting image that expresses longing and isolation.

In Cook's words, she says, "I began to work with the maze blown up, superimposed, and woven in the same process. It's like a screen between you and the face, and that creates a whole other kind of distance and experience. This integrates the maze into the image. You still get the experience of being very close."

Scale is of utmost importance in perceiving this work. The images are diffuse and not solidly formed; looking at a full-size piece in close proximity accentuates this reading. As one backs off the work, it comes into focus. A reproduction of the image at a small scale—on paper or on a computer screen—is a completely different experi-

ence from standing in the presence of the weaving and being able to see it from different distances. Of equal importance, Cook points out, “When it is big, it is not exactly human anymore. The out-scale changes our experience of it, and when it’s a doll, it is something that is more human-like and has more human characteristics.”

Judith Leemann, in her *Faces and Mazes* catalog essay, “Don’t Make that Face: the Weavings of Lia Cook,” elaborates on the way the viewer interacts with these weavings. She writes, “The experience of Cook’s works on the page or from a fixed viewpoint will always have a false concreteness to it. The work is made to be encountered live and by a mobile viewer; it behaves live with a complexity that does not translate into documentation.”

Pattern and movement are key elements in Cook’s current work serving to create imagery that shifts in and out of focus according to the relationship of the viewer to the weavings. The representation of a face, some human, some doll in origin, becomes the starting point for drawing the viewer into an experience of the recognizable that transforms into an unknown. Christin J. Mamiya, in her catalog essay, discusses this complex phenomenon when she says, “On the one hand, the artist clearly intends for viewers to see images (faces, body parts) in her weavings. Yet it is also apparent that the materiality of the woven textile is equally significant.” As the viewer approaches the weaving for a closer look, the image breaks down, and one is left to see the textile itself, thread by thread. Cook stresses that for her, it is “...important that you actually see the threads and have the experience of touch.”

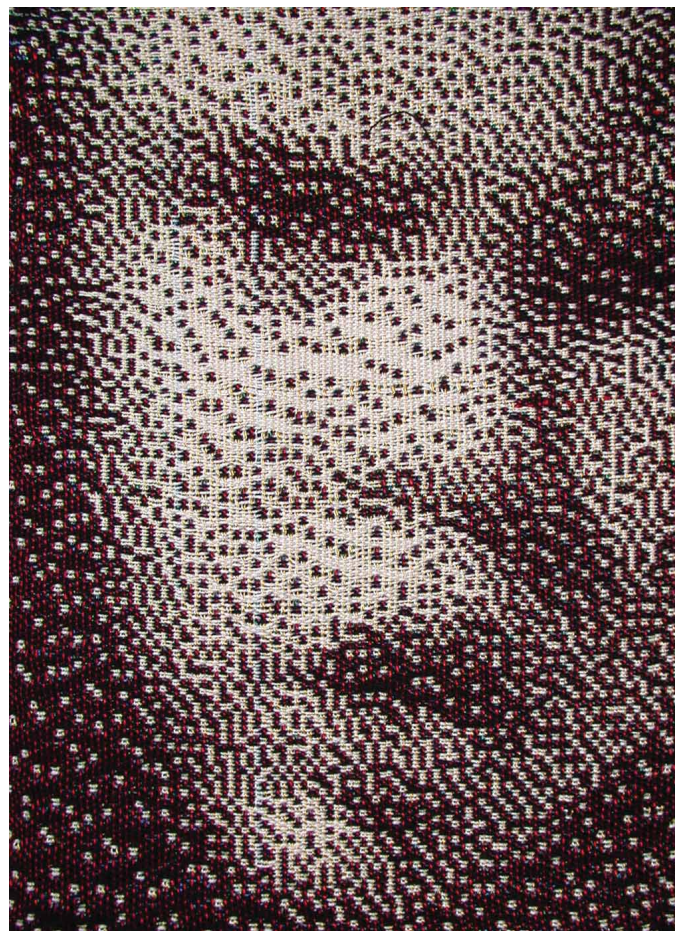
The working title of the exhibition had been *In Touch: Faces and Mazes*, and this quality of the tactile illuminates Cook’s desire to communicate not only an image, but also a physical presence. She says she has worked with “touch and the hand, images of the hand touching cloth, touching my face. I like the idea of the digital and the digit.”

The pieces in the exhibition are not as large in size as some of the massive child figures dating around 2000-2002, yet they overwhelm the viewer in their physical presence. In fact, the faces occupy the full picture plane, about four feet across, and have the capacity to startle and to mesmerize. As the artist gets deeper into her inquiry into this body of work, larger pieces are beginning to emerge, and the themes are shifting from the expression that can be elicited from the face alone to the body, using the toy doll as a stand-in for the full figure. The *Cindy Doll* weavings in the studio portrait illustrate this increased scale.

Cook employs a rigorous search for the multiple ways she can extract information from her subject. Her lifetime study of weaving technology coupled with her fascination with textiles as subject are essential to her working process. She notes that because she understands the technology and weave structure and that she has an electronic Jacquard loom in her studio has allowed her “to be very experimental both in the technique and the process, and how that combines with the image.”

She experiments with images she selects for subject material and then conducts an endless array of variations on the theme, pulling as much as possible from the subject and the ways in which she uses color, thread, weave structure, scale, and composition to imbue the object she creates with new meanings that draw in the viewer.

Towards the end of the talk Cook gave in April, 2009, she showed an image of the work titled *Maze Girl*, 2007. “I have used this image a lot,” she said. “In the end I am probably going to do forty or fifty of them, each one a slightly different translation. It appeals to me that you can do an infinite amount of work with very little. It is all there.”



Spot Face (part of a triptych), 2008.
Woven; cotton, rayon;
16 by 12 inches. ??

A traveling exhibition, *Faces and Mazes*, is culled from this body of work and is currently on view at the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at North Carolina State University in the Talley Student Center in Raleigh, North Carolina, with the show running from January 21–May 15, 2010 (see <www.ncsu.edu/gregg/>). A second exhibition featuring selections from this body of work will be on view at the Textile Museum of Canada, 55 Centre Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, from April 7–September 6, 2010 (see <www.textilemuseum.ca>).

Wendy Weiss uses complex weave structures and natural dyes to create sculptural forms. She is professor of Textile Design at the University of Nebraska and director of the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery. She is co-chair of the Textile Society of America 12th Biennial Symposium Textiles and Settlement: From Plains Space to Cyber Space, October 6-9, 2010, in Lincoln, Nebraska. Visit <www.textilesociety.org> for registration information.

To view the pod cast of Lia Cook's full lecture for the Textiles, Clothing and Design Department at the University of Nebraska, see: <<http://textilegallery.unl.edu/lia-cookpage/>>. You can also find details about the exhibition tour and an order form for the catalog *Faces and Mazes: Lia Cook*.

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