

san jose museum of  
quilts & textiles

**cerebral touch:**  
**Lia Cook**  
**1980–now**

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lia cook 1980–now**

**san jose museum of  
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**january 20 through  
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**foreword**

Very few mediums employ emotional association, cultural identity, and material history and yet fiber art is full of inquiry concerning both visual and tactile sensitive processes. Fibers' imbued intimacy stems from the transformation and manipulation of familiar objects and materials from the natural environment. As fiber art gains traction in the contemporary art world, the momentum embraces new approaches toward the hand made and modern technologies.

The democratization of technology peaked in the 1990s with the advent of the personal computer. As a result, digital processes permeated into fine art, initiating a dialogue concerning the legacy and survival of the skilled hand. Lia Cook's work balances the fine line of art, craft and interrelated media while preserving the sensibilities held dear to the fiber community. *Cerebral Touch: Lia Cook 1980-Now* celebrates a textile artist's evolution in the technological and scientifically rich California Bay Area. Cook's process mirrors the intellectual rigor often associated with startup culture: collaboration, research, innovation and risk taking.

San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles, a cultural venue inspired by the artists and people it serves, celebrates a similar vision, as it looks ahead to future exhibitions and programming. The museum's mission is to promote and celebrate the art, creators, craft, and history of quilts and textiles while challenging and contributing to the contemporary art conversation. San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles enthusiastically supports the role of artists who are at the forefront of creativity and invention and challenge traditional techniques and expectations about the role or function of art and craft.

**Amy DiPlacido**  
*Exhibition Coordinator*



## parallel histories: looking back, looking forward

The San Francisco Bay Area has long been noted for innovation in textile and fiber arts and artist Lia Cook is an important part of that history. The San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles has also played a significant role in this story so it seems only fitting to celebrate the museum's 40th anniversary in 2017 with an exhibition of almost 40 years of this pioneering artist's work. *Cerebral Touch: Lia Cook 1980–Now* traces Cook's artistic journey from her abstract and dimensional pieces of the 1980s, weavings inspired by Old Masters drapery in the 1990s, exploration of portraiture, and finally to work completed weeks before this exhibition opened.

Cook's work has evolved over the decades, combining weaving with painting, photography, video, digital technology and more recently, neuroscience. For the past several years, Cook has worked in collaboration with neuroscientists to investigate the nature of the emotional response to woven faces by mapping these responses in the brain. Her recent works explore the sensuality of the woven image and the emotional connections to memories of touch and cloth.

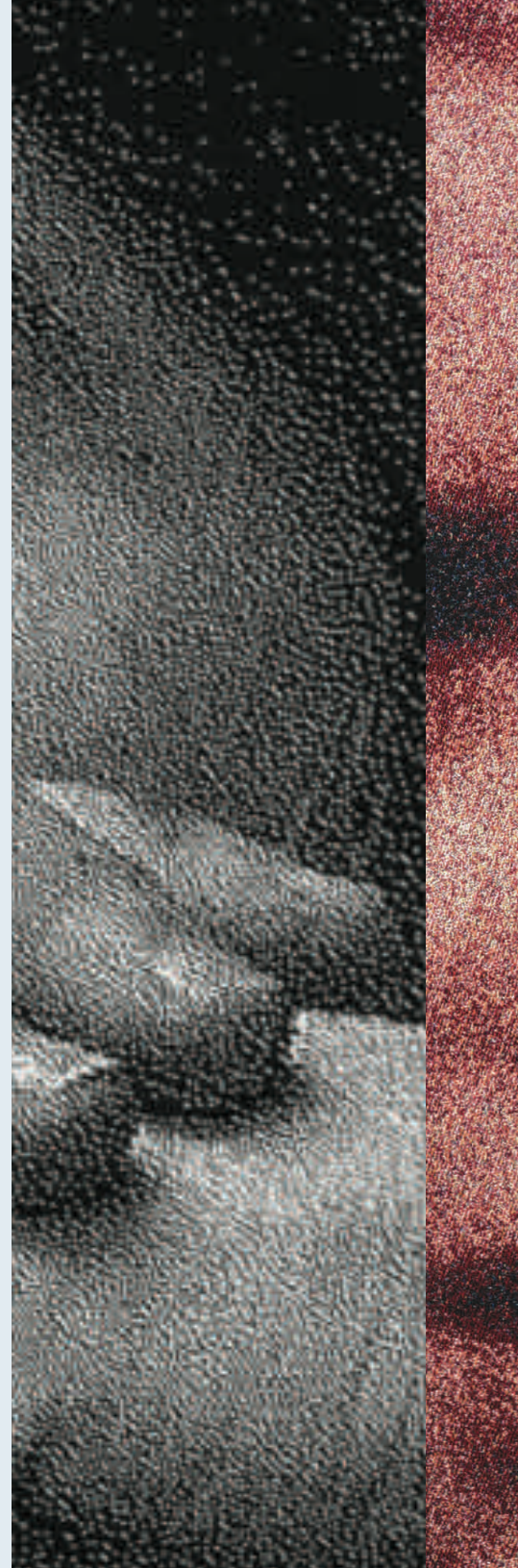
Similarly, the museum has transformed from a institution that displayed primarily historic and contemporary quilts in a small store front in downtown Los Altos, to a vibrant institution that exhibits not only historic and world textiles but also leading edge contemporary fiber art in its permanent home in SoFA Arts District of San José.

Cook's artistic influence extends far beyond her art practice. Since 1975, she has inspired hundreds of students during her over 40 years of teaching at California College of the Arts, retiring as Professor of Fine Arts and Textiles in 2016. As an educational institution, SJMQT has inspired thousands of visitors—children and adults—with its exhibitions, lectures, publications, and programs.

Just as Cook's work celebrates the relationship between the visual and tactile experience of cloth, as this exhibition so clearly illustrates, the museum is dedicated to celebrating textiles—the art, artists and histories. Both the artist and this museum focus on the future: Cook, as she works with neuroscientists and complex software that looks at structural neuronal connections, and this museum, as it continues making relevant creative connections in today's complex and rapidly changing world.

I am grateful to Lia Cook, who played an active role in selecting works for this exhibition and to essayist Leora Lutz for her illuminating essay. It has been a pleasure to work with both of them on this exhibition and the accompanying catalog. Thank you also to the artist and other lenders for generously sharing works from their collections.

**Nancy Bavor**  
*Exhibition Curator*





*Woven Form, 1980*  
Cotton, rayon; woven  
45 x 53 inches  
Lent by Browngrotta Arts

# cerebral touch: Lia Cook 1980–now

essay by Leora Lutz

*"I am interested in re-editing, re-doing, re-translating things."-Lia Cook*

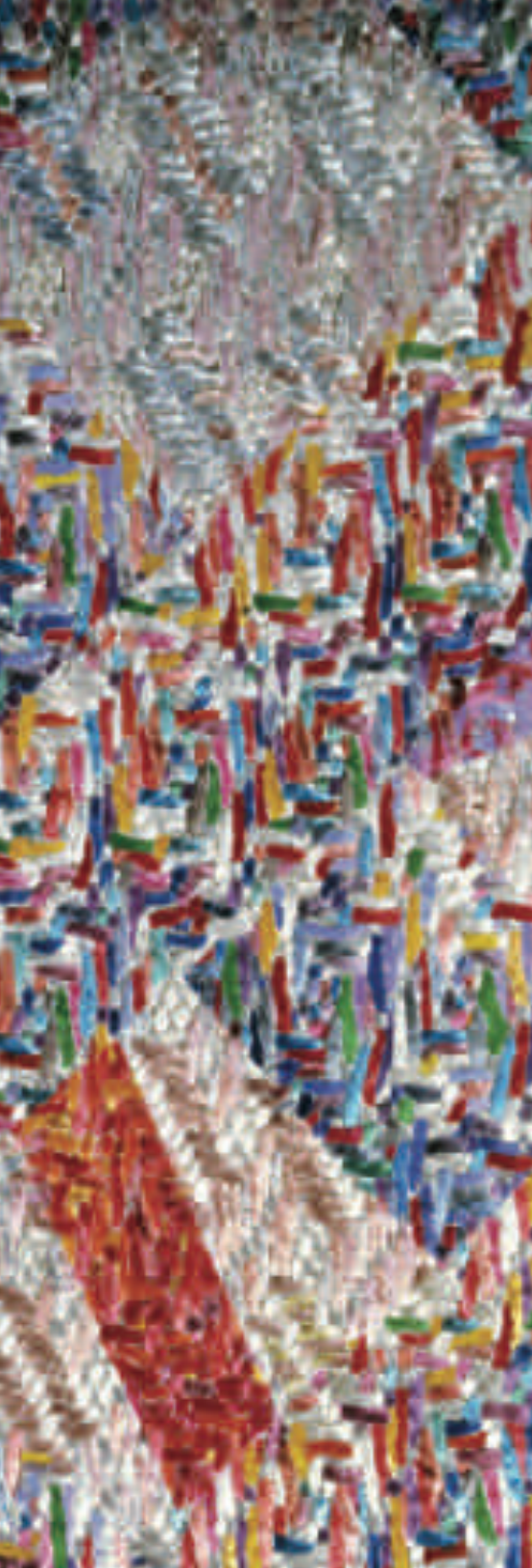
The word "translation" is derived from the Latin *translationem* which means to carry across, to remove or transport; and in other cases it pertains to the transfer of meaning. Its origin stems from the mid-14th century and was used in relation to the transporting a saint's body or relics from one location to another. For over forty years, artist Lia Cook has been creating large-scale woven works that have been described as monumental. The viewer has no choice but to observe and interact with the work with their entire field of vision, with their entire body. It seems fitting then that Cook often uses the word "translation" when talking about her work and the relationships of viewers to it—the work transports the viewer from one sense of place to another—where representation and perception meet.

The Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) created another form of translation—a shift from the maker’s hand to the machine. At the height of the era in 1801, Joseph Marie Jacquard invented the Jacquard loom, which not only provided the ability to create new and more detailed designs, but also created weavings quickly and efficiently.<sup>1</sup> Other artforms, such as painting, were also changing as a result of the Industrial Revolution. With the invention of photography in the late 1800s, portrait painting became less needed; the market for paintings began to decline while the market for photography and all of its machinery and tools increased. Furthermore, representation was no longer subject to artists’ interpretation because photos captured a more instant and “realistic” interpretation of the world and its people. The Industrial Revolution not only changed the future of technology, but also the future of weaving and artistic representation. Changes in artistic representation continue today as we navigate the overlap between technology and the hand-made, and between the illusion and reality of the two-dimensional plane. Some would say that this navigation, and ultimately our engagement with the two-dimensional world, has created a kind of flattening.

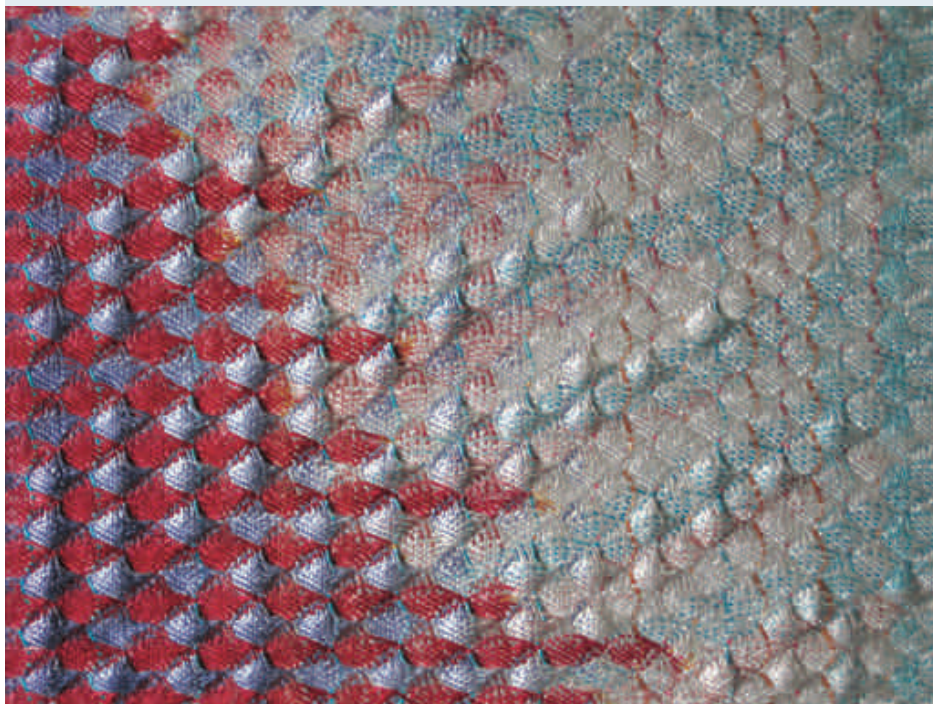
Thomas L. Friedman’s 2005 article “It’s a Flat World, After All” in *The New York Times Magazine*, outlines the accession of flattening with the advent of major advancements in design, tele-commuting, marketing, shipping and outsourcing during the first technology bubble in the year 2000. This created a manufacturing and commodity exchange environment “where intellectual work, intellectual capital, could be delivered from anywhere.”<sup>2</sup> Now, more than fifteen years later, this flattening of business has leached its way into our everyday world. In addition, art and its production has given rise to a post-digital art world, and the formation of New Aesthetics,<sup>3</sup> which is concerned with both the materiality of two-dimensional images, and the perception of them in relation to our representation as subjects; many activities that once required physical presence now take place through a two-dimensional screen, creating simultaneous engagement and disengagement.

Flattening is nothing new. Since humankind began painting in caves, life as a three-dimensional experience has been portrayed in two-dimensions. Cook, along with many textile artists,<sup>4</sup> is using weaving as a powerful catalyst for realizing the





*Two Point Four*, 1980  
Rayon; painted and pressed  
43 x 43 inches  
Lent by Beverly and Peter Sinton



*Fire Pocket Piece, 1984*

Rayon; woven, pressed  
38 x 50 inches



interconnection between that which is seen, and that which is felt on a visceral level. Similar to painting, weavings are two-dimensional, yet the very nature of their materials—three-dimensional threads that are woven into a two-dimensional plane—creates a push-pull relationship between the viewer and the object in front of them.

In experiencing Cook's work, the different layers of detail change as the viewer moves their body forward and away from the weavings. The surface changes within proximity and distance—the fibers seem to expand and contract, grow larger when close, and disappear when far. When looking at a weaving very closely, the cross sections of the warp and weft become tiny dashes, similar to a pointillist painting; dabs of color in close proximity to one another reveal the full image when viewed from a distance. "When you view my work from a distance it is very photographic, but as you move closer they break down into patterns. Then people discover."<sup>5</sup> These discoveries are intrinsic to art, but they also give textile art its unique ability to question the material in relation to the body, and the meaning of those materials. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty states in his book *Phenomenology of Perception*: "Each part arouses the expectation of more than it contains, and this elementary perception is therefore already charged with a meaning."<sup>6</sup> A textile work of art transcends its material and its function: thread for all its linear and malleable faculties; fabric, for all its soft and sumptuous qualities; a blanket for all its warmth and bundling purposes is rendered cerebral—to touch it can only be imagined.

Touch or haptic perception happens through the active exploration of surfaces and objects. The word haptic is oftentimes associated with works of art that have a tactile quality, particularly textiles, ceramics or textural surfaces in paintings where the artist's hand can be seen in the work. The word haptic means made or designed for touch. Psychologist Max Dessoir coined the term in 1892 for his touch research that combined both acoustic and optic sensations. Nick Cave's *Soundsuits* seem most relevant to point out as haptic objects, since they are not only visually stimulating for the viewer, but they are worn by the artist, and they also generate sound. In Cook's case, it's important to note that the act of making the work is a kind of haptic gesture, and it could be argued that viewing her art is kind of haptic perception, or more specifically it creates somatosensation—the sensation of touch—despite the fact that Cook is "finished" touching it once it is made, and the viewer is not allowed to touch it either. In his 1966 book *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* James J. Gibson defined the haptic system as "The sensibility of the individual to the world adjacent to his body by use of his body."<sup>7</sup> Cook's work prompts somatosensation—when viewers stand near her work they experience the illusion of touch.





*Leonardo's Quilt, 1990*

Acrylic on abaca, dyes on rayon; pressed and collaged  
94 x 79 inches  
(detail at right)





*New Master Draperies: Leonardo VIII, 1992*

Acrylic on abaca, dyes on rayon, linen; woven and pressed  
52 x 66 inches

Lent by Judy and Robert Aptekar

**The concept of illusion begins with Cook's** early work throughout the 1970s where she focused on abstraction and optical illusion. "Motion and movement are important in my work," Cook explains. Influenced by the OpArt of Bridget Riley, Cook's work also featured high-contrast color and bold geometric patterns that created the illusion of an undulating surface, even though the surface was completely flat. *Fall* (1963) by Riley features wavy lines that appear to be crumpling toward the bottom. Similar wave formations and undulating patterns appear in Cook's *Translucence* (1978), *Landforms* (1978), and *Woven Form* (1980) (page 4). In a studio visit Cook said, "I've always been interested in pattern, but not pattern that repeats—pattern that changes, that moves."

Despite the fact that both Riley and Cook share similarities with representing subjects and ideas on a two-dimensional surface, one would argue that weaving is more active, more elemental of the artist because it contains a layer of materiality that painting lacks. Rather than a built substrate (a blank canvas) with which to build ideas upon, a weaving is an entire construction imbued from tool to end with the artist's hand.

"I am always looking at the dialog between painting and weaving," Cook says. In *Two Point Four* (1980) (pages 6-7) she breaks down the boundaries between painting and weaving. Using a very heavy rayon industrial fiber, she created a monochromatic white woven foundation as if it were a blank canvas. She painted color on selected crisscross warp and weft strands to create a pattern in a unique kind of pointillism. The weavings were then submerged in water and run through a large etching press. The process squeezed the spaces between each strand together lessening the distance between them, flattening its dimensionality like that of a painting while the shiny surface appears similar to a glossy photograph. Only two of these works exist. Later works involve pressing pre-dyed woven rayon, which retains the shiny surface.

During this exploration of pattern and questioning painting, Cook becomes fascinated by drapery and domestic fabrics and begins to use photography to generate content. Her work begins to evolve away from abstraction toward representation, further iterating the problematic place that textiles have played in art history. She noticed





*Handkerchiefs, 1999*  
Cotton, rayon; woven  
12 feet x 48 Inches  
(detail at right)



that many Renaissance and Baroque paintings include drapery, but it is usually an accent, not the main subject of the work. *Leonardo's Quilt* (1990) (pages 10-11) includes photographs of Leonardo da Vinci drapery from several different paintings and Florentine textile patterns, which she painted onto canvas or abaca, then cut into strips and wove into small pieces that are collaged into a crazy quilt configuration.

As the drapery work develops into the 1990s, Cook begins to look at drapery in relation to the body in an extensive series of work titled *Point of Touch*; as the title suggests, these works begin her focus on the concept of touch. She embarks on further investigation of paintings, including works by Artemisia Gentileschi that include images of the hands holding, folding or resting on fabric. She continues to paint on the canvas or paper, cutting and weaving them onto painted warps.

It wasn't until the late 1990s that Cook begins working almost exclusively with the Jacquard loom, which allowed her to create photographic detail more readily, and to exclusively use weaving as a material, including *Handkerchiefs* (1999) (page 14), and *Resting Digits* (2005) (back cover). Because of its complex computer system, which she continues to use now, the Jacquard loom is best suited to creating photographically precise images. Despite the detail and complexity that the Jacquard loom offers, it still requires an element of hand-making as the artist passes the shuttles through the selected raised warp strings. As opposed to machine operated Jacquard looms, Cook appreciates the slowness and flexibility of the computer assisted loom in her studio, and watching something appear before her eyes as she is making it, coupled with the ability to make changes as she goes along. Her fascination with hands is symbolic of both the maker and of touch.







*Point of Touch: The Deposition, 1996*  
Linen, rayon; woven  
55 x 45 inches

*Unmask: Youth, 2001*  
Cotton, woven  
75 x 55 inches





*Cindy Lay II*, 2010  
Cotton, rayon; woven  
40 x 53 inches

**Throughout Cook's trajectory, subjects** in her work transition from abstract movement, to historical textile references, to the hands and the body and eventually faces, which make their way into her work in the late 1990s and have been the predominant subject ever since. The shift began with a trip to London in 1997 where she was intrigued by a specific antique doll in a toy museum she visited. She began using a photograph of it as well as a photo of her own childhood doll to create portrait weavings. She observed that many people were disturbed by the dolls, which piqued her curiosity: "Why are people so emotional when looking at the dolls?" In almost every culture they are objects that shape relationships through the act of play, and represent a passage from childhood to adulthood. Dolls play an important role in ancient cultures as symbols of the body, whether as fetish objects, objects for ritual or to bring fertility.

In many ways a doll is a disengagement of ourselves; it is a representation of the body in three-dimensional form, yet it lacks the response we desire from real interaction with others. Cook noticed that a "hybrid-human" relationship began to form between the viewer and the doll, which paved the way for her investigations into how people relate to the things that they see, and the things that can be touched. Not only were people suddenly displaying a whole new set of emotions with the doll weavings, but also a new layer of inquiry and relationships between subject and material collided: the viewer was becoming agent of the work. Cook wanted to investigate this further and began working with neuroscientists. "It's a collaborative process with the scientists," Cook explains, and her work in the last six years has involved many different kinds of experiments.

Concurrently with the dolls, she began the *Su Series* (2008-2016) (page 21). She noticed that although she uses the same image of her face as a child, viewers were interpreting the facial expressions in different ways depending on the configuration of abstract designs that were foregrounding the face and emphasizing material translation. Some viewers thought the face was sad, in another piece they thought the face was serene, and to others the face was upset. It struck Cook, "It's how the piece is translated," that has the most impact on the viewer; it is not the face that matters as much as what else is happening in relation to the face, how the interpretation changes based upon the translation of what the face might mean.

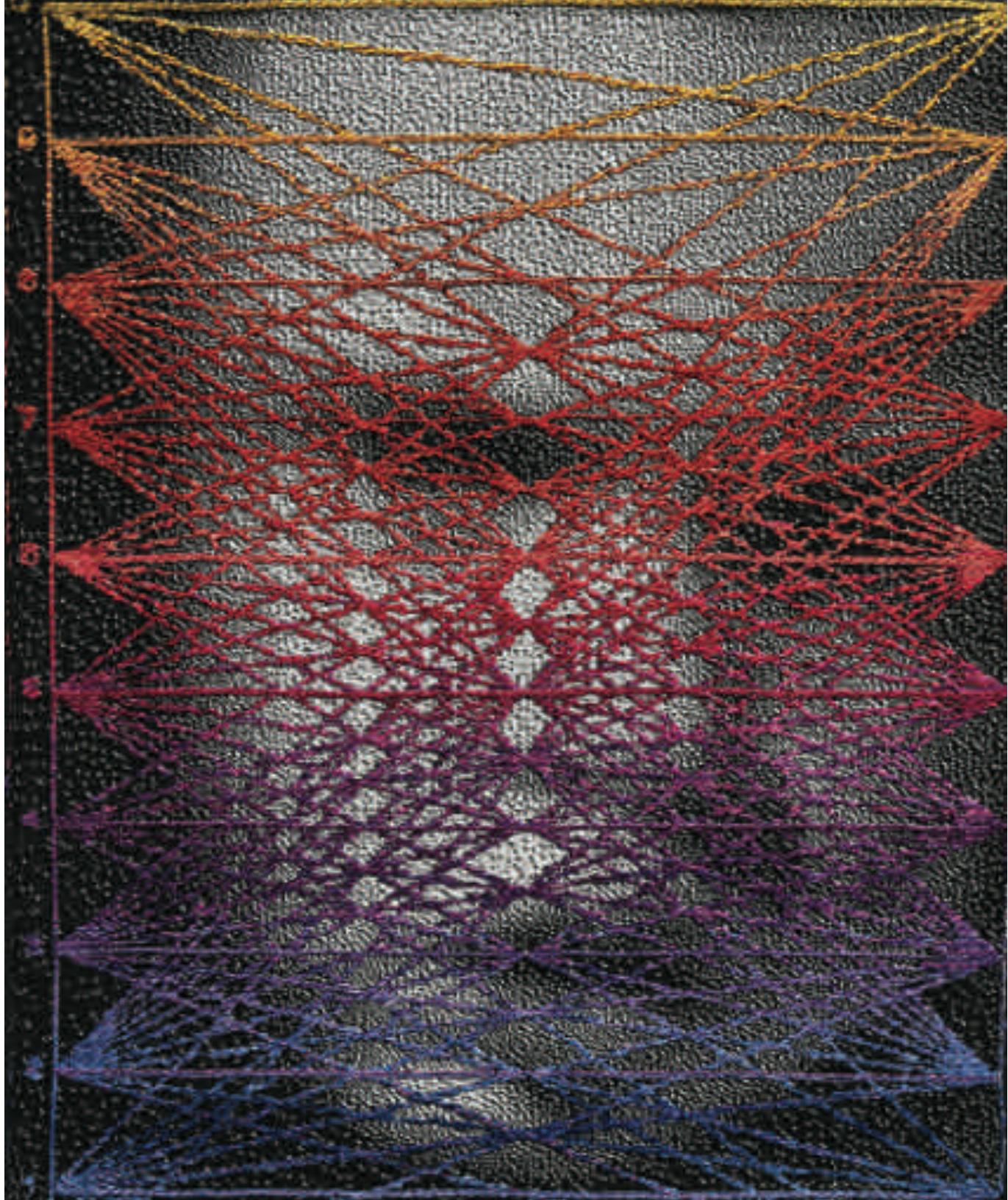
In 2010 she worked with Dr. Greg J. Siegle, Director of the Program in Cognitive Affective Neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, to specifically “find out what the emotional difference is between looking at a photograph and looking at a weaving.” Many different research techniques including fMRI, EEG and eye tracking were used in their preliminary studies with subjects. In some instances the viewer was allowed to touch the weavings.

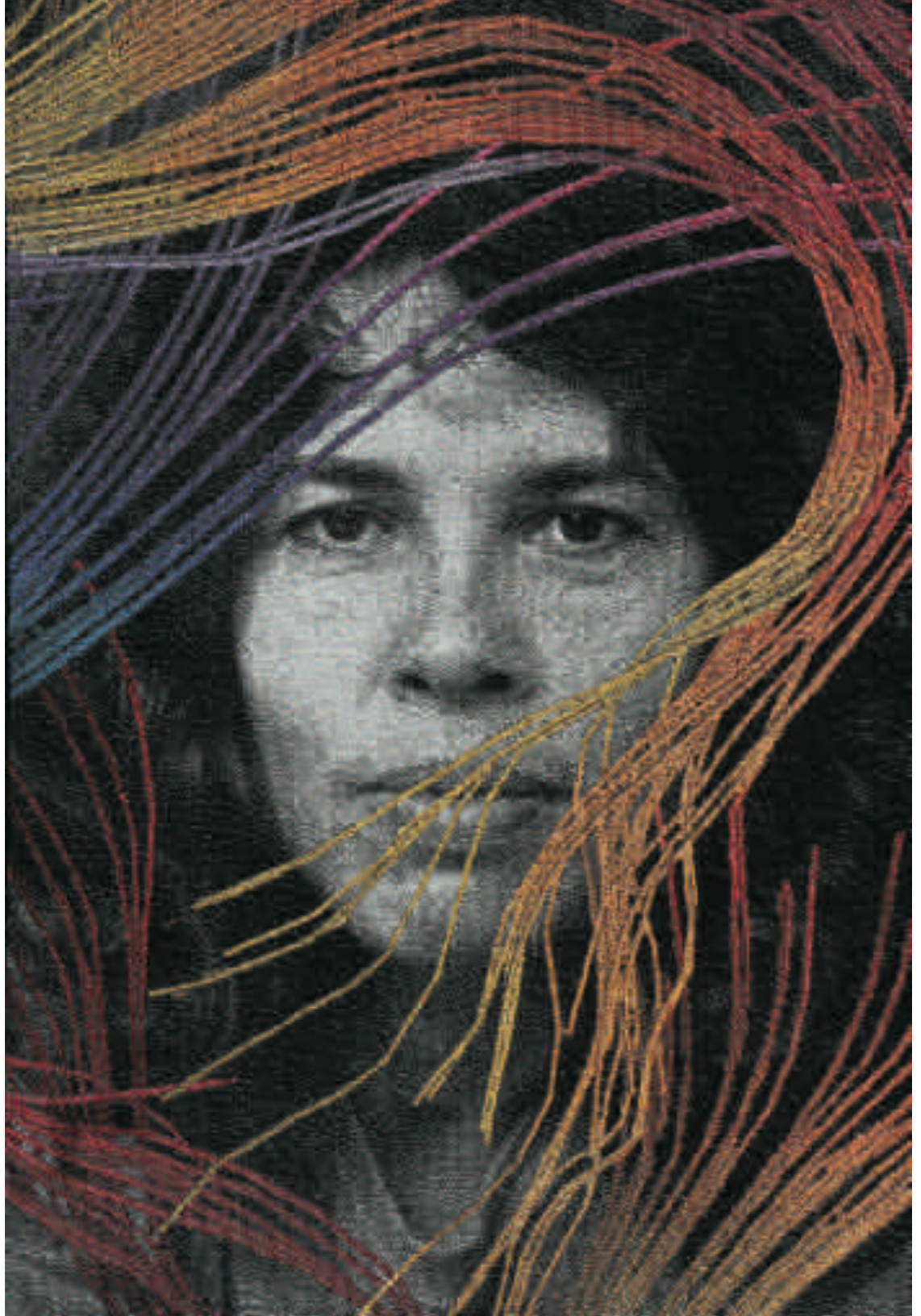
The studies showed that the amygdala, a part of the brain that processes memory, decision-making and emotions, and the insula, which play a role in consciousness and interpersonal relationships, were both stimulated more by the woven face than by a photographic image of the same face. Basic neurology explains that “stimulation of the amygdala causes intense emotion, such as aggression or fear.”<sup>8</sup> Cook and Siegle’s studies also showed more emotional stimulation in the brain even while looking at a photograph of a weaving. In essence, a photograph is more direct and less frightening or threatening because there is not as much more to think about once we “get it,” and we get it more rapidly than when looking at a weaving of a face.

Gerhard Richter’s black and white photographic paintings from the late 1960s to now come to mind.<sup>9</sup> Much in the same way that Richter is turning a photograph into a painting, Cook turns a photograph into a weaving. Using the photograph as subject, some of Richter’s earlier paintings are rendered with such detail they border on photo-realism.<sup>10</sup> It is not until one approaches and peers at it closely that the true material of the image is revealed.

In contrast to photographs, woven faces prompt questions for viewers: How am I supposed to feel about this? Is this a portrait of a real person? For Cook, her intrigue with the emotional response to the “woven experience” continued to grow. She worked with Dr. Daniela Schiller, Director of the Schiller Laboratory of Affective Neuroscience at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York, to study emotional responses to the woven faces compared to printed photographs of the same face.

*Positivity Su Data, 2014*  
Cotton, rayon; woven  
60 x 48 inches

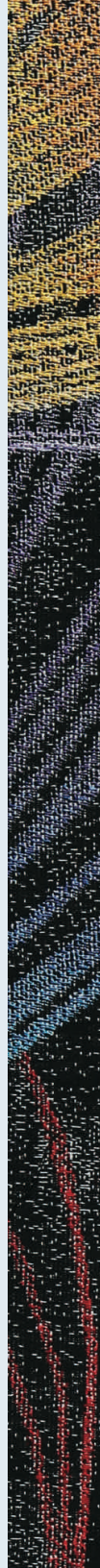




Not all of her studies and observations have taken place in laboratory environments—a great deal of interactive work has taken place in galleries during her exhibitions. For some studies she installed booths with one large-scale photograph and one large-scale weaving of the same face in each. Visitors filled out anonymous questionnaires recording their emotion responses to viewing the faces. She has gathered information from over 800 participants and is working with data scientist Brad Shanrock-Solberg to create data visualizations that she incorporates into woven faces. For the last five years she has been working with the Dr. Walter Schneider at the Walter Schneider Laboratory, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and with Timothy Ellmore, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology at The City College of New York. Using Diffusion Spectrum Imaging (DSI) and TrackVis software, she is gathering structural imaging of the neural connection in her own brain.

The strands of neural connections that the DSI scans create are called “fiber tracts”—a double entendre between the content Cook is weaving and the materials themselves. In her most recent work, Cook has been incorporating her own brain scan patterns, which she weaves over large-scale self-portraits. In *ConnecToMe 2* (2016) (page 22) sweeping tendrils of magenta, red and yellow criss-cross in front of Cook’s face. The layering of the face and the abstract lines creates dissonance between abstraction and representation; the faces are partially obscured by data, akin to a computer screen glitch. Looking very closely, the woven intersections resemble pixels, a computer phenomenon very different than peering closely at a paper photograph.

*ConnecToMe*, 2016  
Cotton, rayon; woven  
75 x 51 inches



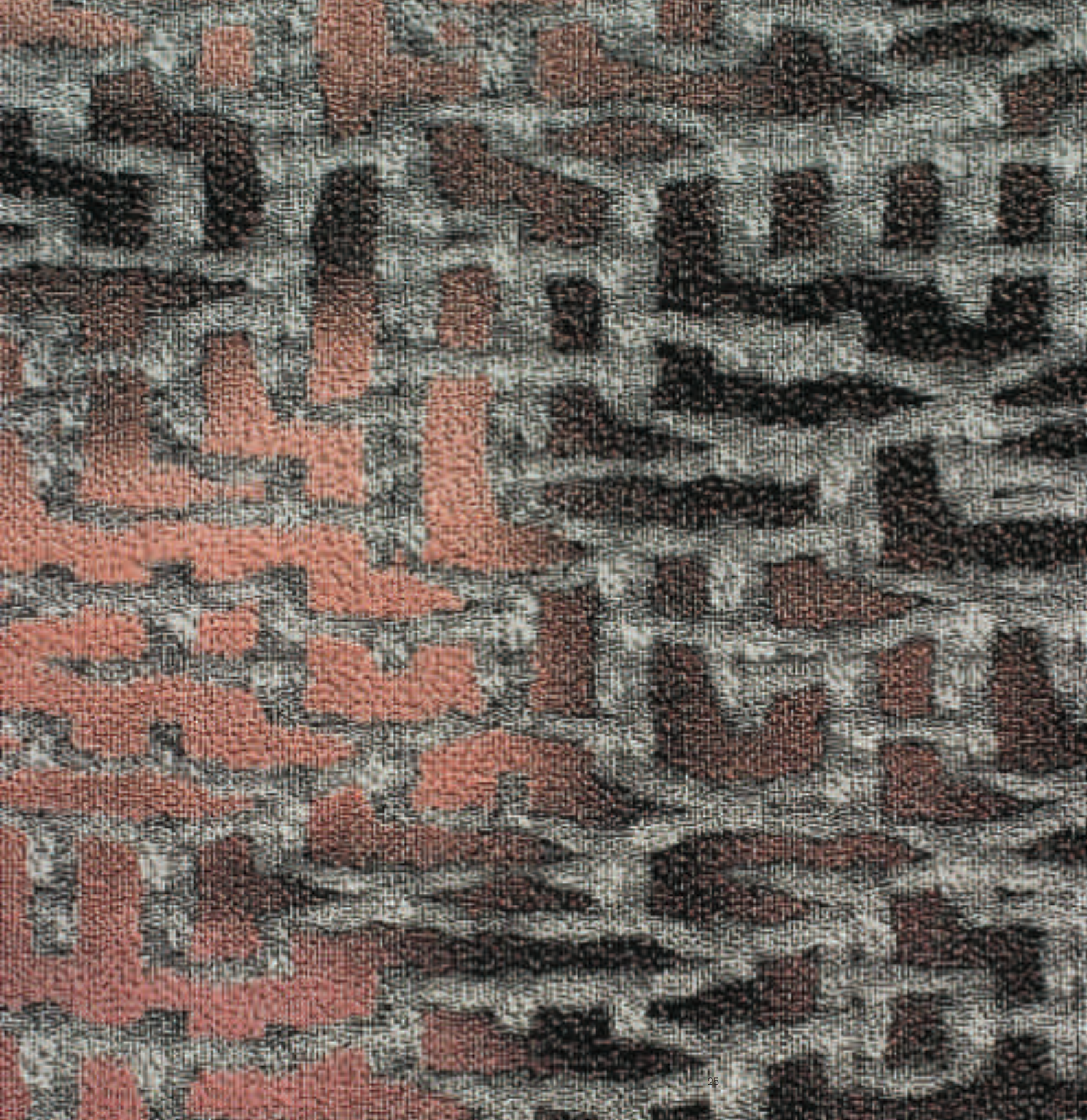


*Maze Gaze, 2007*  
Cotton, rayon; woven  
72 x 52 inches  
(detail at right)

**When looking at a photograph of a person,** one cannot touch the subject, but the sensation or desire to do so is there. “Of all our senses, vision is the strongest and most influential in memory formation,”<sup>11</sup> writes neuroscientist Joshua Sarinana. In a sense, people are gaining more awareness of themselves through new forms of technology. They are engaging with and in the two-dimensional plane in ever new and changing ways, whether through photographs that are held or viewed on the computer screen. Memory of the person’s presence or the illusion of touch exists on this flat surface which creates a fantasy—disconnect—between what is real and what is imagined or what was remembered.

In Lia Cook’s work, this power to attract yet deny—making it inaccessible to touch yet purely tactile—does not create a divide, but rather encompasses an experiential chasm that passes between the viewers’ sight and their own body. “People come into an exhibit, they know they are not supposed to touch [the work], but they feel a sense of entitlement—that they ought to be able to touch it,” Cook explains. “There is a great deal of anxiety that happens.” Textiles tap into tactile urgency and the instinct to wear it, or cover our body with it, to touch it. The tension between the alluring and the possibility of attainment creates symbiosis—a dance akin to unrequited desire; the gaze is the paramount reward for the viewer. Yet, the presence of the artists’ hand remains for the viewer—a visceral response that can be felt by the viewer despite the touch they are denied. What the object lacks, the mind makes up for the difference. It is these differences that Cook translates to the surface—something haptic, to touch with our mind’s eye.





## essay footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The complex punch card system that operates the threads on the loom to create designs is considered the precursor for modern-day computer programming. Computer programming used punch card methods until the 1980s.
- <sup>2</sup> Friedman, Thomas L. "It's a Flat World, After All." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 2005. Accessed September 31, 2016. [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/magazine/its-a-flat-world-after-all.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/magazine/its-a-flat-world-after-all.html?_r=0).
- <sup>3</sup> Paul, Christiane and Malcolm Levy. "Genealogies of the New Aesthetic," in *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, M. Dieter and D. Berry, Eds., New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2015. 27-43.
- <sup>4</sup> Cook's work is on-point with many younger generation textile artists using technology as inspiration and source material. For example, Margo Wolowiec uses images generated from Instagram; Kate Nartker and Indra Allegra each work with pixels and moving-image glitches. Faig Ahmed transforms traditional Azerbaijan rugs into stretched glitches and Nadia-Anne Ricketts creates weavings from computer-generated sound waves.
- <sup>5</sup> Quotes by Cook were generated in a conversation between the author and the artist, September, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945, 4.
- <sup>7</sup> Gibson, James J. *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966, 97.
- <sup>8</sup> Wright, Anthony, Ph.D. *Neuroscience Online*, Chapter Six, Section 5. Accessed November 12, 2016. <http://neuroscience.uth.tmc.edu/s4/chapter06.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> Elger, Dietmar, Ed., Hans Ulrich Obrist *Gerhard Richter: Text, Writing, Interviews and Lectures, 1961-2007*, Thames and Hudson: London, 2009, 29.
- <sup>10</sup> In the 1960s, painters begin using photographic visual references for their work in defiance of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.
- <sup>11</sup> Sarinana, Joshua. "Memories, Photographs, and the Human Brain," July 20, 2013. *PetaPixel*. Accessed October 2, 2016. <http://petapixel.com/2013/07/20/memories-photographs-and-the-human-brain/>.

back cover:  
**Resting Digits, 2005**  
Cotton; woven  
38 x 54 inches

## acknowledgments

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Images, front and back cover,  
pages 3, 4, and inside back cover:  
(details) *Unmask Youth; Resting Digits*





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