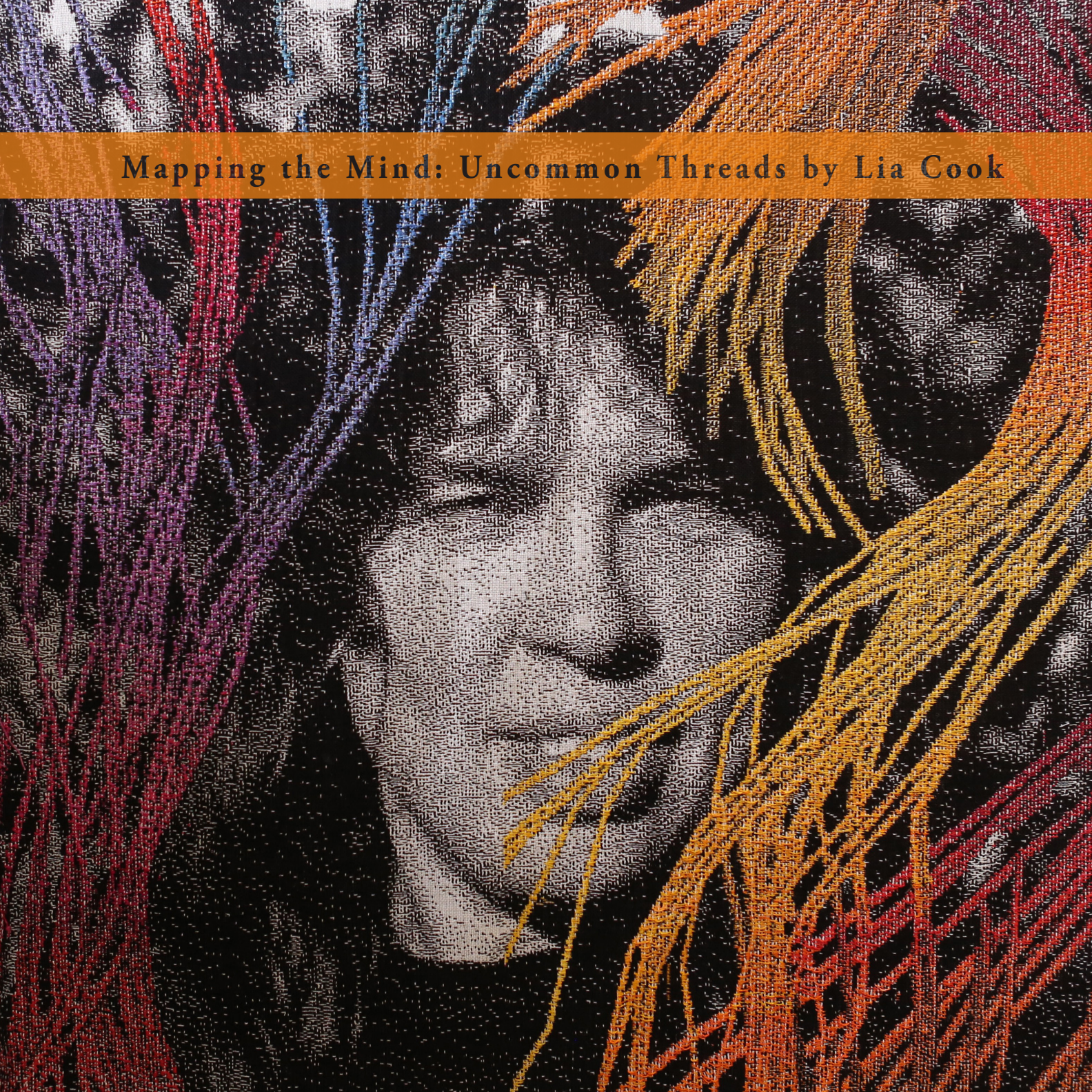
Mapping the Mind: Uncommon Threads by Lia Cook



Mapping the Mind: Uncommon Threads by Lia Cook

Lia Cook

With works from the Richmond Art Center Exhibition: *Inner Traces*
curated by Inez Brooks-Myers
2540 Barrett Avenue
Richmond, California 94804

Exhibition Dates: September 11 - November 16, 2018
Reception: Saturday, September 8, 5:00 - 7:00 pm

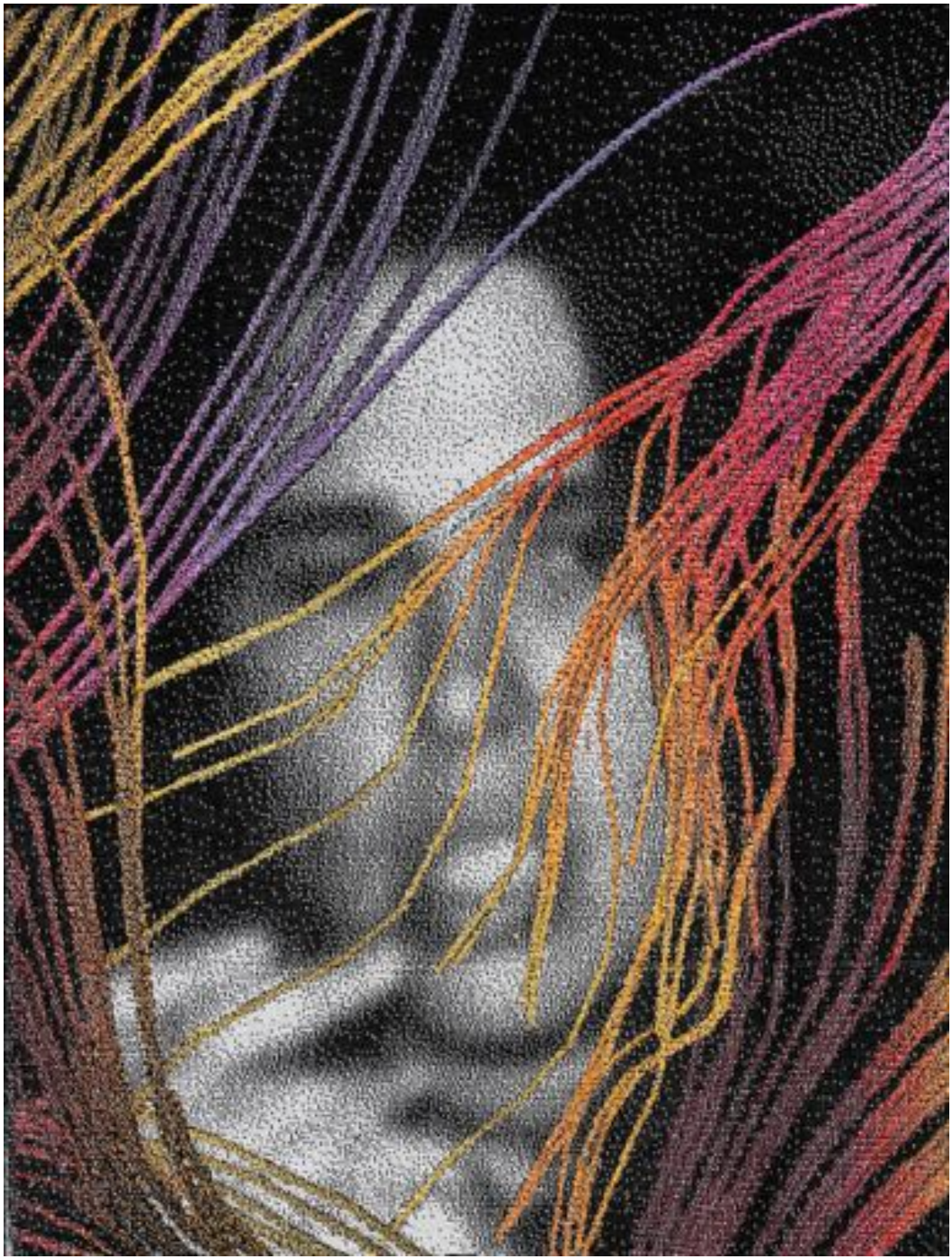
Works available through Seager Gray Gallery

Essay by Paul Liberatore
Catalog design by Donna Seager

SEAGER / GRAY GALLERY
CONTEMPORARY FINE ART
108 Throckmorton Ave. Mill Valley 94941 . 415.384.8288 . seagergray.com . art@seagergray

I work in a variety of media combining weaving with painting, photography, video and digital technology. My current practice explores the sensuality of the woven image and the emotional connections to memories of touch and cloth. Working in collaboration with neuroscientists, I investigate the nature of the emotional response to woven faces. I draw on the laboratory experience both with process and tools to stimulate new work in reaction to these investigations. I am interested in both the scientific study as well as my own artistic response to these unexpected sources.

- Lia Cook



The ‘brainy’ weavings of textile artist Lia Cook

by Paul Liberatore

Lia Cook has been blowing minds with her groundbreaking weavings since she burst onto the textile art scene as an exciting young newcomer in 1973, showing one of her large scale “fabric landscapes” at the International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne, Switzerland, alongside major names in the field like Magdalena Abakanowicz and Sheila Hicks.

“I started at the top,” she says with a laugh one recent morning in the Berkeley warehouse that has been her home and studio for more than four decades. “You could apply as a totally unknown person and be accepted there. The major people in the field would show alongside the unknowns.”

Forty-five years after that auspicious international debut, the 75-year-old artist hasn’t been an unknown for a long time now, having taken her place on the roster of renowned textile artists internationally. Her weavings are in the permanent collections of galleries and museums worldwide, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the French National Collection of Art in Beauvais, France and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

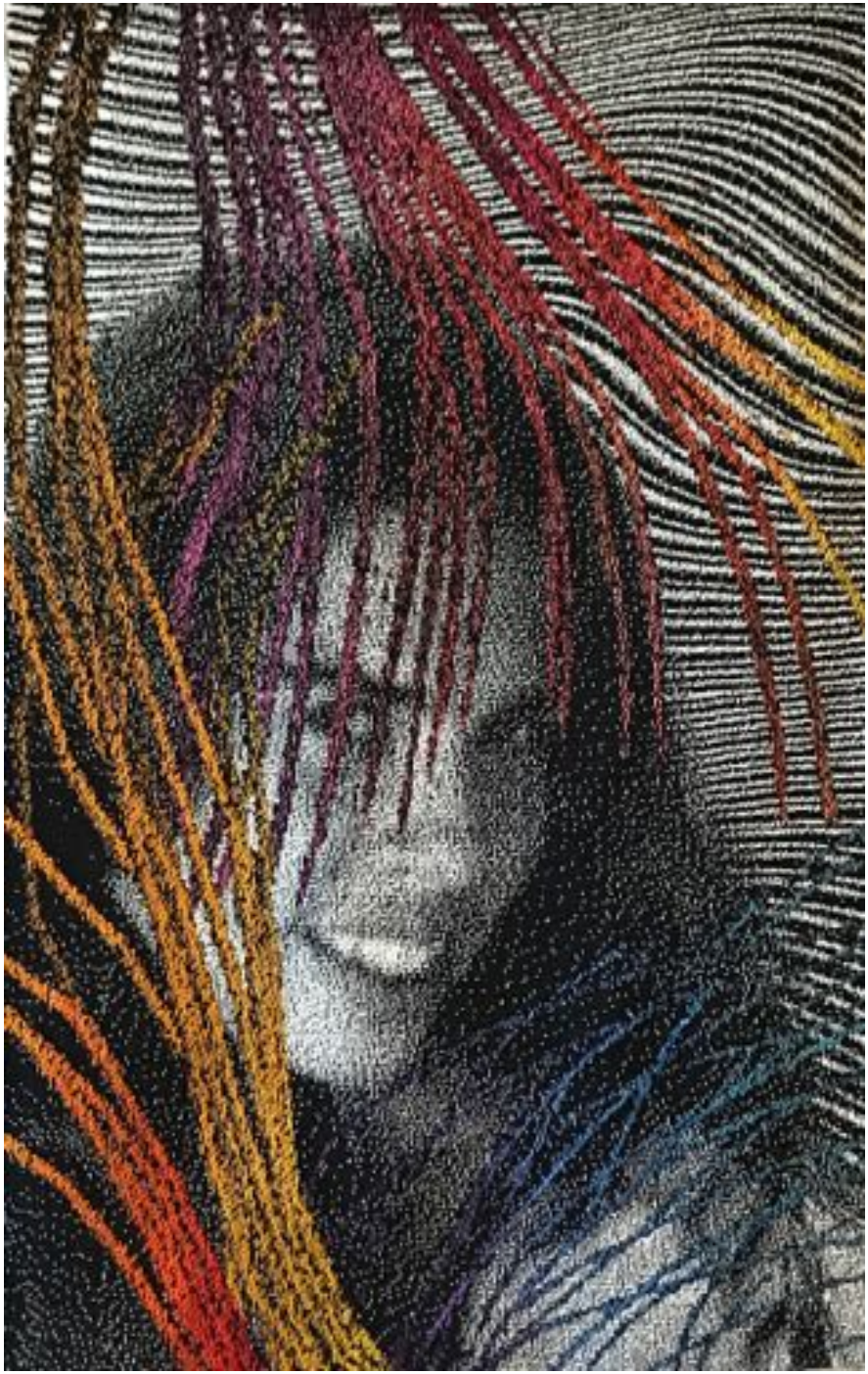
In her distinguished career, she has exploded the boundaries of traditional weaving, creating innovative work that plays with our emotions and challenges our perceptions, making us question what we’re seeing with our own eyes. Is it weaving? Is it photography? Is it painting?

The answer is yes to all three, and you can add to that list digital technology and the emerging field of neuroaesthetics.

Cook’s work has always been cerebral in its complexity, but now it’s brainy in a literal sense. For a number of years, she has been deeply involved in collaborations with medical researchers and neuroscientists, exploring what she calls “the territory between scientific investigation and artistic interpretation.”

In one series of weavings, she has superimposed variously colored MRI images of the neural connections in her brain over photographic portraits of herself as a young woman, giving these weavings titles like “Wonder Net” and “Neurothread Head.”

left: *Wonder Net*, 2017, cotton, rayon, woven, 51 x 39”



Revisioned, 2018, cotton, rayon, woven, 51 x 32”

She does the same thing with neural images from the brain of one of the neuroscientists she's worked with, Timothy Elmore, over a childhood photo of him. And finally, she combines his brain images with hers, superimposing them over her photo in a piece appropriately titled "Mindmeld."

In the background of "Mindmeld," in a kind of inside joke and nod to her artistic beginnings, she has incorporated the wavy optical black and white lines of that first fabric landscape from her breakthrough at the Lausanne show all those years before. By knitting weaving and science together like this, it's as if she's saying, 'This is my brain as art."

"I saw this image of the neural connections in the brain at a scientific conference and of course it looked like a weaving," she recalls, smiling at the memory. "These scientists would say, 'Oh, you could weave a brain.' And I said, 'Never. I'm not going to weave brain. What do you mean?' So guess what I started doing."

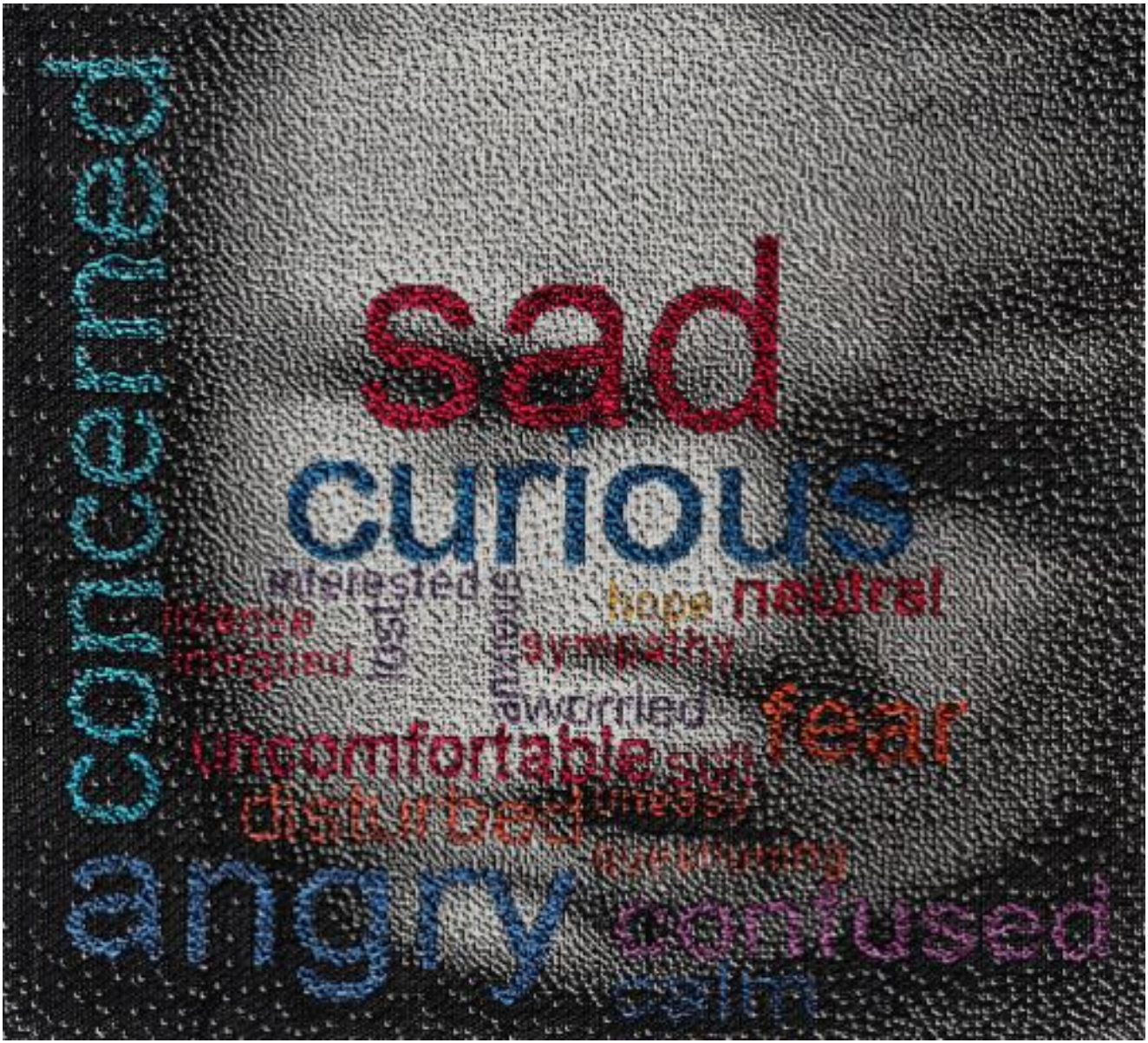
Her interest in visual representation of what goes on inside her head began after she was diagnosed with a rare illness, "pure autonomic failure," a dysfunction of the autonomic nervous system, the part of the body that controls involuntary actions, such as widening or narrowing of blood vessels. One of its symptoms is a sudden decrease in blood pressure, causing dizziness when a person with it stands up. It isn't life threatening, but it has been concerning enough that Cook was determined to learn more about it, traveling all over the country to meet with top research doctors in the field.

"I didn't want to make artwork about illness, but I found these doctors and scientists and their labs very interesting and some quite creative in themselves," she explains.

"Some of these researchers understood something about neuroaesthetics, a field better known in Europe. Others didn't but were willing to give it a try."

She had always been interested in viewers' emotional response to her weavings, so she began working with scientists on data visualization projects that inspired what she calls her "word cloud" weavings.

Space Continuum, 1973, woven wool and cotton, 14 ' x 12'



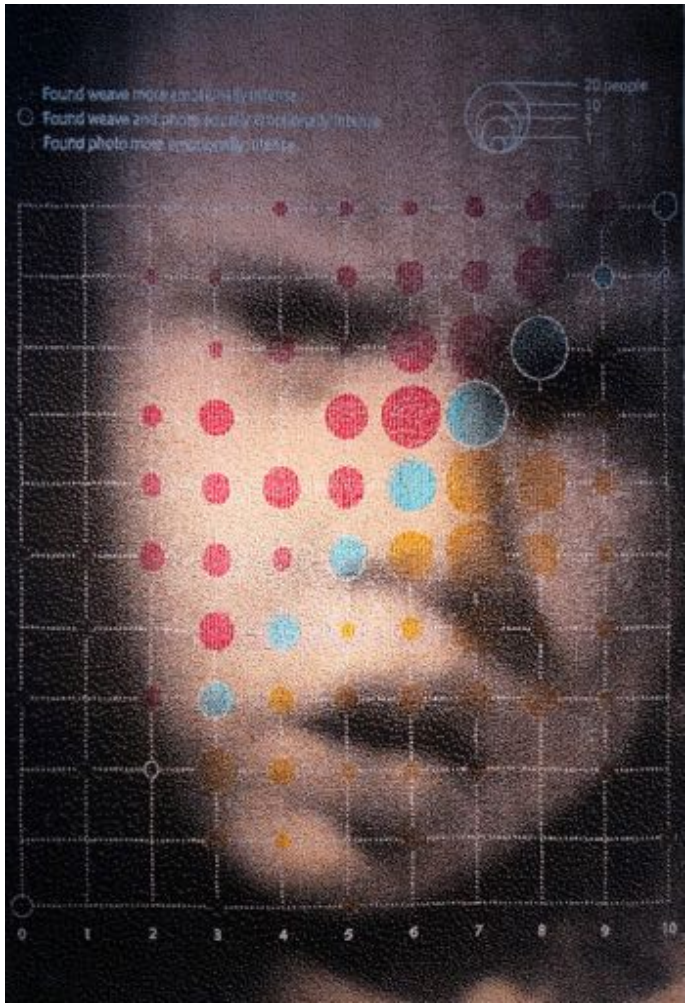
Sad and Curious, 2018, cotton, rayon, woven, 37 x 45”
Data visualization by Bradley Shanrock-Solberg

One piece, “Sad & Curious,” arose from a study that asked viewers to come up with one word that best described the emotion they felt looking at a weaving of the artist’s face as a child -- mouth partially open, peering out from the frame with what looks like a frown.

The words, in various colors – sad, curious, angry concerned, worried -- are woven over the portrait, dominating the foreground. She uses the same technique in “Intense & Questioning,” a weaving that incorporates words distilled by a data engineer from essays by 400 people who were asked to express their feelings about the same woven photo image.

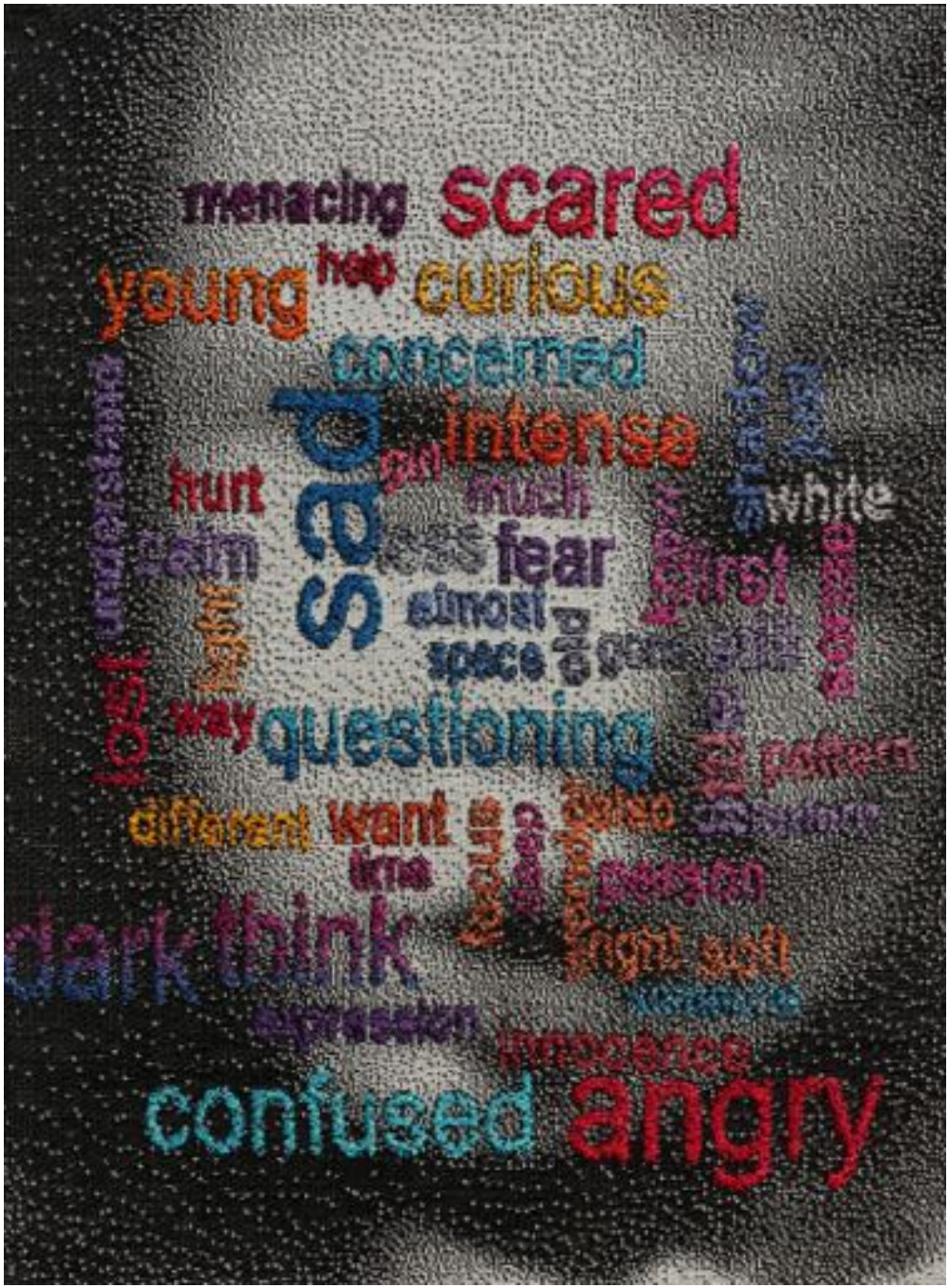
“Normally, I’m not that interested in using words in my work,” she says. “But, in this case, I think it’s actually good for the public because this stuff is hard to interpret. It gives people a sense of what it’s all about.”

In an informal survey she conducted herself, she asked a group of volunteers to gauge their emotional responses to a large weaving of her childhood photo and then to the actual photograph itself. Using data visualization once again, she wove the results -- in the form of colored dots in various sizes – and superimposed them over the image of the woven face – blue for people who felt no difference between the two; yellow for those more affected by the photo and red for those who found the woven image the most emotionally intense.



Data Dots Emotional Intensity, 2015, cotton, rayon, woven, 77 x 51”
Data visualization by Bradley Shanrock-Solberg

Perhaps not surprisingly, it turns out that the woven photo evoked the most frequent and strongest reactions. The red dots, floating in the foreground like balloons at a child’s birthday party, are bigger than the yellow and blue ones, and there are many more of them. Cook admits that this hardly a scientific survey, but it’s scientific enough for her purposes – making visually compelling art from science and statistics.



Intense and Questioning, 2018, cotton, rayon, woven, 68 x 50”
Data visualization by Bradley Shanrock-Solberg

“I could have pursued the science more actively,” she says, “but I’m more interested in how it looks.”

The enchantment of weaving

As a college undergraduate, Cook hadn’t yet thought of art as a career choice. As she puts it, “It was just something you did.”

For a number of years she was passionate about acting, studying drama later at San Francisco State University.

“But then I had a change of mind,” she recalls. “One reason for that was what you had to do as a woman to get a part. I wasn’t about to do that.”

So she enrolled at U.C. Berkeley and studied political science along with anything else that interested her.

“I had a professor who let me take whatever I wanted,” she says. “I took painting and ceramics and studied the history and anthropology of places like Africa and South America. I was interested in all that stuff.”

When she wasn’t in school, she was what she describes as “a climbing groupie,” hanging out with pioneering rock climbers in Yosemite.

“Being a climbing groupie was really nice for women because you could travel alone and not be harassed,” she remembers. “You didn’t have to be their girlfriend.”

She also worked in menial jobs in Sierra ski resorts so she could have a place to stay and ski during the winter.

As an adventurous Berkeley college student, the blurred contours of her young life began to come into focus while traveling through Mexico on a bus. All by herself.

“It was interesting being a woman alone traveling in Mexico in the ’60s,” she remembers with a smile. “But the important thing is I collected all these textiles. I went down to Chiapas and Oaxaca and saw these Indians who had never seen white people before and I saw all their indigenous weaving. That’s where I got my passion for textiles.” She is quick to add: “And I survived.”

Inspired by her trip, he was driven by a desire to learn to weave herself. After earning a bachelor’s degree from U.C. Berkeley in political science, she taught grade school to earn

Point of Touch: Bathsheba, 1995, linen, rayon, oil paint woven, 46 x 61”

a living for three years before she and her now ex-husband, then a graduate student in ceramic sculpture at Berkeley, went off to study abroad.

She spent 1967-'68, San Francisco's Summer of Love, in Stockholm, Sweden, learning how to weave at Handarbetets Vanner (Friends of Handicraft), an association devoted to the education, development, production and experimentation of advanced textiles and design. It gave her a solid technical foundation for what would become her life's work.

"It wasn't an art school, it was all about weaving," she says. "At the same time, we traveled all over Europe. We went to Russia, the Hermitage, Documenta in Kassel Germany.. It was a great art education."

Back in the Bay Area, she enrolled in grad school in Berkeley's School of Environmental Design, earning a master's degree in art.

Immersed in the social and political ferment of Berkeley in those days, with its newly-minted art stars, experimental performances and hippie era happenings, Cook joined a group of progressive women textile artists, some of whom founded Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts in 1973. She credits that group for giving her encouragement and direction as she launched her career.

"These women, former students, met every month," she recalls. "We shared exhibitions and travels. It was the age of women's groups when women got together and complained about men, but ours was about art."

The sensuality of touch

Discussing the sensuality of her work, Cook once said that fabric isn't something most of us notice very much in our lives, "but it's a very sensual thing. We sleep on it, we're covered with it. It's always on our bodies."

This fascination led to the creation of such pieces as "Point of Touch: Bathsheba," a weaving that shows arms and torso of the Old Testament temptress as she appears to be drying herself after a bath.

In "Presence/Absence: Light Touch II," a still photo of the artist's hands – taken from a video her working with cloth -- is woven into the fabric of the piece, which is then draped on the wall when it's hung, creating a kind of optical illusion -- an image of draped fabric on a draped fabric.

Her investigation of the intimacy and sensuality of fabrics has not been without controversy, albeit a mini one. It erupted over a weaving she did in of Jesus wearing a loincloth.

“A French painter was disturbed that I would look at Christ’s loincloth like that,” she says with a snicker.

If some of Cook’s weavings, in those pieces and others, look like paintings as well as tapestries, it’s because they’re a blend of both.

“A lot of my work has a conversation with painting,” she explains, noting that the processes involved in that kind of work can be labor intensive, to put it mildly.

Early in her career, she wove a piece out of rayon, immersed it in water and then pressed it flat.

“I painted all the threads individually,” she says. “This thing is crazy. It took six months to finish.”

She calls another technique of hers “painting in three layers,” a process that involves painting the details of classic paintings or drawings on linen, canvas or abaca, cutting it into strips and then weaving it into a piece using painted warp threads in a pattern that she had already created on a pattern loom. She used this process works like “Leonardo’s Quilt” from her “Old Masters” series.

The temptation of touch

In her many public exhibits, Cook has noticed that people have an almost irresistible urge to touch her weavings. That phenomenon became the focus of one of her recent artistic experiments with the University of Madison business school.

In this collaboration, three booths were set up for people to look at a weaving from her “Woven Faces Project.” One booth was for viewing the weaving close up, another for seeing it from a distance. In the third booth, subjects were allowed to touch the piece.

“We were trying to find out what happens when people actually get to touch the art,” she says.

Binary Traces: Young Girl, 2004, cotton, woven, 60 x 48”

Maze Gaze, 2007, cotton, rayon, woven, 672 x 52”

It turns out that some of the participants felt uncomfortable doing that. But the most frequent response by far was, "I wish I could touch it more" – twice as many people said that than anything else.

"When people see my work, they often don't know it's a weaving, and then when they discover it, they want to touch it, but they know they're not entitled to," she says. "My theory is that it's gut level. Cloth is something you're familiar with. You've grown up with it. You don't think about it. You just want to touch it."

About Face

Many of Cook's most striking and startling pieces are her weavings of faces from her collection of nostalgic family photographs, most of them of the artist herself at various times in her life.

"I created this whole way of weaving images based on pixels," she says, explaining a process that first involved using a large pixelated negative and exposing in onto a photosensitized weaving. Later on I developed a technique using multicolored threads.

"It was a kind of a technical innovation. I broke the image into individual color pixels and individual threads of color then found a way to make it weave altogether to create the kind of color and image I wanted.

In a 2009 catalog for "Faces & Mazes," an exhibit of Cook's work at the University of Nebraska, art history professor Cristina Mamiya wrote that after looking at one of Cook's face weavings, one artist and writer she knew was so deeply affected that she felt woozy and had to sit down.

"I sat there totally mesmerized by the image in front of me," she said.
For Cook, her woven faces take different forms depending on where you are when you look at them. She compares the pixilation of the weavings' warp and weft with the colored dots in a pointillist painting. (Warp is the longitudinal thread held stationary in tension on a loom, while the weft, or woof, is drawn through and inserted over and under the warp.)

"I'm interested in movement in relationship with the image," she explains. "So here you have an image of the face that looks just like a photograph, but as you move closer to it, the image breaks down and the viewers discover that it's actually woven. In exhibitions, when people discover that it's woven, rather than a print, it creates a whole other emotional response."

Presence/Absence: Light Touch II, 1998, cotton, rayon, woven, 48 x 48”

How does she do it?

Cook's spacious studio is dominated by a TC1 Jacquard loom, a computerized loom developed by a Norwegian friend of hers. It's a modern version of the original Jacquard loom, invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard in 1804.

"I use the computer to input the structure of how a piece is going to be woven," she explains. "It's a binary process that you can do on Photoshop now. You just have to program it to say which threads you want up or down.

"What's nice about these looms is that they're hand looms, so you can make changes all the time," she continues. "The information you input is from a computer, but it isn't like a printer. You step on a pedal and if you don't like what you've done you can change things and 15 minutes later go back. So you have a flexibility that you didn't have before. You can weave by hand. You don't just push a button and it chunks out."

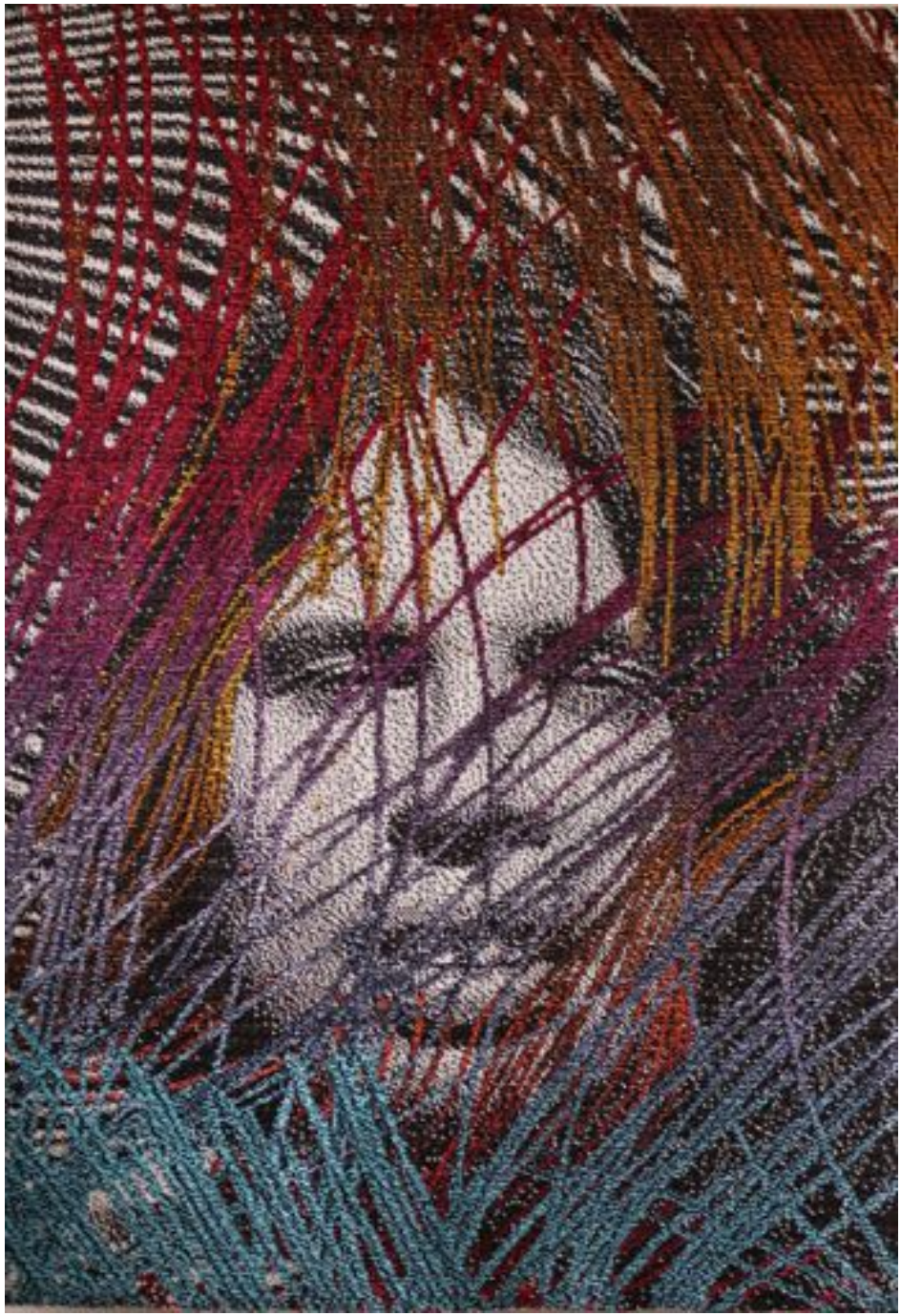
As a student of the history of her art form, Cook's studio is something of a weaving museum.

"One thing I do is research things that interest me, which I do long before I ever use them in my work," she says. "And I always thought Jacquard had a real possibility. I did a lot of research around that."

On display in her studio is a turn of the 20th century Jacquard loom from England whose invention revolutionized the manufacture of textiles with complex patterns. It's controlled by a chain of punch cards laced together into a continuous sequence. That innovation is considered an important step in the history of computer hardware.

"That's when the whole thing changed," Cook says. "Before Jacquard, only really wealthy people could have elaborate textiles. Once they had this loom, then they could make multiples, and then elaborate textiles could be available to the general public.
"Some people think it's early computer programming," she adds, showing how it works by stepping down on a length of rope wrapped around her foot to produce a satisfying ka-chunk.

"I love that sound," she says with a wide grin.



Back to the brain

Working with a New York neuroscientist, Cook is hoping to get more detailed MRI images of her brain to use in future pieces.

She points out that the neuro-threads in her current work don't actually show the connections that have to do with touch and real-time emotion – the stuff that really interests her.

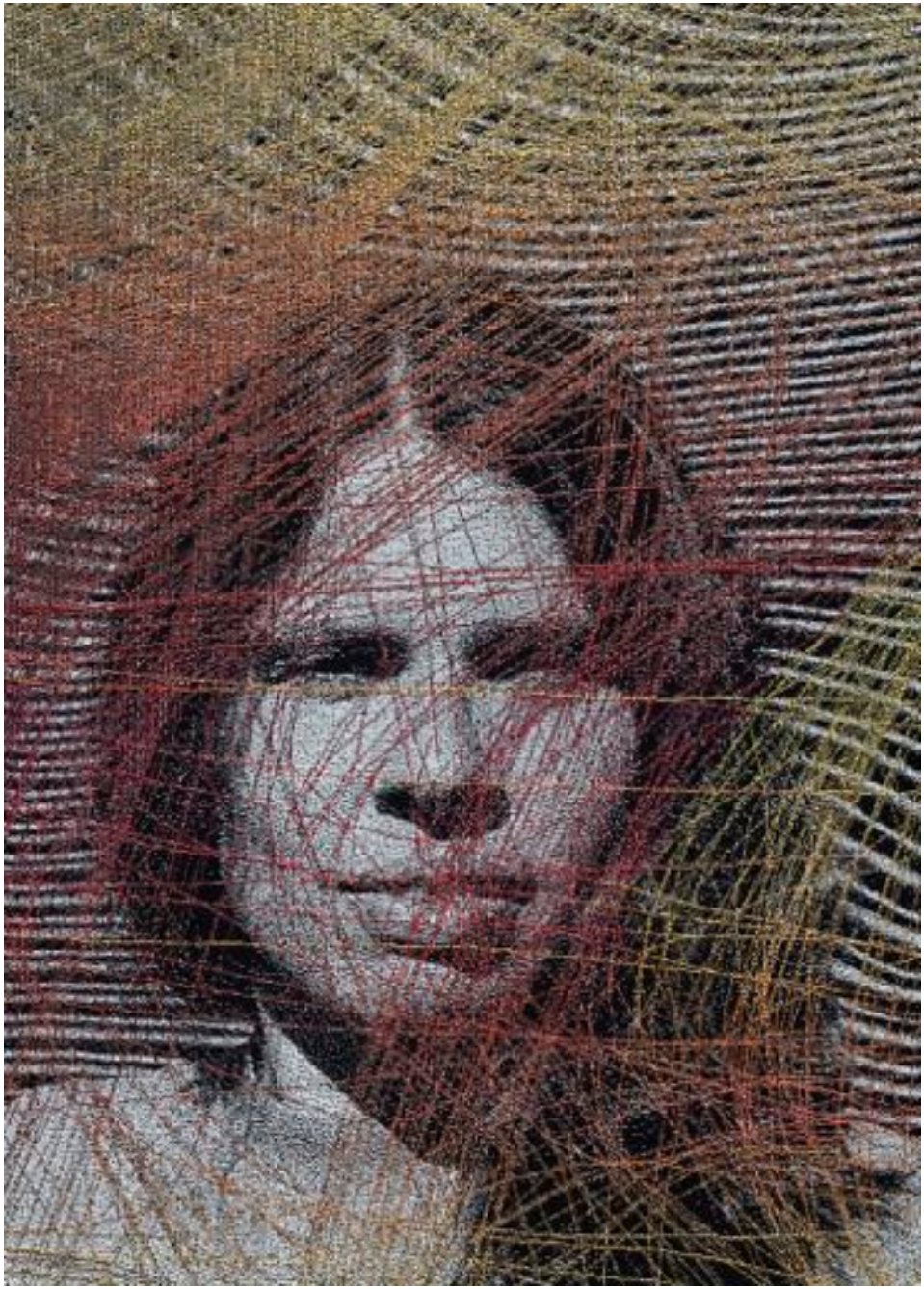
"The image that I have now cuts off before the emotional part," she explains. "And I want to get specific."

She also wants to get more abstract. She plans to hang some of her weavings away from the gallery wall so that viewers walk around can see both sides.

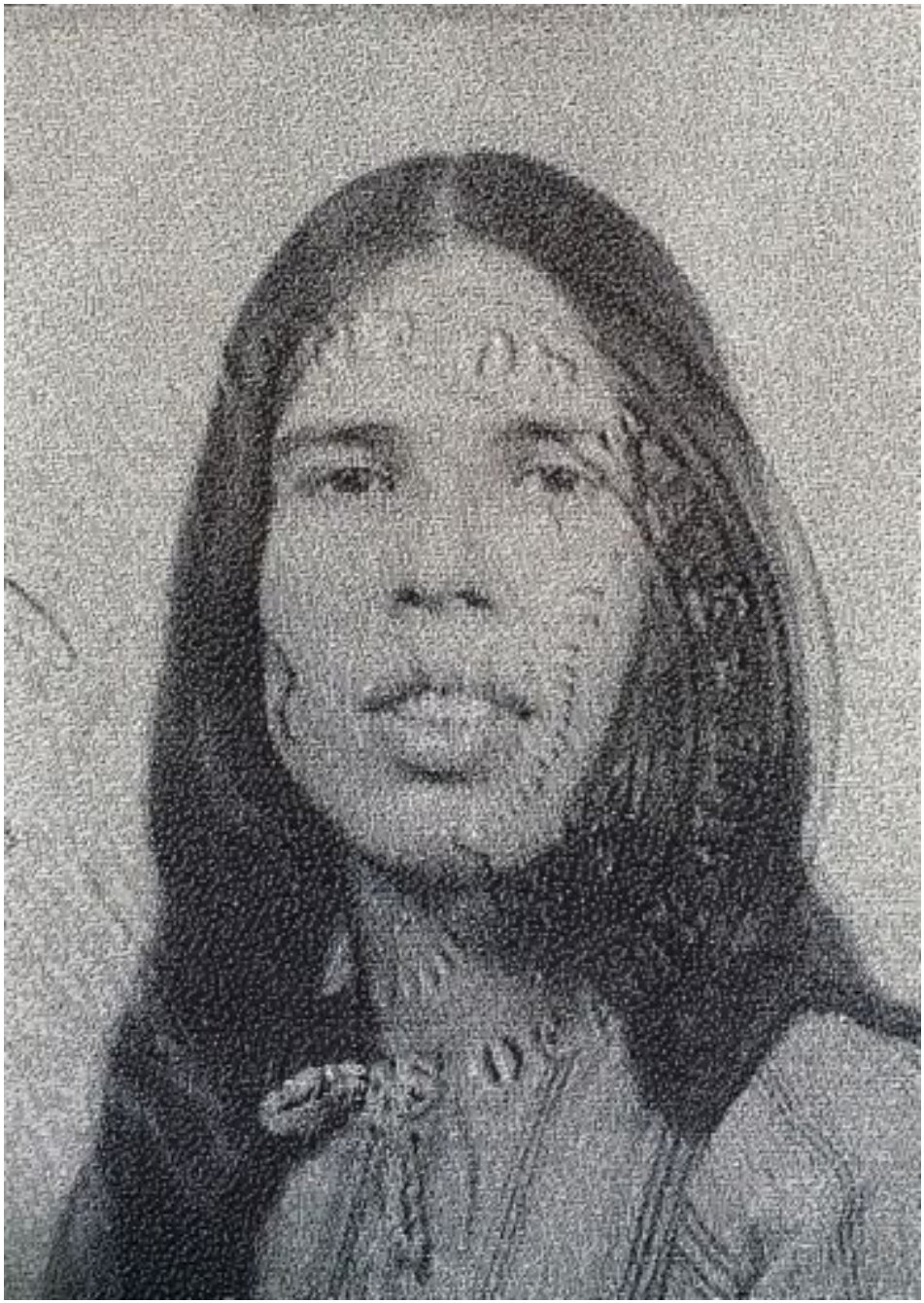
"When you walk around the back it's really abstract," she says, doing that very thing in her studio. "I think it gives you more of a feeling than when it's plastered on the wall." She's created the text pieces and recent others in a coarser weaving than she usually uses. The aim is to make her tapestries more accessible to people unused to seeing weaving as a form of fine art. It's been the case that her work has often been confused with painting or photography, but she wants to make it clear that these are weavings, that this is textile art above all else.

"Sometimes people will walk through a whole exhibit and not even notice it's all weaving," she says. "I want people who are not familiar with textiles to recognize it more."

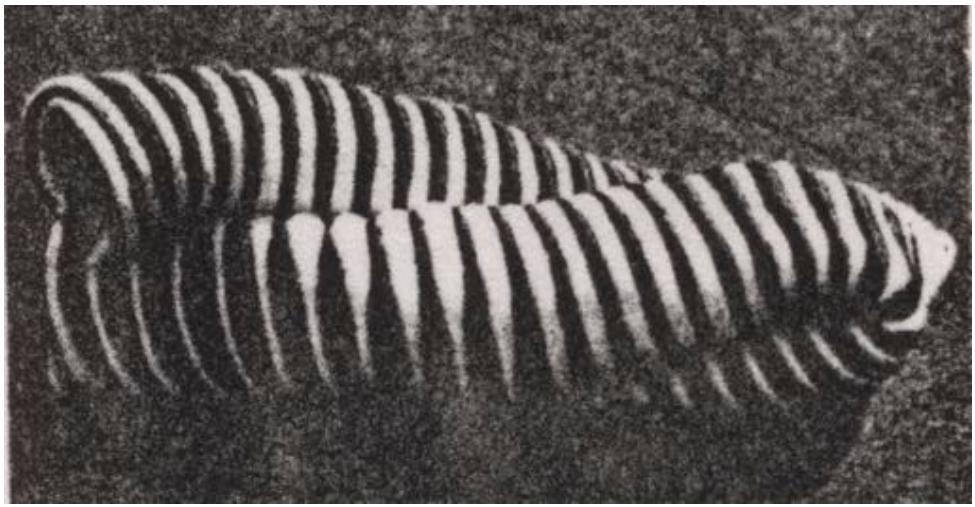
left: *Mindmeld*, 2016, cotton, rayon, woven, 70" x 48"



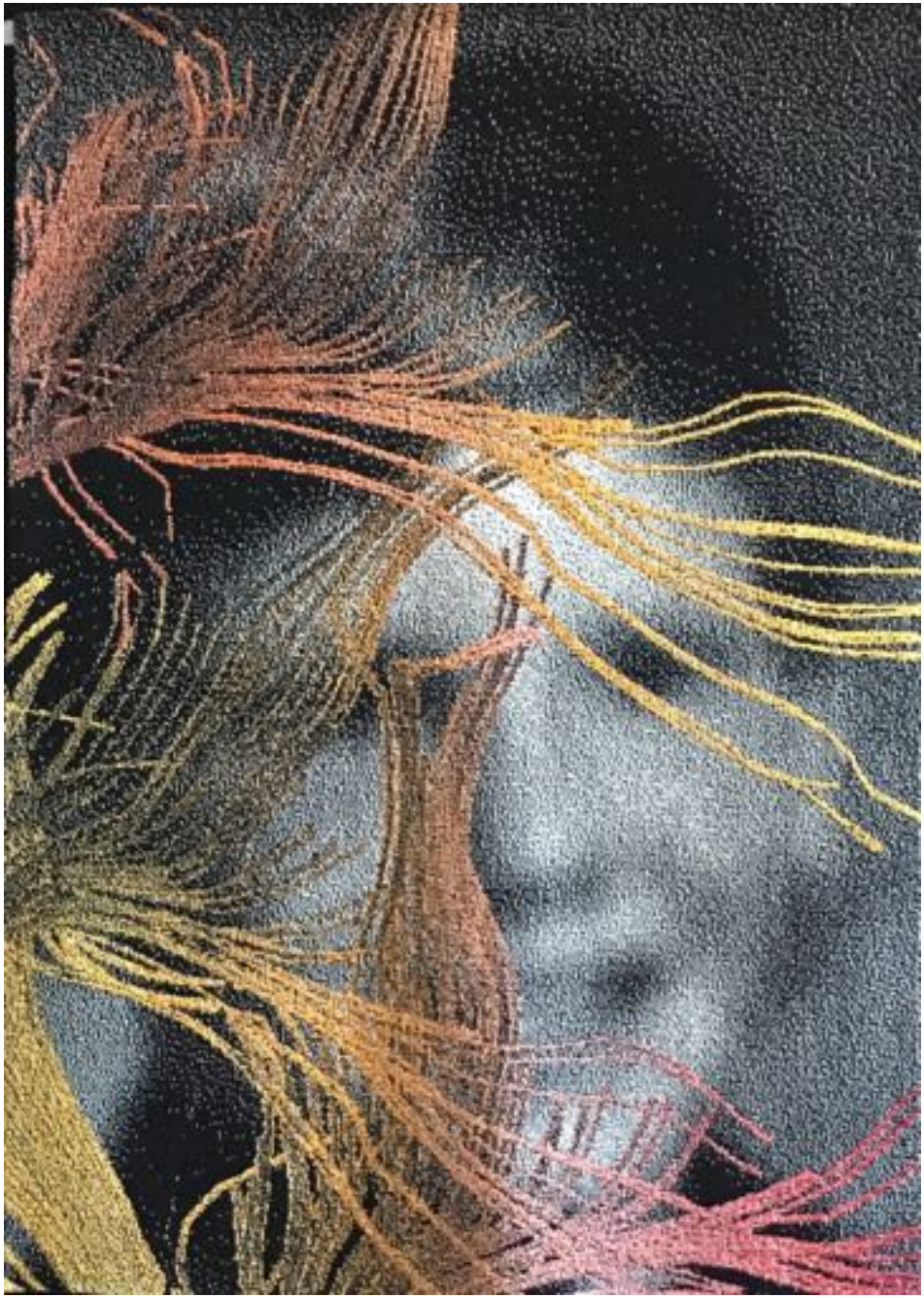
Connectome, 2013, cotton, rayon, woven 72 x 51”



Passport, 2016, cotton, rayon, woven, 54 x 39”



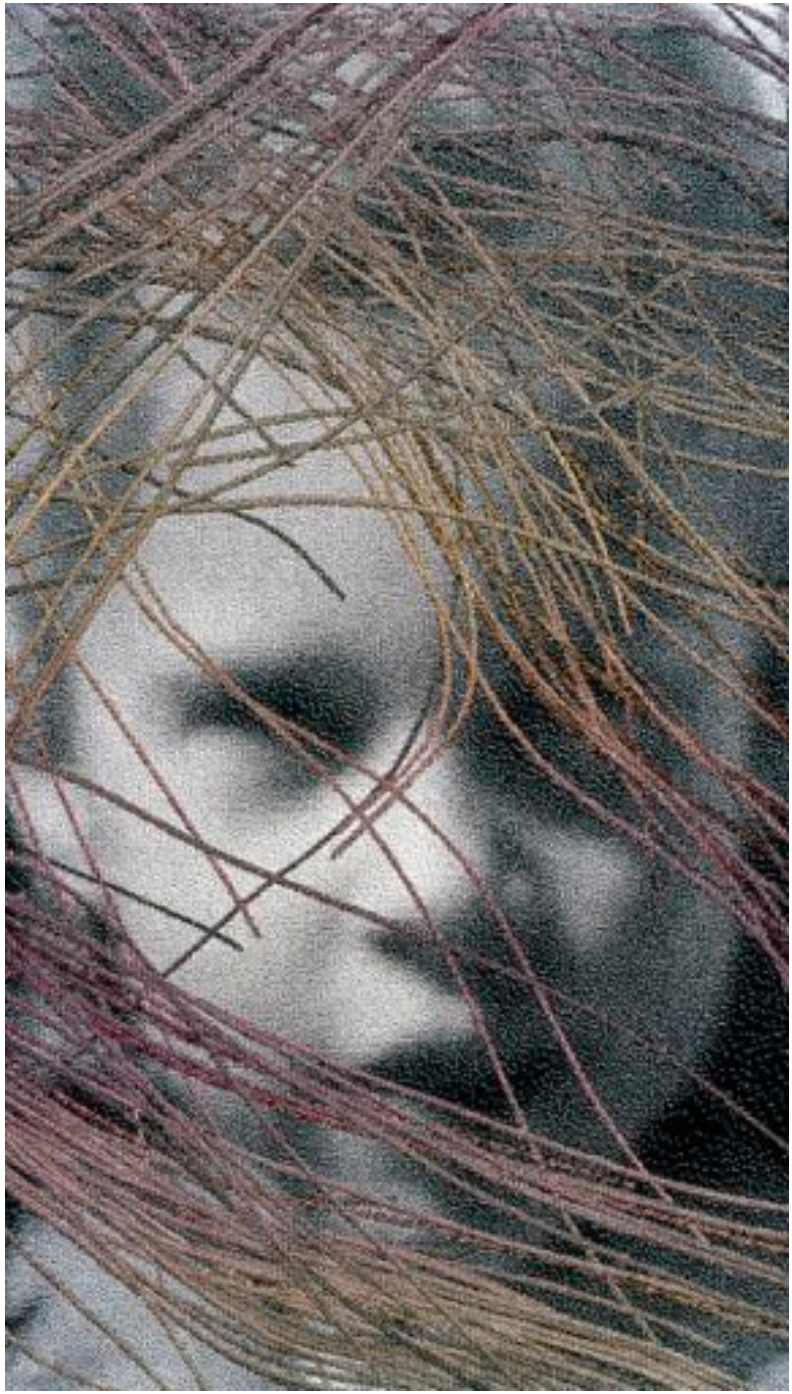
Legs, 1977, cotton, polyurethane foam, woven, 12 x 7 x 4.5”



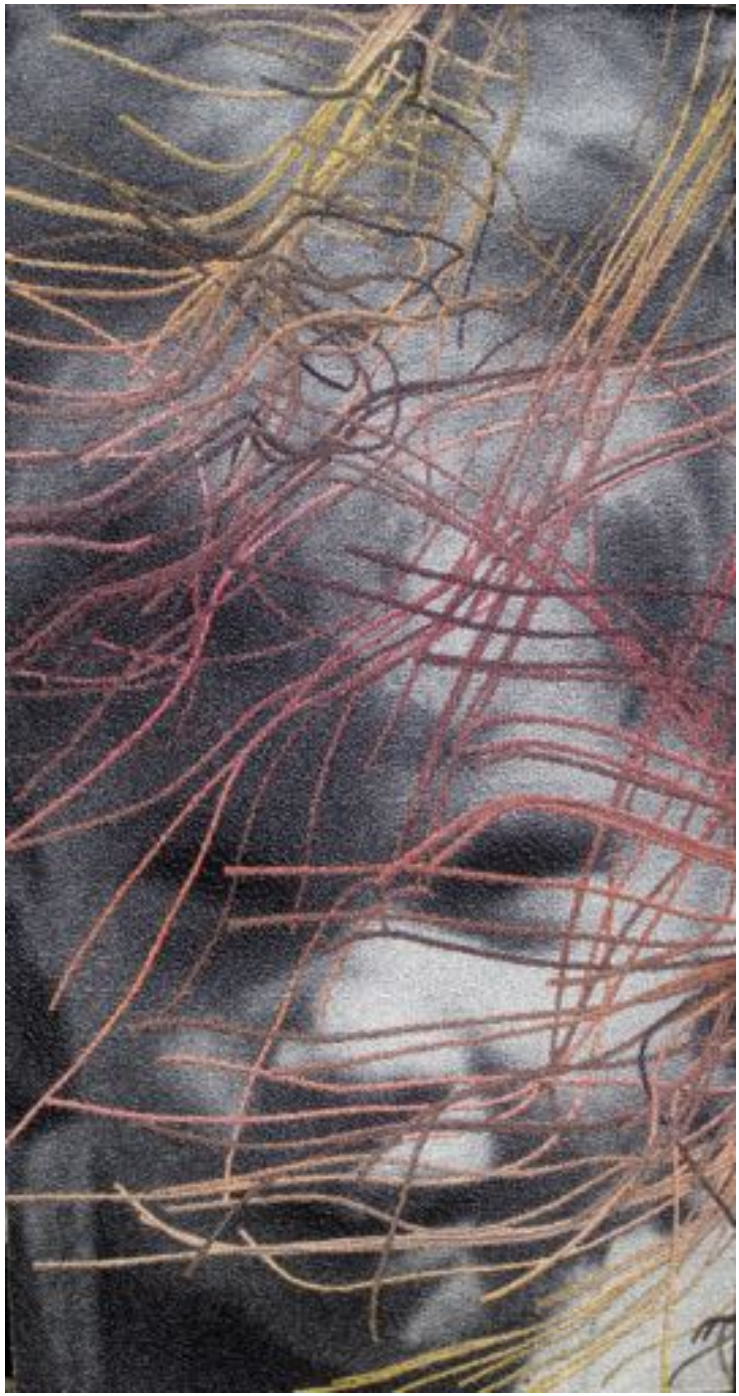
*Timothy,*2015, cotton, rayon, woven, 52 x 36”

Net Net, 2013, cotton, rayon, woven, 40 x 48”

Inner Nets, 2011, cotton, rayon, woven, 39 x 51”



Traces Past, 2012, cotton, rayon, woven, 88 x 50”



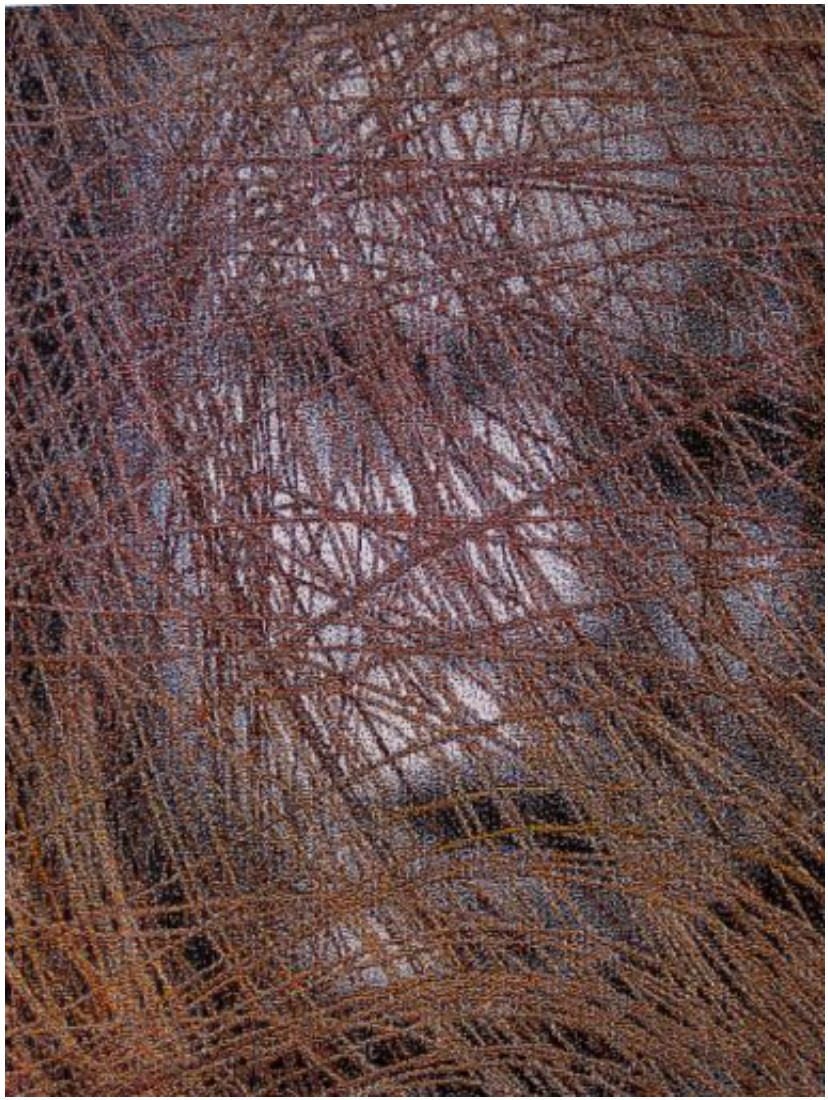
Tracts and Traces, 2011, cotton, rayon, woven, 96 x 50”

Su Series

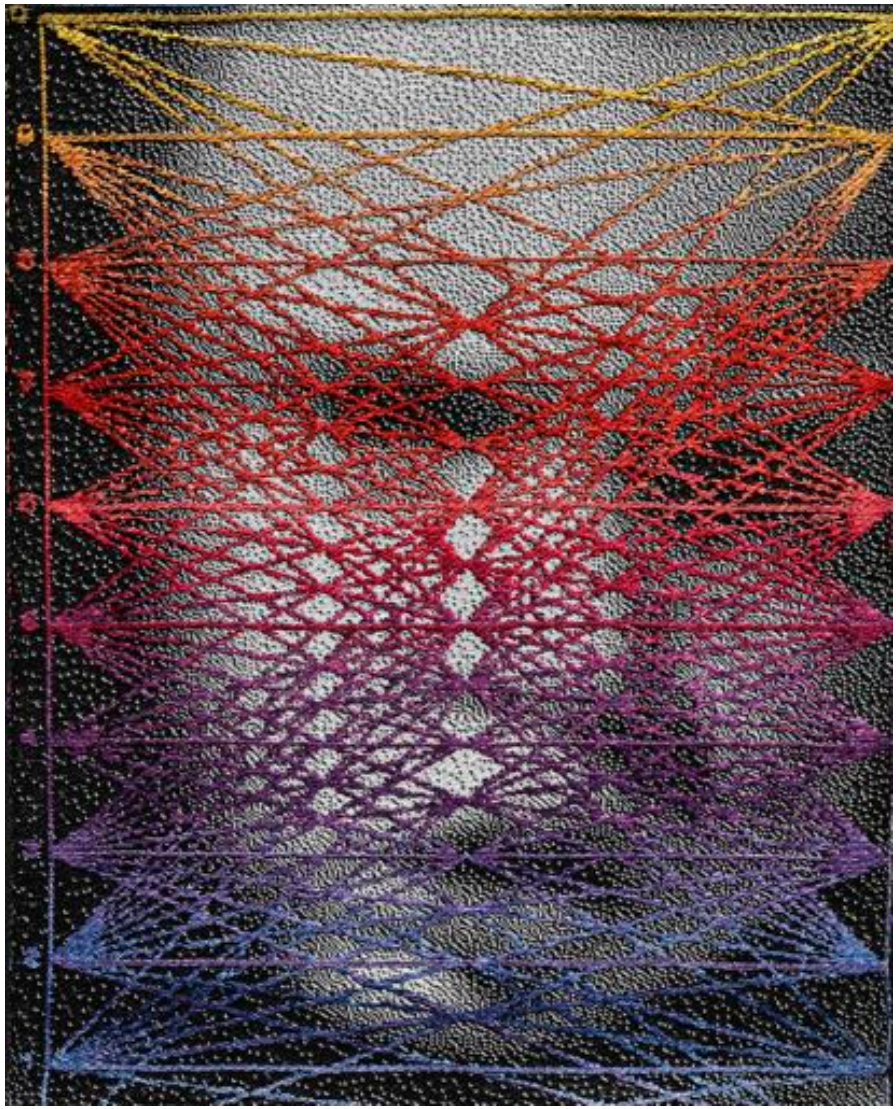
The Su Series is made up of 32 individual pieces consisting of multiple iterations of the same face, an image of myself as a child. Each time the individual face is translated through the weaving process in a new way, it seems to form a different emotional expression, perhaps sad, worried, angry etc. Sometimes the change is subtle and sometimes dramatically different even though the original face image from which is taken is exactly the same each time.

I am interested in the threshold at which the face dissolves first into pattern and then into a sensual tactile woven structure. What does this discovery and the resulting intense desire to touch the work add to our already innate, almost automatic emotional response to seeing a face? In the Su Series I am exploring how the specific translation of the image effects the nature of this response.

_ Lia Cook, 2017



Su Inside Out, 2011, cotton, rayon, woven, 88 x 52”

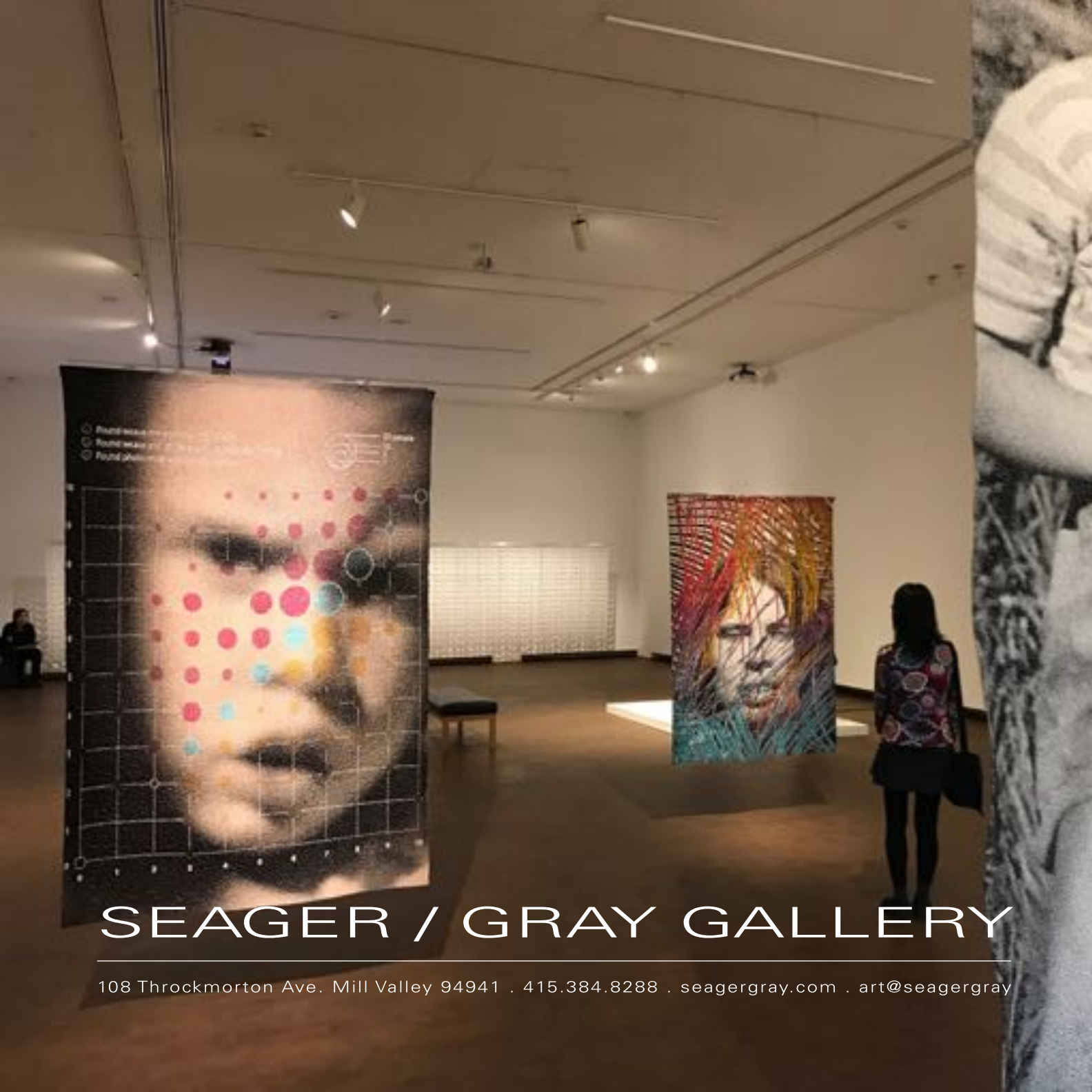


Positivity Su Data, 2014, cotton, rayon, woven, 60 x 48”

LIA COOK

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Honolulu Museum of Art, HI
Zhejiang Museum of Art, Hangzhou, China
Denver Art Museum, CO
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, MN
Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian, NY
Boston Museum of Fine Arts, MA
Gregg Museum of Art & Design, North Carolina State University, NC
The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, NSW, Australia
Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, OK
The Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH
American Association for Advancement of Science, Washington, DC
Museum Bellerive, Zurich, Switzerland
Det Danske Kunstindustrimuseum, Copenhagen, Denmark
American Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY
Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, WI
De Young Museum, Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco, CA
Galerie Nationale de la Tapisserie et d'Art Textile, Beauvais, France
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
National Permanent Collection US Embassy, Moscow
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA
Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS
University Art Museum, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX
US GSA, Federal Social Security Building, Richmond, CA US
GSA, Pittsburgh Federal Courthouse, Pittsburgh, PA.



SEAGER / GRAY GALLERY

108 Throckmorton Ave. Mill Valley 94941 . 415.384.8288 . seagergray.com . art@seagergray