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In the weave: textile-based modes of making and the vocabulary of handcraft in selected contemporary artworks from South Africa

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Abstract

This research focuses on handcrafted artworks made by contemporary artists working in South Africa who employ textile-based materials and processes of fabrication related to weaving and/or unweaving in producing sculptural objects, installations and performances. The primary aim is to investigate how and to what ends contemporary artists working in South Africa have chosen to engage in practices that are common to textile-based handcraft traditions of weaving, stitching and tying. This is done with reference to indigenous southern African textile-based traditions of making where appropriate. The focus is on how artists have understood manual work and its philosophy, and how conceptualization in their creative practice is accessed through the physical act of repetitive making by hand, based particularly on those traditional textile craft practices associated with weaving. In examining selected examples, such 'textilic' making practice is considered from a generative perspective involving a process of 'following materials' through handcrafted fabrication (Ingold 2010a). Furthermore, the study considers a material-conceptual interplay between 'text, textile and *techne* (craftsmanship)' and the knowledge production that this intertwining generates (Mitchell 2012). In South Africa, craft materials and techniques are currently in use by contemporary artists in very particular ways, and in relation to the historically politicized context of the country. I critically examine how the selected artists' works intersect with a politics of craft that is particular to the country's post-apartheid context, and how they subvert or destabilize the hierarchical distinction between art and craft.