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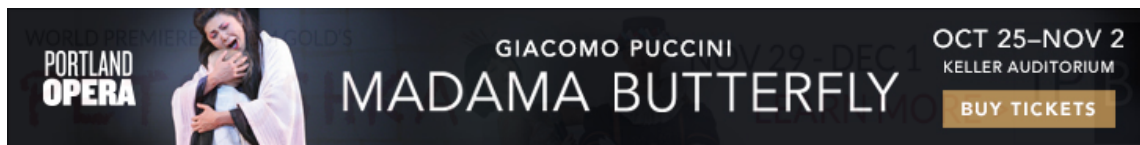


# OREGON ARTSWATCH

## OREGON'S ARTS & CULTURE NEWS

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## Oregon ArtsWatch



### [VISUAL ART](#)

## Warp, weft, in between and beyond

### Martha Daghlian reports on the Textile Connections Symposium “Textiles & Culture: Past, Present, and Future”

October 30, 2019 // [VISUAL ART](#) // [Martha Daghlian](#)

As Portland Textile Month wrapped up its second year, the Textile Connections Symposium made its debut on October 26th and 27th 2019. The Symposium was a weekend-long gathering held at Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) that consisted of artist lectures and discussions on Saturday and a “makers’ marketplace” on Sunday all of which aimed to spark critical conversation and networking amongst a broad range of artists and craftspeople in the metro area. The Symposium was independently produced by a team of dedicated volunteers with support from Columbia FiberArts Guild, PNCA, Oregon Community Foundation, Portland Textile Month, and Regional Arts and Culture Council. The inaugural theme of “Textiles & Culture: Past, Present, and Future” was an apt focus for an art medium that spans generations and cultures, albeit not always continuously or comfortably.

I attended the speakers’ day with two companions from the fiber/textile arts community. We encountered a diverse group with a shared interest in developing community and finding ways for fiber art to assert its relevance into the twenty-first century. Nearly a dozen artists spoke about their work to an enthusiastic audience, reflecting both on the craft legacies they had inherited and on their individual efforts to innovate and bring their practices forward aesthetically and conceptually. This tension between respect for the past and anticipation of the future provoked much open-ended and considerate discussion regarding the complex relationships between art, craft, identity, sustainability, and pedagogy that proved the Symposium’s success in forging connections and inspiring critical engagement within the fiber arts community.



Feral Abbasi-Ghnaim sewing traditional tatreez embroidery. Photo courtesy of [tatreezandtea.com](http://tatreezandtea.com)

The speakers' day began at 10 am Saturday morning with mother-and-daughter Palestinian embroidery (tatreez) experts Feryal Abbasi-Ghnaim and Wafa Ghnaim. Tatreez is a style of embroidery consisting primarily of cross stitching on traditional Palestinian gowns known as thobes, and although its origins are global, having been originally adapted from Chinese textile designs obtained through ancient trade routes, it gradually evolved into a uniquely Palestinian tradition. [Abbasi-Ghnaim was awarded](#) a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship in 2018 for her artistry and activism. Ghnaim is the author of [Tatreez and Tea](#), a book documenting her family's craft and its cultural significance.

Before the 1948 *nakba* ("disaster") in which over 700,000 Palestinians were exiled or fled from their country, tatreez was a highly regional decorative art. Ghnaim led the audience through a guided slideshow tour of the various styles of tatreez including the richly adorned *melek* or "royal" thobes of Bethlehem, the iconic wine-on-cream motifs of Ramallah, and the modestly concealed thobes of Galilee. Abbasi-Ghnaim modeled her own thobe for the audience, walking up and down the aisles, microphone in hand, explaining the meaning of the intricate designs.



Wafa Ghnaim tatreez-adorned denim jacket. Photo courtesy of [tatreezandtea.com](http://tatreezandtea.com)

The pair explained that after the displacement of 1948 and the loss of culturally significant goods including thobes, many Palestinian women whose respective villages might previously have had little interaction came together to remake tatreez as a symbol of unified Palestinian identity. During the ensuing decades of violence, curfews, and cultural oppression, tatreez became an opportunity for aesthetic and bodily resistance. The Ghnaims showed the rapt audience images of thobes from the 1970s and 80s bearing cross-stitched outlines of a unified Palestine, motifs featuring men slingshotting rocks, and the liberal use of the colors of the Palestinian flag. Ghnaim also showed her own tatreez-embellished denim jacket, which utilized the traditional "missile" pattern (also interpreted as an upside-down cypress tree) to illustrate her personal struggle

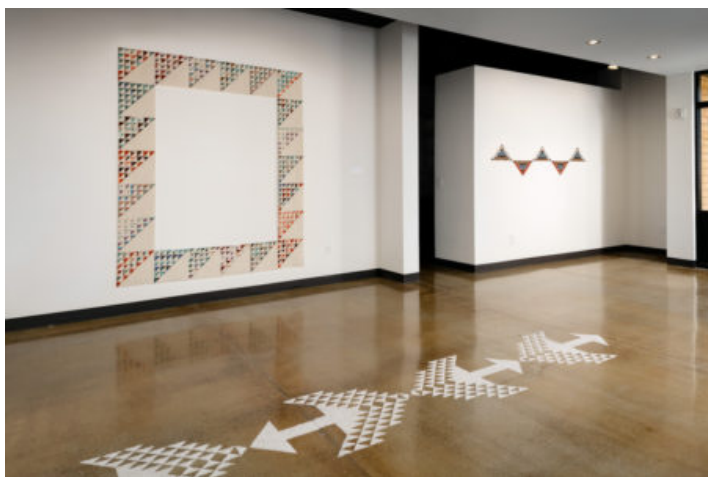
with postpartum health complications and chronic pain. The audience offered up sensitive, nuanced questions, including one about tateez and cultural appropriation (Wafa's response: there is a distinction between mass commodification and individual appreciation), and another regarding the regional origins of a particular tateez-decorated garment in the attendee's personal collection (it was a jacket worn over thobes in certain areas).

The crowd's excitement might have led to another hour of discussion with the Ghnaims were it not for a symposium organizer's timekeeping. Next on the agenda were individual presentations by three Oregon-based fiber artists. During the presentations, it became apparent that the practices of Francisco Bautista, Sonja Dahl, and Adriene Cruz shared a common medium, but little else. Bautista, a fourth-generation Oaxacan weaver, was firmly rooted in a craft-based approach that values the passing on of family tradition above all else. He has recently gained recognition and awards for his skillful incorporation of another craft tradition, that of the Bauhaus school, into the woolen weavings he and his wife Laura create on their floor-pedal loom but he seemed most interested in talking about his young son's aptitude for weaving. At several times, Bautista was moved nearly to the point of tears as he described how his son had proclaimed himself a future fifth-generation weaver.



Francisco Bautista demonstrates traditional Oaxacan weaving techniques on his loom. Photo by Caleb Sayan and courtesy of Portland Textile Month.

In contrast, Dahl presented a rigorously researched body of work that explored her own identity as a white settler on occupied native lands through the symbolism of quilting patterns and historically loaded materials. She described how her love affair with indigo dye had curdled when she learned of its association with environmental pollution and the trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequently inspired a new line of inquiry in which the artist faced her own cultural legacy as an occupier and oppressor. Without the context Dahl provided in her presentation, it might be hard to discern the emotional vulnerability contained within the meticulous craftsmanship and restrained look of her work – perhaps there is really no easy way to represent the messy reality of accounting for one's inherited guilt without some direct dialogue.



Sonja Dahl. *Recounting Fragments* (2018). Photo by David Paul Bayles.

Cruz began her presentation by describing one of her first memories of noticing color – as a child she admired the multicolored dog biscuits her mother kept for the family pet, and she got a big laugh from the audience when she described her confusion that “the biscuits tasted so bad when their colors were so good.” That sort of self-assured good humor runs through Cruz's multi-decade practice that includes tapestry-crochet, quilting, public artworks, and fiber sculptures inspired by ceremonial Yoruba *egungun* costumes. The artist described her work's connection to her ancestry as a member of the African diaspora, a connection so profound that she has even had visions while working in her studio. Color and texture are Cruz's primary concerns, and she has developed an exuberantly decorative visual style that proclaims her individuality even as it honors her heritage.



Adriene Cruz. Photo courtesy of [adriencruz.com](http://adriencruz.com)

The afternoon's panel discussion, which shifted the focus from fiber arts as a mirror for cultural inheritance to its contemporary and future relevance to global society, had so much momentum the event organizers had trouble bringing it to a close. Four artists, all of whom are also educators, were led in a rigorous and exciting exchange by designer Ophir El-Boher for around two consistently engaging hours. The discussion, titled "Textiles Now: Continuity & Disruption," centered around the question of how tradition and progress coexist within the textile world and particularly as they are taught in higher education settings.



Panel Discussion. Photo by Mel Christy and courtesy of Portland Textile Month.

Alison Heryer, a costume designer and professor at Portland State University, and Sara Bernstein, a fashion scholar and professor at PNCA, both shared a focus on critically engaging with the often conventional narratives of fashion and textile history they teach to their undergraduate students. They described their pedagogical methods for opening our perceptions of history to readings grounded in non-Eurocentric perspectives and non-binary identities, and emphasized that their progressive-minded young students were often the sources of their inspiration. Heryer described how making costumes, which are created specifically for the actors that will wear them, had influenced her thinking about how fashion affects and is affected by individuals. She described an upcoming project that takes this idea further by documenting the entire wardrobes of fifty Portlanders, including people from marginalized groups like those experiencing houselessness and members of the trans community, which elicited much enthusiasm from the audience. Bernstein's efforts to shake up the world of fashion scholarship have taken the form of an online magazine, called *Dismantle*, that features critical takes on contemporary fashion and culture written by professors, students, professionals, and amateurs alike. After realizing that the world of academia was too cloistered for her tastes, Bernstein created *Dismantle* as a way to broaden the field and its audience, in the hopes of effecting real change in our shared understanding of why, what, and how we wear.

Many of Tricia Langman's innovations arose from her experience as a professional textile designer. Langman has worked with some of the biggest names in fashion, and has made her mark by changing both the way new collections of textile designs are conceived and presented within the industry (she popularized the use of actual fabric samples instead of concept drawings on paper), and by reworking processes like batik dyeing to be both scalable and sustainable. She is now training her focus on the intersection of fashion and science, declaring that biomimicry will be the future for textiles. She cited experimental fabrics that have incorporated mushrooms, imitated shark skin, and delivered vitamins through the skin, as examples of the possibilities that open up when craft and design are incorporated into STEM curriculum.



Langman painting batik wax on Pendleton wool. Photo courtesy of [Pendleton.com](https://www.pendleton.com)

University of Oregon professor Jovencio de la Paz brought to the discussion a unique perspective on the relationship between textiles and technology, which was at once deeply critical and hopeful in unexpected ways. The fiber art department at UO houses both a digital jacquard loom and an 18th-century version that uses punch cards to program the weave, a system which is often referred to as the “first computer.” Working on both of these machines has inspired Paz to bring the digital aspect of the modern loom back into the material world by pushing its software to its limits – creating, in his words, “monstrous mathematical aberrations”. He does this by inputting images that the software cannot easily convert to a pixel-based weaving scheme (certain gray tones, simple line drawings), and that result in bizarre computer-devised solutions that have a “glitchy” look when woven on the loom. Paz sees this failure of the digital to properly translate content into reality as evidence of the lack of attention that has been paid to the “heart” of digital and AI technology, which has largely grown up in the narrow context of capitalism. The question of what we might lose when we abandon the material, or haptic, aspects of life in favor of the digital world, was brought into focus for Paz when he noticed many of his undergraduate students seemed to struggle with manual fluency. He is currently pushing for added functionality on digital loom software to make it more open to intuition and creativity, and less dependent on artificially predetermined pathways. In his view, the materials, functions, and processes of fiber arts have a special ability to bridge the realms of human embodiment and digital technology as we move forward.

The throughline connecting the day’s discussions, both on and off the stage, was the question of how fiber arts communities, and perhaps the medium itself, ought to evolve in order to keep up with contemporary cultural and technological contexts. There was much talk of incorporating scientific research, rethinking teaching methods, and even renaming entire fields of study. The exhibitors at Sunday’s marketplace showed off high-tech fiber innovations, like soft circuitry and computer-generated fabrics, and organizers from Portland Textile Month touted a new online platform for fiber artists called the [TextileXchange](https://www.textilexchange.com). But the most important work seemed to be happening already. Simply connecting fiber and textile artists with each other – sharing their work, traditions, and opinions – might have the greatest impact on the future strength and development of the community. In that respect, the Textile Connections Symposium was significant in providing a platform for artists to learn more about their peers in the field and to talk about the value of fiber arts not only in the context of other disciplines but also, perhaps more importantly, within this vibrant and dedicated community.



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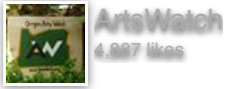
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