



**Title**

Textiles in contemporary art

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Cover image: **Fig. 4** *Koco at the Bodega*, by Tschabalala Self. 2017. Coloured pencil, photocopies of hand-coloured drawings, acrylic, Flashe, fabric and painted canvas on canvas, 243.8 by 213.4 cm. (© the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London; photograph Andrea Rossetti).

# Textiles in contemporary art

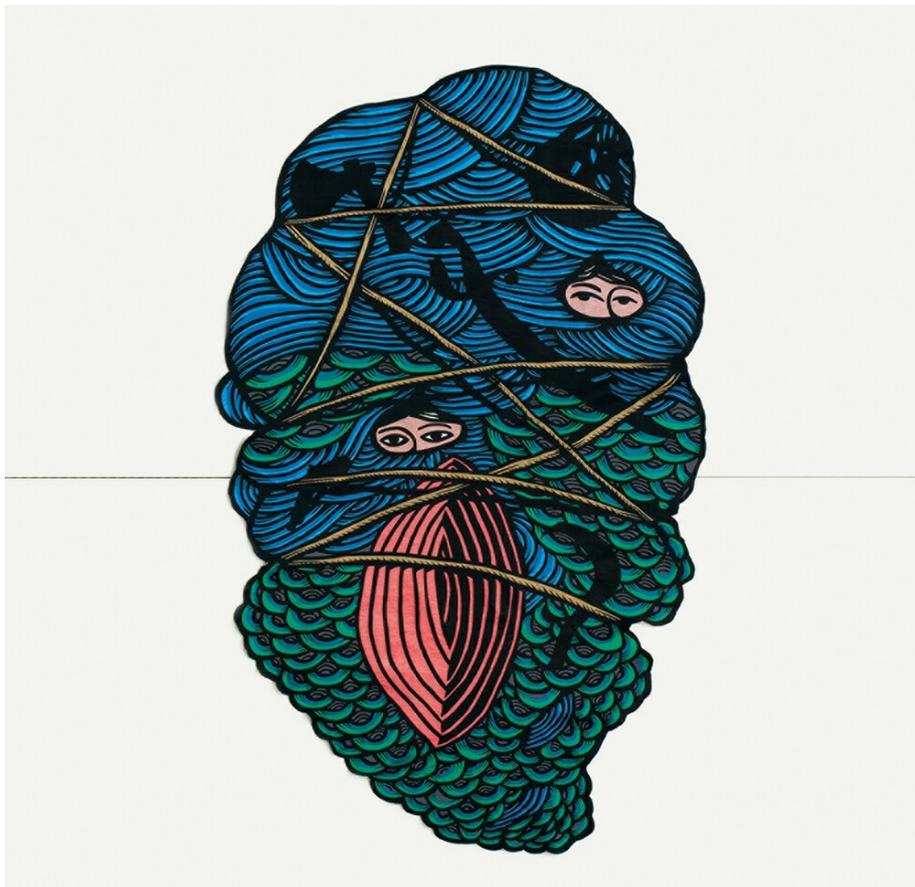
by K.L.H. Wells • 22.01.2020

*Vitamin T* is part of a series of books published by Phaidon that surveys contemporary art through the lens of a specific medium. Beginning with *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting* (2004) and followed by *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* (2005), the series has grown to include follow-up books on painting and drawing, as well as volumes devoted to photography, sculpture and installation, sustainable design, clay and ceramics, and now textiles.<sup>1</sup> The book's subject-matter is referenced explicitly by the cover, which mimics a moth-eaten cloth whose holes reveal a colourful patchwork of textiles below, while a pink thread adorns the spine of the book in a crisscross pattern. This elaborate cover design suggests an attention to medium specificity that the book itself prefers not to deliver.

The chief value of *Vitamin T* lies in its inclusiveness and diversity. The book profiles 114 artists (including one artist duo) from all over the world who engage with textiles in a wide variety of ways. Each artist is described in a brief essay (up to 450 words) and even briefer curriculum vitae, followed by several illustrations. The book's ratio of word to image is weighted heavily in favour of pictures. Of the thirty-four writers who contributed to the book, some excelled at the brief essay format by providing succinct accounts of the artists' development and compelling interpretations of their works' significance. Louisa Elderton, who co-edited the book, deserves special mention here, along with Jonathan Griffin, Henry Little, Mitch Speed, Sean O'Toole and David Trigg. In addition, Elizabeth Buhe, Paul Carey-Kent, Elbe Coetsee, Kristian Vistrup Madsen, Nina Miall, Michele Robecchi, George Vasey and Elvia Wilk provided exceptional commentary. The artists are arranged alphabetically, which avoids any kind of hierarchy, but also any kind of interpretative categorisation. In browsing through the book, a reader might be able to identify that some artists engage with indigenous textile traditions [FIG.1](#) while others appropriate mass-produced clothing [FIG.2](#); that some artists treat textiles as monumental structures [FIG.3](#) and others as pictorial wall hangings [FIG.4](#). But the editors themselves have made no such effort to connect the dots.

On one level, such a refusal to categorise these artists' use of textiles is admirable, allowing readers to make their own interpretative connections rather than dictating prescribed routes. But the editors' reluctance to organise their material also undermines the very premise of the book. In their preface, the

editors, Elderton and Rebecca Morrill, emphasise that while the book focuses on ‘a particular category of media’, that medium has so many ‘plural meanings’ that it defies categorisation. Although the book surveys textiles in contemporary art, it also ‘embraces pluralism. It incorporates craft techniques into the story of contemporary art rather than suggesting further segregated categories’ (p.9). Although one can understand the desire to avoid segregating textiles from the wider category of contemporary art, the proposition of *Vitamin T* is to do exactly that, to isolate textiles as worthy of our focused attention. Phaidon’s series of *Vitamin* books is thus structured around the contradictory project of categorising contemporary art by medium while avoiding making any coherent claims about the stakes of that medium in artistic practice today.



**Fig. 1** *Mask 2*, by Eko Nugroho. 2012. Manual embroidery, 237 by 149 cm. (© the artist; photograph Danang Sutasoma).

This hesitancy to make clear interpretative arguments about the different meanings that textiles could have in contemporary art derives from the presumption that we are operating in a post-medium condition. As Janelle Porter writes in her introduction to the book, we are now ‘post fibre, medium unspecific’ (p.17). Indeed, the editors acknowledge that not all of the invited artists agreed to be included in the book since doing so would categorise their work as textile art (p.9). Likewise, many of the writers emphasise that the artists they discuss are not really textile

artists, because they work in a variety of media, because they consider their work to be variations of painting or installation, or because their work eludes categorisation all together.



**Fig. 2** *A.C.Q. (III)*, by Senga Nengudi. 2016–17. Air conditioner parts and nylon tights, 335.3 by 243.8 cm. (© the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, and Lévy Gorvy, New York and London; photograph Natasa Radovic).

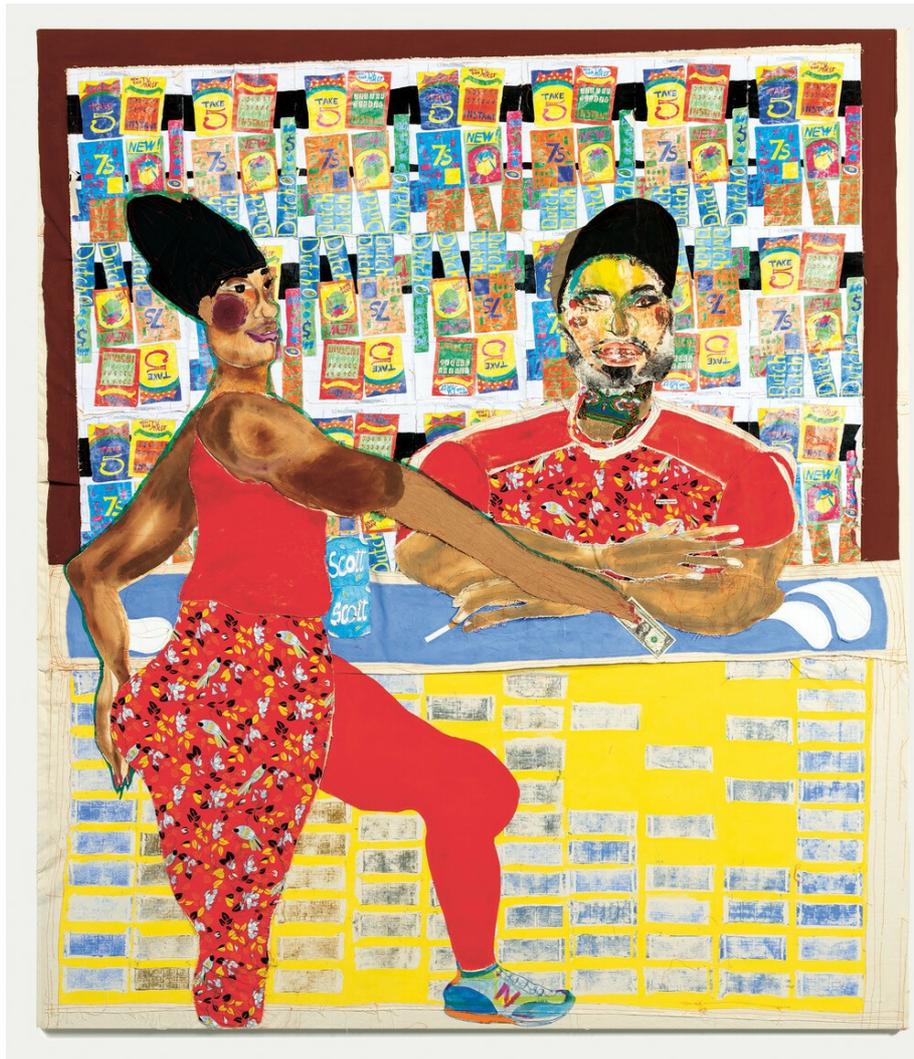
On the other hand, the critical importance of focusing attention on textiles derives from the presumption that the medium has been excluded from the category of high art. The book's inclusion of such artists as Sam Gilliam and Do Ho Suh **FIG.5** alongside those more associated with craft, such as Olga de Amaral and Faith Ringgold, under a shared category of textiles seems calculated to produce a certain subversive frisson. Porter's introduction to the book relies on this narrative of an art/craft divide to lend critical substance to artists' use of fibre, arguing that historically, 'the promise of a robust art movement was diminished by fibre art's

persistent categorisation as craft' (p.10). But Porter also insists on an inherent equivalence between the works of fibre artists and their more prominent colleagues in 'Minimalism, postminimalism, Conceptualism, performance art, land art and feminist art', claiming that 'in its attitude, textile art of this period was no different from its contemporaneous movements' (p.10). Porter thus overlooks the meaningful differences in historical context between fibre artists, minimalist sculptors and feminists that have been so convincingly analysed by Elissa Auther; ultimately Porter's introduction does not advance beyond her earlier catalogue text for the landmark exhibition *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present*.<sup>2</sup>



**Fig. 3** *Big Boss*, by Orly Genger. 2010. Recycled lobster rope and paint, installation view at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams. (© the artist and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams).

Hoping to have it both ways, *Vitamin T* implies that we should be interested in textiles within contemporary art because of their historic marginalisation but that this history is no longer relevant for interpreting textile art today. Although individual writers engage in critical readings of their material, the overall project of *Vitamin T* is clearly celebratory. With its elaborate cover, copious colour illustrations and impressive heft, the book makes a handsome object suitable for display. Leafing through its pages would undoubtedly prove inspiring for a range of practitioners and its succinct presentation of a diverse range of artists makes the volume a useful reference for those teaching or curating with textiles.

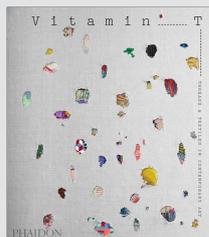


**Fig. 4** *Koco at the Bodega*, by Tschabalala Self. 2017. Coloured pencil, photocopies of hand-coloured drawings, acrylic, Flashe, fabric and painted canvas on canvas, 243.8 by 213.4 cm. (© the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery, London; photograph Andrea Rossetti).



**Fig. 5** *Home within Home within Home within Home within Home*, by Do Ho Suh. 2013. Site-specific commissioned artwork for Hanjin Shipping Box Project, MMCA (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art), Seoul, 13th November 2013–11th May 2014. (© Do Ho Suh, Lehmann Maupin, Victoria Miro and Contemporary Art, Seoul).

## About this book



*Vitamin T: Threads and Textiles in Contemporary Art*  
 Edited by Louisa Elderton and Rebecca Morrill, with an introduction by Jenelle Porter  
 Phaidon, London and New York, 2019  
 ISBN 978-0-714876-61-0

## Footnotes

- 1** *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography* (2006); *Vitamin 3-D: New Perspectives in Sculpture and Installation* (2009); *Vitamin P2: New Perspectives in Painting* (2011); *Vitamin D2: New Perspectives in Drawing* (2011); *Vitamin Green* (2012); *Vitamin P3: New Perspectives in Painting* (2016); and *Vitamin C: Clay and Ceramic in Contemporary Art* (2017).
  
- 2** E. Auster: *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, Minneapolis 2009; and J. Porter, ed.: exh. cat. *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present*, Boston (Institute of Contemporary Art), Columbus (Wexner Center for the Arts) and Des Moines (Wexner Center for the Arts) 2014–15.

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