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String Theory

Delicate weavings reveal a painter's approach to tapestry **BY ELIZABETH KHURI CHANDLER**

Ruth Laskey tucks her long, brown hair behind her ears and settles in front of her floor loom, much like a pianist about to strike ivory keys. Leaning in close to count the threads, she places her feet against the pedals and passes the shuttle through the web of alabaster strings.

The 35-year-old California College of the Arts graduate first began weaving in 2001 because she wanted to paint on handmade canvases. She purchased a 1970s loom off Craigslist, then jettisoned oils entirely—choosing to make weaving the medium instead. “With painting, I felt very disconnected from my work because I was buying the paint, buying the canvas, spending five hours making a painting, and then I was done. It didn’t feel complete,” she says. >>

At her Glen Park studio, Laskey sits in front of work from her Twill series.



In order to create the woven part, or weft, the wooden shuttle is fed through vertical threads called the warp. Laskey colors her threads by dipping them in a dye bath and names the final piece after the manufacturer's paint color. ABOVE At work at her 1970s loom. BELOW An assortment from Laskey's shuttle collection.

From a distance, her technique does look like brushstroke. Geometric patterns, series of squares, one flickering diagonal—color in these tapestries whispers with deliberate tempering. She hand-dyes her threads to generate gradations of tone. In one series, Laskey uses a third thread to represent the overlap of two hues on the grid. “I’ve always been more focused on the materials,” she says. “The weaving becomes a fluctuation. It’s what’s going on between the hard-edged and the curvy.” Critics have called the interplay, as seen in her *Twill* series, anachronistic and quiet; a fusion of design and process.

San Francisco art dealer and collector Sabrina Buell was intrigued by Laskey before she purchased a piece in 2008. “She is able to remove her hand from the gesture, and they [the art] are both personal and formal at the same time, which I find compelling,” says Buell.

Most recently, the artist was named a recipient of the Biennial SECA (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Artists) Art Award from SFMOMA. The honor is bestowed upon four independent artists who have not yet received widespread recognition. Nearly 30 finalists host



curators and patrons from the 50-year-old society at their ateliers—in Laskey’s case, her Glen Park garage, in front of the home where she grew up and now lives with her husband, sculptor Jonathan Runcio—to view their methods in action. Along with the award and a modest cash prize, Laskey will receive some well-deserved attention as part of a fall showcase at the museum. “We were impressed by the meditative quality and precision underlying her working method and how, with each investigation of color, line and gradation, she continues to push her materials in new directions,” says Tanya Zimbaro, co-curator of the prize.

For Laskey, process reigns supreme: She flicks on experimental jazz on her stereo, creates a version on graph paper and weaves each tapestry for a month until satisfied. In a way, her care mirrors one of her idols: Canadian “stripe” painter Agnes Martin. “She used to make them very slowly,” Laskey explains. “It was about the way the mark went across the painting rather than trying to make the mark mean something.” Then she pauses for a second. “It’s all about getting to the essence.” *Ruth Laskey is represented by Ratio 3 in San Francisco; ruthlaskey.com.* •