

Cast-off: Revisiting Modernist Abstraction Through Vernacular Craft Practices

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Fig. 1 – Eirini Boukla, 1,2,3,4,5 *Untitled (Sirens Net)*. 2023. Wool, Gouache, on Cardboard packaging.

Introduction

Ever since the secularization of Europe that occurred during the Renaissance and emergent interest in *humanism* and philosophical ideals that emphasized the value and agency of human and emotional expression and transformed the artist from an anonymous craftsman to an individual practicing an intellectual pursuit, Western culture has discriminated art and craft as two distinct modes of production. Art is seen as an autonomous and expressive pursuit, whereas craft is often associated with repetitive, skill-based work constrained by material and function (Green-

halgh, 1997). Because of this binary of functionality and creativity, certain media having associations with the processes and vernacular functions that tended to be practiced by women, for instance, needlework, have customarily been consigned to the spheres of decorative arts and female culture and given a lower profile which contributed to their denied art status (Parker, 1984)¹. I refer to vernacular as creative practices produced by often self-taught individuals who are and may not identify as artists. These creators work outside traditional art institutions and commercial galleries, emphasizing everyday creativity that may reflect unique material, cultural, and geographic contexts. This emphasis plays a significant role in this reimagining as artists increasingly integrate techniques and materials typically thought of as functional or decorative.

In recent times, contemporary art has seen a new trend that broadens the scope of its practice. Materials and techniques once *cast off* as simply decorative or functional are re-emerged, challenging entrenched hierarchies, and redefining the relationship between art, craft, and the social. A distinguishing feature is the absence of uniformity, ideologies, and principles of organization. Instead, frequently bridging traditional art boundaries, the conduits of art and its circulation (Johnson et.al., 2024)² have merged into the larger social discourse that focuses on contextual frameworks such as cultural and personal identities, nationality, family, and community and shows a wide range of materials, media, and technologies, as well as situations to reflect on what art is and in what way it is defined (Art21, 2024)³. In this setting, conceptual and subversive work in materials long-established with craft, for instance, textiles and the

¹ Textile arts and crafts have historically been associated with femininity and domesticity. Art historian Rozsika Parker highlights how patriarchal structures confined women to decorative arts within the home, ultimately intertwining these practices with Western cultures «to know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women».

² In the catalogue for the Barbican exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*, Lotte Johnson remarks: «Back in 2020, we had collectively noted how textiles were proliferating across contemporary art practices». This proliferation of textile art can be traced back to recent societal changes and the instrumental role of cultural intermediaries, including museums and private galleries.

³ Characterized by diversity of material, of form, of subject matter, and even time periods the distinguishing feature of contemporary art is the absence of uniformity, ideologies, and principles of organization. Instead, contemporary art has merged into the larger social discourse that focuses on contextual frameworks such as cultural and personal identities, nationality, family, and community.

decorative, has begun to breach the established boundaries of functionality and tradition (Elkin, 2024).

Considering my current practice within this landscape, especially my work *Sirens Net* (fig. 1), a body of work which combines repurposed commercial packaging, paint, yarn, and techniques associated with amateur and vernacular arts and crafts, I am mindful of the historical discrimination opposing painting's abstract forms to craft ornamentation. This qualitative distinction works «to distinguish the Modernist aesthetic from 'simple decoration'» keeping a dismissive "hierarchy of media" arising from the binary opposition between art and craft (Auther, 2006). However, contemplating the convergence of abstract art with amateur arrangements and exploring the connection between abstraction and everyday utility raises questions about how this blending of an art-oriented practice with applied techniques affects a reshaping of the boundaries between vernacular and high art practices.

I should also point out that my reflections in this text focus on the everyday practices I remember growing up in a small fishing community in northern Greece. While many of these practices link to female roles and traditions and the critical characterization of their *feminized* domestic craft, for the focus of this discussion, I will not address gender roles analyzed by feminist theories. As it becomes clear in the next section, I see these practices here are as much connected to my father and the everyday activities of men as they are to my mother and women.

Drawing on personal memory, material observation, and the cultural environment in which my early encounters with craft developed, this article adopts a practice-led research approach. The biographical elements included here serve as a contextual foundation that supports the analysis of how vernacular craft practices shape and intersect with abstraction. Rather than functioning as narrative material, these experiences provide the cultural and material grounding through which broader questions about making and abstraction can be examined.

The research develops through three interconnected methods. First, material and visual analysis enable close attention to the structural, surface, and formal properties of both vernacular crafts and my own artworks. By examining pattern, repetition, construction, and the organisation of materials, the study identifies ways in which the visual logic of domestic craft parallels and complicates modernist accounts of abstraction.

Second, the discussion employs practice as research, treating the process of making, particularly in the development of *Sirens Net*, as a mode

of inquiry. Decisions taken during the production of the work, such as reworking, unravelling, overlaying, or recomposing materials, become sites of reflection, generating insights into cultural memory, material transformation, and the relationship between abstraction and everyday craft traditions. In this way, the studio operates not only as a place of production but as a space for thinking through materials.

Additionally, contextual reflection grounded in lived experience situates the analysis within the cultural and familial environment that shaped my early understanding of making. These reflections illuminate how everyday craft practices, embedded within domestic and communal settings, inform my perception of abstraction and material structure. While personal in origin, these experiences function here as a lens for examining broader themes of vernacular aesthetics and the resonance of everyday objects within contemporary art.

This methodological orientation is especially relevant to the concerns of this article. The themes addressed, vernacular craft, domestic creativity, material transformation, and abstraction, are intertwined with lived practices and embodied forms of knowledge. A practice-led methodology, therefore, provides the most appropriate framework for articulating how artistic making can produce theoretical insight, and how personal and cultural memory contribute to current discussions of abstraction and material culture.



Fig. 2 – Fishing net in my father's garage.

Rediscovering Domestic Craft in my Practice

«There is a story to tell every time objects and people meet. » (Pamuk in TRT World, 2025)

While visiting my home in Greece and helping to clear out my father's garage, I was reminded of my father's love for fishing and my upbringing in the village. This reminder of my family's story and the narratives embedded in everyday life contributed to my work's shift in process and contextual framework. Growing up, the most cluttered and crowded, and to me, special space in the entire house was the garage, my dad's domain. Everywhere you turned, the traces of his things showed this room belonged to him and triggered remembrances of his presence. Here, an incident that prompted and shaped my thoughts and this writing was seeing a fishing net still hanging in this space (fig. 2). At that moment, the sight of my father's hanging fishing net, a familiar object from childhood, took me back to the beach, where he and his friends would wash or mend the nets. As a child, I was mesmerized by their gestures, skills, and effortless actions, as well as their laughter and playful banter (καλαμπούρι), which still linger as a soundtrack in my ear (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 – My father and friends on the beach. 1977. Author's family archive.

However, when my partner (also an artist) joined me in the garage and noticed the hanging net, he did not see my recall of the net's narrative, practices, or utility. Instead, unmindful of any social formations that shaped the net's existence, he focused on its formal aesthetic. Seeing a surface effect that mimicked an artwork, or more accurately, its image, he considered the net as an Eva Hesse-like sculpture, highlighting a contrast between our experiences. His distant aesthetic observation, devoid of the intersubjective connection I felt, created an atemporal formalist viewing experience. He acted to perceive, while I, immersed in the memories, simply perceived. His view was unidirectional, mine multilayered, shaped by shared experiences and a sense of deep connection. The fishing net, for him, was a formal object, but for me, it was a portal to a tapestry of shared history, a reminder of a life lived and people loved, embodying sentiments that go beyond the limits of art and everyday life. Here, a distinction raised a critical position between artwork and artefact. My partner's sense of an aesthetic driver, which may not have been intended, upholds an ingenuous question about art or artefact while narrowly maintaining their distinction. This distinction is arguably partly attributable to museum history and the fact that many artefacts were originally amassed and displayed as art, removed from their archaeological context (Whitehead, 2009, p. 9). Consequently, the separation of objects from their original utility and context presented as isolated artworks has hindered a comprehensive understanding of their cultural significance, as their meaning is not intrinsic but rather shaped by cultural construction, as noted by Thomas (1991), director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge: «Objects are not what they are made to be but what they have become» (p. 4). This highlights the role of context in grasping the significance of an object. By removing objects from their original contexts and presenting them as art, we risk misinterpreting their true meaning and reducing their cultural value to a purely aesthetic. Consider, for example, the ART/artifact exhibition at The Centre for African Art in New York (now the Africa Centre) in 1988 and the Zande hunting net, an instance that foreshadows the story of my father's fishing net⁴ (Jasper, 2017). The exhibi-

⁴ Similarly in 1984, the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, became a controversial display juxtaposing non-Western artifacts from Africa and Oceania with modern art by Euro-American artists. Aiming to explore connections and similarities between diverse art traditions, the exhibition drew criticism for its narrow western per-

tion was a landmark examination of how African artefacts were displayed and classified in Western contexts, influencing their interpretation and reception (Vogel et.al., 1988). The Zande hunting net, still rolled and bound for transport, was placed on a low, perfect white pedestal, prominently displayed in a pristine white room designated as the art museum, with minimal contextual information distinguishing between utility and neighboring artistic objects. This ambiguity, intentionally mirroring modern sculpture aesthetics, emphasizes the curatorial decision and the influence of Western art history and museum practices as much as anthropological fieldwork. This illustrates how the distinction between art and artefacts is shaped by display techniques and the institutional context that frames our understanding of these objects (Faris, 1988).

My point is that failing to acknowledge the intricate web of social, historical, and cultural factors that shape the meaning of an object reinforces the notion of art as autonomous and detached from the social realm, emphasizing its aesthetic qualities and distancing it from its cultural significance. However, attributing meaning solely to the object itself, rather than acknowledging its culturally projected nature, overlooks the dynamic and collaborative process of meaning-making, in which objects derive their significance from their interaction with the social, historical, and cultural context in which they are situated. As a result, it undermines the inherent interconnectedness of art and society, obscuring the ways in which art reflects, shapes, and is shaped by the world around it.

Spending this time at home in Greece and reflecting on my father's fishing net led me to reconsider notions of craft and vernacular art, shifting my focus toward the intersection of fine and applied art, particularly in relation to modernist geometrical abstraction. This reflection drew my attention to the blurred presence of abstraction in everyday life and its manifestation in the practical and decorative belongings made by my family and village neighbors. Noticing these handmade objects, knitting, needlework, and other domestic crafts, I began to see aesthetic similarities with the principles of modernist abstraction, particularly in their structural arrangements. These works, despite being created outside formal artistic training, often exhibited symmetrical patterns, repetitive modular elements, and a clear engagement with materials, paralleling the visual logic of minimalist and geometric abstraction (fig. 4).

spective. Critics argued that it did not fully appreciate the aesthetics, meaning, and purpose of non-western objects, and rather than serving as a historical analysis of the West's appropriation of tribal cultures, essentially re-enacted it.

The intuitive and lived experience guiding these vernacular creations suggests that abstraction is not confined to institutional art practices but appears organically within vernacular traditions. Although their makers did not identify as artists, their work carries a significant visual language that aligns with modernist abstraction. This observation aligns with the perception that abstraction today functions less as a rigid ideology and more as a stylistic situation, absorbed into broader cultural tendencies rather than serving as a critical rupture. Suggesting that contemporary abstraction is no longer a distinct movement but a flexible approach that interacts with diverse visual languages (Boukla, 2013). Extending this idea and drawing from Bourriaud's (2002) argument that contemporary art is less about crafting from raw materials and more about engaging with existing cultural artefacts, positioning artists within an ongoing dialogue rather than as isolated creators. Indicates that originality in today's abstraction also arises through recontextualization rather than the pursuit of a blank slate⁵.

Within this framework, *Sirens Net* evolved towards geometric abstraction initially through the reworking of discarded materials, specifically flattened commercial packaging and Amazon delivery boxes cluttering my studio. Painting over, I observed their branding, shipping labels, and signs of wear, subtly narrating transnational movement and collective handling. While using monochrome color to cover the surfaces, I became aware of parallels to urban graffiti removal processes, an unintentional form of modernist formalism. The act of 'buffing', which involves painting over graffiti to conceal it, inadvertently generates compositions reminiscent of minimalist abstraction⁶ (Kalin, 1997). McCormick's (2001) documentary, *The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal*, highlights how these unintended aesthetic remnants echo the formal concerns of modernist abstraction, raising questions about authorship, originality, and collective and vernacular labor.

⁵ Karen Moss, director of exhibitions and public programs at the San Francisco Art Institute, in conversation with Nicholas Bourriaud notices «Because of the conundrum of not being able to produce anything new, I find it interesting that your proposal for art is post-production—mining previously made work and recontextualising it. That is what, if anything, could be considered new, the recontextualisation of the already made». <http://karenmoss.art/articles-essays/>.

⁶ Kalin's insights, dating back to 1997, on how overpainted surfaces can strikingly resemble the works of modern masters like Rothko further underscores the accidental visual dialogues sparked by this process.



Fig. 4 – Handmade tablecloths by my mother and grandmothers.

This realization prompted a deeper engagement with abstraction's material and conceptual layers, particularly as I reflected on the woven and gridded structures I had observed in my mother's and grandmother's knitting and crochet work. I repurposed a knitted jumper my mother had made for my father, unravelling and reknitting the thread into a crochet grid paralleling and overlaying the buffed packaging layouts (fig. 5). This act underscored the structural and conceptual significance of the grid, both in its material manifestation and in its historical association with modernist abstraction. I show the interplay between solid and negative spaces within the crocheting process, in some ways, resonated with the aesthetic logic of a modernist grid, where absence is as integral as presence.

As Krauss (1985) posited that the grid functions dually as a spatial tool and as a representation of abstract thought, allowing for works that are simultaneously tangible and conceptual. This perspective increased my interest in the grid's role within modernist abstraction, particularly in relation to its recurring presence in both vernacular and social spaces. The textile-like nature of the grid connected to the checkered tablecloths of traditional *καφενείο* (village coffeehouses) and the intricate crochet lace that adorned family tables. These textiles, embedded in communal experiences and social rituals, suggested a broader cultural engagement with geometric abstraction beyond formalist art discourse. The grid, rather than being an exclusive modernist device, appeared as an organic structure woven into everyday life, connecting material culture with aesthetic order.

Valoma (2005), stressing this connection, stated, «for generations, weavers have delved into the distinctive graphic possibilities of constructing units within a grid framework. Textile arts have transcended mere technological innovation; they have laid the groundwork for a rich aesthetic tradition known as the geometric aesthetic, which can be regarded as the intrinsic language of textiles» (p. 46). Indicating that textile practices have long anticipated the visual and conceptual inquiries that modernist abstraction later formalized. In this sense, the material and spatial logic of the grid in fiber arts offers *Sirens Net* an alternative lineage of abstraction, one rooted in vernacular, communal, and utilitarian traditions rather than solely in avant-garde formalism.

Through these explorations, my work has come to negotiate the intersection of modernist geometrical abstraction and vernacular material culture. The transformation of found objects, whether discarded packaging or repurposed textiles, foregrounds abstraction as a process shaped by recontextualization and adaptation rather than pure invention. By tracing abstraction's presence in the everyday, my practice attempts to bridge formalist concerns with lived experience, positioning geometric abstraction as both a historical artistic language and a persistent, evolving aesthetic embedded in material culture.

Re-Considering the Decorative in Abstract Painting in Relation to Domestic Crafts

When exploring the history of Abstract art, the established discussions often overlook the connection between textile and vernacular art and its

development. Historically, textile art and the decorative crafts have been linked to women, while abstract art has primarily been attributed to men. As a result, the gendered division added to a devaluation of textile and household crafts, often regarded as amateur intellectually, and aesthetically inferior to abstract art (Auther, 2004). This narrow perspective on abstract art has reflexively created boundaries that obscure historically significant connections and innovation. Looking into these neglected realms, it was necessary to understand the interconnected development of abstract art and decorative arts. I was particularly interested in the features of textile and home-based craft practices that evoke aesthetic pleasure. These surface and decorative effects have often been considered superfluous and contrary to high art, esteemed intellectualized professional practices.

Discussing art's surface features and the decorative element, which are seen as supplementary aspects primarily appealing to the senses, Kant (1987), in *Critique of Judgment*, proposed that the decorative, as an ornamental or supplementary element, contributes to aesthetic enjoyment, but it is not fundamental to the artwork⁷. Positioned between the object's form and an audience's subjective interpretation, the value of this element can enhance and detract from the artwork's artistic value. So, indulging the sensor through surface features, he argues that it compromised the artwork's autonomy, hindering unbiased aesthetic judgment and obstructing the appreciation of true beauty⁸ (p. 181).

This bias against surface effects continued in the 20th century. Loos (1908), criticizing ornamentation as superfluous and antithetical to Modernist ideals, considered ornamentation as a cultural regression, arguing that true modernity required its elimination from functional objects (p. 20). Seeing ornamentation as an unnecessary appendage incompatible with the modern age, the early 20th-century philosophies of *Modernism* and aesthetics of abstraction promoted the systematic exclusion of ornamentation from functional objects. Greenberg (1960) in *Modernist Painting* emphasized that the true significance of visual art lies not in an-

⁷ Referring to parergon as beside the work or in addition to the work. «Even what we call ornaments (parerga), i.e., what does not belong to the whole presentation of the object as an intrinsic constituent», but «is only an extrinsic addition, does indeed increase our taste's liking, and yet it too does so only by its form as in the case of picture frames, or drapery on statues or colonnades around magnificent buildings» (p. 181).

⁸ «On the other hand, if the ornament itself does not consist in beautiful form but is merely attached, as a gold frame is to a painting so that its charm may commend the painting for our approval, then it impairs genuine beauty and is called finery» (p. 181).

ecdotal or literary elements, though entertaining, but in its *medium specificity*. He argues that these extraneous elements distract from the essence, and more specifically, that each art form possesses a unique strength dictated by its inherent nature and *its proper area of competence*. This *purification* process strips the artwork down to its fundamental essence, emphasizing aesthetic unity transcended by the material, resulting in a concentrated, self-contained form that sets up the artwork as an autonomous entity, free from external influences. His position was that for painting to achieve true autonomy, it needed to become abstract. His reasoning was not about abandoning representation or narrative but rather about shedding any qualities shared with sculpture. So, in his view, painting's pursuit of pure abstraction was fundamentally about emphasizing its inherent flatness. This *literal two-dimensionality* of the canvas became the defining characteristic that set painting apart from all other art forms. He asserted that flatness was a quality exclusive to painting, a condition it shared with no other medium and pointed to artists like Jackson Pollock, whose expansive canvases, defined by a *polyphonic all-over* aesthetic of energetically poured and dripped paint, challenged traditional art narratives. In Greenberg's view, Pollock's work abandoned a clear beginning, middle, and end, instead favoring an uninterrupted visual field akin to wallpaper patterns, finding its meaning solely in this material reality. The sheer presence of color and its dynamic movement across the canvas created a self-contained aesthetic experience independent of external narratives, representing the ultimate embodiment of this flatness. However, this new way of painting, characterized by its decentralized composition and seemingly infinite repeatability, tread a precarious line, bordering on simple decoration.

Wrestling with the decorative implications of the *all-over* style, Greenberg (1965), in his exploration of easel painting's evolving boundaries, supports that despite a seeming flatness and uniformity nature, a picture retains its status as an easel painting, as long as it maintains a dramatic play of light and dark, a fundamental principle that anchors it within the realm of traditional art «no matter how shallow the picture becomes, as long as its shapes are sufficiently differentiated in terms of light and dark, and kept in dramatic imbalance, it will remain an easel painting» (pp. 154-157) and allows these *all-over* paintings, when successful, to possess an undeniable presence on the wall, an inexplicable quality that elevates them from surface decoration. My point is that, despite often embracing surface-level expression, abstract painting has historically

struggled to reconcile itself with the decorative. This intellectual bias, blurring the line between *all-over* painting and pattern design, has led to a neglect of textiles' expressive influence on the evolution of abstraction. While abstract painting and textiles share a common emphasis on surface and materiality, the latter's role in shaping the trajectory of abstraction has generally been marginalized due to the art world's historical preference for intellectual pursuits over sensory experiences. Confronting abstraction's tension with the decorative, *Sirens Net*, I suggest, operates within this contested space, questioning the boundaries between pattern, surface decoration, craft and art.



Fig. 5 – Eirini Boukla, *Untitled (Sirens Net)*. 2023.
Wool, Gouache, on Cardboard packaging.

Threads of Change: Modernist Disruptions and the Decorative Revival

The 1960s art deliberations and the emergence of Minimalism and Conceptualism marked a transformative period in art defined by a reductive formalism or a radically inclusive *free-for-all* (Lippard, 1973), a significant shift in the focus of art from established aesthetics to philosophical, political, and social exploration (Goldie, Schellekens, 2007). These movements, challenging the established frameworks for art making, distribution, and appreciation, expanded the definition of art to encompass more profound ideas, contexts, and reflections on human experience, fostering a more pluralistic view of art and reestablishing connections between artistic expression and everyday life.

This reconnection blurred the boundaries between art and craft, sparking discussions about gender and ethnicity biases as well as the societal relegation of craft. Materials commonly associated with domestic spaces, such as textiles, gained prominence as artists challenged the link between femininity and the notion of lesser artistic worth. Fiber art and textile techniques gained popularity, merging traditional craft practices with avant-garde artistic expression, partly due to cultural movements such as the back-to-the-land and folk-art revivals surrounding the 1976 American Bicentennial (Auther, 2008). Through these changes, female artists, previously overlooked in the craft realm, found a new platform to show their work, redefining conventional definitions of art.

Presaging this overturn of material and practice biases in 1963, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York hosted *Woven Forms*, an exhibition highlighting the work of five women whose diverse backgrounds as weavers and artists converged in a shared mode of expression. Lenore Tawney, Alice Adams, Sheila Hicks, Dorian Zachai, and Claire Zeisler, in experimenting with anachronistic off-loom techniques such as knotting, wrapping, and plaiting, using unconventional fiber structures developed «sculptural» works in which «not only the created surface but the created shape becomes an expressive formal element» (Smith, 1963).

In challenging traditional boundaries, *Woven Forms* emphasized fiber art as a legitimate art form with aesthetic power. Yet, by moving away from function, I see the exhibition reflexively reinforced the hierarchy between craft and high art, a sentiment expressed by Zeisler when she later argued that knotting in her work was an integral artistic structure rather than a decorative technique. «Some people referred to my work as Claire Zeisler's macramé. That's when I hit the ceiling [...] I do mind the word

macramé because macramé today means a decorative knot and I use my knotting technique as structure [...] The knot becomes the base for the piece, like the canvas is the base for a painting. » (Auther, 2023, p. 219)

Irritably arguing the use of macramé beyond a leisure pursuit with utilitarian imperatives, Zeisler encapsulates a modernist binary opposition between the formalist elements of her work and the decorative characteristics of popular craft. Stressing the significance of knotting in her artistic structure and drawing a direct comparison between it and painting, she invokes its medium to highlight not craft-oriented technique but art-oriented practice.

The momentum and merging of fiber-based art and craft practices with avant-garde artistic expression continued with the 1969 exhibition *Wall Hangings* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Curated by Mildred Constantine and weaver Jack Lenor Larsen, the exhibition distinguished fiber arts' advance and alignment with fine art by deliberately ignoring any utilitarian or decorative origins of weaving in favor of its formalist potential. «The weavers whose work is being shown in this exhibition are in no way concerned with the pictorial aspects of weaving but are involved with extending the formal possibilities of the craft. » (Constantine, Larsen 1969)

By adopting a modernist perspective that prioritized abstraction over practicality and emphasized the aesthetic independence of the artworks, their presentation was intentionally understated. This approach was designed to enhance the visual impact of each piece, allowing the artworks to stand independently of any functional considerations. This focus on form also extended to the exhibition catalogue, which prioritized the formal attributes of the works rather than their technical details. Notably, each piece was presented against a neutral background, a choice that echoed traditional museum practices for displaying ethnic artefacts and emphasized their formal qualities over any implied utility (Auther, 2008).

For such a major event, *Wall Hangings* attracted little critical attention, with only one notable review from artist Louise Bourgeois (1969) in *Craft Horizons*⁹. While she described the works as “delightful”, she felt they lacked a unique identity, existing precariously “between fine art and applied art”. Doing a little policing of institutional boundaries, Bourgeois

⁹ *Craft Horizons* a magazine of handcrafts and decorative arts published by what is now the American Craft Council.

differentiated them from conventional paintings or sculptures, which «place significant demands on the viewer while remaining distant from them, while these works seem more engaging and less demanding», and noting that they «rarely liberate themselves from decoration» (Bourgeois, 1969, pp. 31-35). This pejorative positioning as a decorative rather than rigorous intellectual pursuit reiterates Greenberg's stance that decoration lacks the artistic seriousness of high art, reducing it to something simply *immediately pleasing*. Bourgeois critique ultimately reinforced a hierarchy that associates art with intellectual rigor and relegated craft to simple surface effects. As a result, despite the curators' desire to challenge the art-craft hierarchy, *Wall Hangings* was eventually unsuccessful in dismantling these distinctions (Greenberg, 1986, pp. 41-42).

In contrast, the Pattern and Decoration (P&D), a short-lived movement of the 1970s, presented a counter narrative to Modernist ideals by celebrating cultural diversity and challenging male centric perspectives in art history and Western cultural hegemony. By reclaiming decorative arts, P&D questioned the exclusionary nature of modernism, opening new pathways for the reintegration of craft within fine art. Drawing on certain formal characteristics of abstraction, aimed «not to self-reflect on the abstract, but to raise issues of identity, gender, power, authority, and authenticity», (Botwinick, 2007, pp. 4-5) with its participants effectively reclaiming decorative arts as worthy of artistic consideration, highlighting the value of the decorative and craft in a way that *Wall Hangings* and Bourgeois's critique did not.

The *Pattern Painting* (1977) exhibition at P.S.1, NY, introduced what its curator Perreault called The New Decorativeness. Perreault (1977) described P&D as a synthesis of non-minimalism, feminism, and historicism, critiquing the rigid frameworks of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. He reinterpreted Greenberg's concept of *all-over painting* into an all-over patterning reminiscent of wallpaper. For example, artist Cynthia Carlson used faux wallpaper in her installations¹⁰, reconfiguring notions of the grid and a routine of prescribed steps, but from a *low art* perspective, she challenged conventional notions of conceptual aesthetics and systems through a distinctly female lens. She explains,

¹⁰ Link to image of Carlson's, Wallpaper installation, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH, 1980, accessed November 28, 2024. <https://www.cynthiacarlsonartist.com/installations>.

Wallpaper! It was a way of being subversive again, as wallpaper is usually the amount of eyesight left over after the main event - and I would make it the main event [...] I also thought there was a little humor in thinking of Pollock's all-over paintings, which were thought of as being so aggressively male. Just the opposite of wallpaper (Carlson, 2023, pp. 12-31).

Furthermore, while Carlson's wallpaper installations challenged the grid in a way that highlighted women's historical role in creating art within the home, others, such as Joyce Kozloff, confronted Western cultural hegemony, expanding the conversation around identity and cultural dialogue. Her installation *An Interior Decorated* (1978-79)¹¹ incorporated a variety of non-Western motifs, including Moroccan and Berber designs. Honoring anonymous craftsmen, she meticulously catalogued her appropriated elements to emphasize transparency in her creative process.

I've painted motifs from many traditions onto these tiles: Native American pottery, Moroccan ceramics, Viennese Art Nouveau book ornaments, American quilts, Berber carpets, Caucasian kilims [...] The motifs are clustered according to culture, and when I made them [...] The entire piece is my personal anthology of the decorative arts (Kozloff, 1979, p. n.n.).

Moreover, the P&D movement, by fostering a genuine connection to its cultural sources, embraced elements such as kitsch, craftsmanship, and ornamental decoration, celebrating openness and rejecting the exclusivity of fine art, which distinguished it from other appropriation movements of the time, such as the Pictures group¹². Influenced by Conceptual and Pop Art, the Pictures group embraced postmodern detachment and irony typical of the 1970s, with a stronger intellectual leaning compared to the more visually appealing works of P&D. Both groups engaged with feminism and appropriation, but while Pictures leaned into

¹¹ Link to Kozloff's, *An Interior Decorated*, 1978-79, installation view at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, 1979, <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/patterns-and-pictures-strategies-of-appropriation-197585>, accessed December 15, 2024.

¹² The 1977 exhibition *Pictures*, curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York, featured emerging artists Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith, who moved away from the dematerialized tendencies of Minimalism and Conceptualism to reemphasize the significance of image-making. Two years later, Crimp expanded on these ideas in an essay of the same name published in *October*, where he replaced Philip Smith's work with Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80). This further established the term *Pictures* in art history (Crimp 2005).

intellectual paradox, P&D embraced the sensuality and materiality of craft. This distinction in approach accounts for the differing critiques, with P&D viewed as *playful* and *historicist*, while Pictures was regarded as serious, intellectual, and more esteemed. However, if P&D is often overshadowed by perceptions of being simply decorative, in focusing on the interplay between found ornamental elements, global cultures, and the historical biases tied to post-war painting, it unequivocally asserts the decorative and feminine qualities of abstract painting, which have been historically overlooked. Hence, reducing P&D “to being simply playful and sensuous” and *historicist* neglects its critical engagement and depth, a stark contrast to the recognition afforded to the Pictures group (Sorkin, 2019).

Nonetheless, the influence of the P&D movement continued to be seen. Ebony (2020), in a conversation with Anna Katz, notes that the P&D movement’s embrace of decorative practices laid important groundwork for contemporary artists, who now utilize textiles, abstract imagery, and cross-cultural vernacular aesthetics as essential means for arts thematic content of story-making and storytelling and expression of identity and culture. This resurgence of surface pattern elements reiterates the significance of everyday materials and forms in the context of high art, aligning with P&D’s belief in the validity of aesthetic practices that had been traditionally marginalized. Emphasizing the lasting significance of this movement and its relevance to contemporary discussions surrounding identity and cultural heritage. During the interview, Katz also points to American artist Sanford Biggers for his varied textile-based work, in which he fuses an assortment of patterned fabrics into abstract paintings and constructivist-like sculptures that often begin with vintage quilts, blending these repurposed home-produced beddings with abstract designs, which results in a complex interplay of cultural influence.

Functionality and Aesthetics in Flux

In a conversation with Weis (2022), Biggers countersigns Katz’s reflections. Talking about his methods and how they reflect his diverse background and engage with themes of identity, politics, history, and visual culture in contemporary America, he tells, «I’m interested in craft and context, the juxtaposition of materials with my conceptual interests» (para.10). He explains that in his *Codex* series, *Freedom quilts* are used as a base of connection to a narrative that is as historic as it is mythical.

In African American folklore, *Freedom Quilts* were encoded with messages to signal safety and danger along the Underground Railroad. Biggers reinterprets these quilts by adding layers of historical, political, and artistic elements. He combines various textiles with tar, glitter, and sequins, along with painterly or geometric gestures, creating a “juxtaposition of materials” that challenges easy categorization and interpretation. «I place this work in an abstract and geometrically aesthetic conversation and not a figurative conversation — there are very few signifiers that would locate this as work being made by a Black artist» (Weis, 2022, para. 10). Biggers, here perhaps, suggests that while geometry and patterns are universal concepts, their meanings can vary greatly across cultures and time periods. Thus, understanding his work is influenced by historical contexts and contemporary perspectives, which change with time and place, rather than being defined solely by a singular cultural identity. For example, looking at Biggers *Kubrick's Rube* (2020)¹³, a kind of *Rubick Cube* constructivist sculpture composed of multiple block forms, individually covered in various fabrics on each side (for me, reminiscent of a carpetbag)¹⁴. The work prominently features a pineapple pattern variant of the *Log Cabin* quilt, a staple in many vintage and traditional American quilting¹⁵ (Laster, 2021) that combines a lenticular-like effect and dynamic all-over patterning, which brings Kinetic and Op art to mind. Initially seen from one angle, the patterns become increasingly perplexing as one moves around them, affecting new outlines and making it difficult to revert to the original perspective. Similarly, the title shifts our perspective. On a *Freedom Quilt*, the patterning might indicate that you should pack up your things in preparation for travel because one of the *conductors* would lead you to safety nearby. However, *Kubrick Rube*, perhaps slyly by referring to Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space*

¹³ Link to image of Biggers, Kubrick's Rube.

<https://marianneboeskygallery.com/exhibitions/6/works/artworks-26473-sanford-biggers-kubrick-s-rube-2020/>, accessed January 2, 2025.

¹⁴ A form of cheap luggage made from carpet fabric.

¹⁵ Gee's Bend quilters often remixed this pattern with Ghanaian Kente cloth designs. The Quilts of Gee's Bend at the Whitney Museum in 2002, celebrating the artistic legacy of four generations of African, American women from a small, historically all-black community in rural southern Alabama. Sanford Biggers recalls in an interview with Paul Laster that «When I saw The Quilts of Gee's Bend show at the Whitney Museum in 2002, several things sparked my interest—the aesthetics of the quilts on their own and then their relationship to painting and Whitney's history of showing mostly male painters, which made it a deeply political show for me.»

Odyssey, perhaps can shift our focus from the historical journey of the Rube¹⁶ escaping slavery to a futuristic and imaginative journey. Similarly, considering the collective title of my works, *Sirens Net*, it figuratively refers to ethnic and mythic narratives, while materially I see evidence of amateur and vernacular art and crafts resonating with modernist abstraction. In my view, *Sirens Net* serves as a bridge between the cultural and familial, emphasizing how vernacular designs and practices illuminate the intricate relationship between functionality and aesthetics. This, in turn, indicates broader cultural narratives that highlight the significance of utility and aesthetics in our everyday lives.

Building on this perspective, the use of vernacular materials in *Sirens Net*, alongside its interplay with abstraction and creative expressions beyond naturalizing institutions, like *Kubrick's Rube*, emphasizes the influence of vernacular crafting methods. By doing so, it challenges conventional notions of value and meaning in art, suggesting that an object's significance should be determined not only by its past standing but also by its present cultural relevance. Further, Biggers's viewpoint complements this dialogue by drawing attention to quilts made by marginalized black women in the rural South, initially crafted for utilitarian purposes, these quilts embody narratives of resilience and community. Their significance transforms as they evolve from functional objects to celebrated works of art exhibited in contemporary galleries. This shift resonates with the stories, reclaimed materials, and means in *Sirens Net*, inviting viewers to engage with the cultural layers embedded and to consider how interpretations of such objects change over time.

Through this interconnected narrative, *Sirens Net* and *Kubrick's Rube* prompt me to reflect further on the various cultural stories that shape our understanding of art and craft. They propose a future ethnography in which objects transcend singular identities to embody a shared amalgamation of meanings and origins, enriching our collective cultural discourse.

¹⁶ This word implies a country bumpkin or a lack of sophistication, education, and culture.



Figure 6 – Eirini Boukla, *Untitled (Sirens Net)*. 2023.
Wool, Gouache, on Cardboard packaging.

Conclusion

Examining the significance of crafts in the context of abstraction and modernist painting, this paper has shown how vernacular practices and utility such as net-making, crocheting, and quilting, share structural and conceptual affinities with modernist abstraction. The historical association of fibre arts with domesticity and amateur creativity has often led to their exclusion from critical discourses. However, by revisiting these practices through an autobiographical and cultural lens, *Sirens Net* highlights their intrinsic artistic value, drawing attention to the ways in which abstraction manifests organically in everyday life (fig. 6).

The anecdotal recollection of my father's fishing net serves as a pivotal moment in this exploration, illustrating how material objects act as conduits for memory, cultural narratives, and artistic reinterpretation. This instance reveals the layered nature of perception, where an object like a fishing net can simultaneously be viewed as a functional artifact, an evocative symbol of lived experience, and a form that recalls modernist aesthetics. This tension between artifact and artwork is central to *Sirens Net*, as it reframes traditional craft techniques within a contemporary art practice, questioning the established distinctions between applied and fine art.

Engaging with a contemporary critical discourse on ornamentation and surface decoration, *Sirens Net* also aligns with past artistic movements that looked to elevate craft-based aesthetics within modern and contemporary art. While modernist critiques by voices such as Greenberg and Loos attempted to discredit ornamentation as an anti-intellectual pursuit, movements like Pattern and Decoration (P&D) challenged these exclusions by embracing surface aesthetics, materiality, and challenging Western hegemonies. *Sirens Net* extends this discourse, drawing from personal history and cultural traditions, proposes an alternative approach to abstraction, one that is rooted in amateur and vernacular creativity rather than the rigid specialism and formalism of high modernism. This reconceptualization aligns with contemporary artists, such as Sanford Biggers, whose practice integrates quilting and abstraction to explore historical and socio-political narratives. Like Biggers's *Kubrick's Rube*, *Sirens Net* engages with past traditions and found materials, repositioning them within a current visual discussion that speculates between histories, functionality and artistic expression. In doing so, *Sirens Net* perhaps not only bridges the gap between high art and vernacular

traditions but also reaffirms the continuing relevance of craft-based techniques in contemporary artistic discourse. Through this practice, abstraction is reframed as an open and evolving language, shaped by lived experiences, cultural memory, and material transformation.

While this article engages with art-historical and theoretical discourse, it does not arise from a strictly academic perspective. Rather, it reflects the position of an artist attempting to make sense of the materials, memories, and formal languages that inform her own work. The search is therefore experiential, emerging from a desire to understand how making generates meaning and how personal history can become a site of critical insight. In this way, the writing mirrors the practice itself, observational, exploratory, and attentive to the interpretive potential embedded in familiar materials.

The contribution of this paper lies in its integration of personal narrative, material investigation, and critical discourse to articulate an alternative lineage of abstraction grounded in vernacular craft. The text offers a distinctive perspective by repositioning domestic and culturally specific making as structurally and conceptually aligned with modernist and contemporary abstraction. By analyzing a work from within the intention of its own making, the paper provides insights that are less accessible through more distanced academic approaches, foregrounding how embodied experience, familial knowledge, and common materials can serve as meaningful sites of inquiry. This practice-based vantage point expands existing conversations on abstraction by suggesting that its development is shaped not only by formalist or canonical trajectories but also by lived, everyday forms of creativity.

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Abstract

This paper explores how contemporary art practices blur the historical divide between fine art and craft, particularly in relation to domestic crafts, material culture, and abstraction. Using my work, *Sirens Net*, as a case study, I examine how everyday objects and memories inform artistic practice and challenge notions of high art.

Considering the intersections of Modernist Abstraction, craft, and vernacular narratives, challenging the traditional view that positions fine arts as intellectual and relegates craft to utilitarian roles, the discussion focuses on marginalised practices like fiber arts, often associated with gender, domesticity and amateurism, to reexamine the cultural significance of craft techniques in relation to contemporary painting and abstraction. Drawing from personal experiences while growing up in a Greek fishing community, the discussion reflects on how domestic crafts, like knitting and net-making, can inform artistic methodologies. The featured work, *Sirens Net*, becomes here a pretext for elaborating on how vernacular craft techniques can challenge and disrupt hierarchical binaries today. Looking at abstraction painting, modernist critiques of ornamentation, and the revival of fiber arts through movements such as Pattern and Decoration and notable artworks, the study highlights the importance of vernacular creativity that challenges traditional conventional boundaries and categorisation within artistic practices, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of art, everyday materials, and their historical contexts.

KEYWORDS: Modernist abstraction; Vernacular narratives; Artistic Methodologies; Art and craft hierarchical binaries; Material culture.

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