



**T Presents: 15 Creative Women For Our Time**

### **The Artist Making Bulbous, Colorful Sculptures Out of Thrifted Clothes**

*Each of Aiko Hachisuka's intricate, hand-stitched pieces is a meditation on memory, materiality and domestic labor.*



Aiko Hachisuka stands with three of her recent pieces. Credit Philip Cheung

By Merrell Hambleton | Aug. 10, 2020

When, as a young girl in Nagoya, Japan, Aiko Hachisuka observed her mother and grandmother sewing, she didn't quite know what they were doing — maybe mending a sock or attaching buttons, she thinks now — but she was keenly aware that they were not to be disturbed. “I was very attracted to that focus, and the creative headspace that they were in,” she says. It was the closest thing to a studio practice that she had been exposed to. “I knew I needed to have work myself,” she says. “My first attempt at that was to go and buy a sketchbook.”

As an artist, Hachisuka, 46 — who now lives in Los Angeles, where she shares a home and studio with her partner, the painter John Williams — has maintained a practice rooted in the humility of domestic work. The large and vibrant stuffed fabric sculptures for which she is best known — and which have been shown most recently at Van Doren Waxter in New York — are constructed slowly and methodically over a period of three to four months. Yet even hung on a gallery wall, they retain the energy of the woven mats her grandmother used to construct from the family's old clothing. “I liked the fact that it was something you put on the floor, that you stepped on,” she says.

But though Hachisuka identified her interest in art-making, especially as related to textiles and stitching, early on, her path to her current practice was not a direct one. As a teenager, she applied to be a foreign exchange student in the United States and was placed with two different families in Pensacola, Fla., for her junior and senior years of high school. After a portfolio review her senior year, she was accepted to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and the Ringling College of Art and Design, in Sarasota, Fla. At the insistence of her

host mother, who thought New York might be dangerous or overwhelming, she chose Ringling. “Some people still think I went to circus school,” Hachisuka says with a laugh.

In her third year, during a semester-long independent study in New York, she began to experiment more, both creatively and conceptually. This was the mid-1990s, a decade after the end of the Pattern and Decoration movement, and artists such as Mike Kelley and Annette Messager were appropriating the vocabulary of textile work to great critical acclaim. It was common for Hachisuka’s fellow students to have sewing machines in their studios, and, she says, “kids were making drawings out of doilies, or taking cubes from cake decoration sets and incorporating them into paintings.” She started using puff paint and found objects — cheap ornaments and stuffed animals purchased on Canal Street — to create sculptures. Instead of pedestals, she would place the pieces on top of hand-sewn pillows.



“Each piece of clothing is like a mini-painting,” says Hachisuka, who uses a modified screen-printing process on the individual components of her vibrant sculptures. Credit Philip Cheung



In her studio in Los Angeles’s Lincoln Heights neighborhood, the artist mixes her paint before applying it to the garments. Credit Philip Cheung

After graduate school at CalArts, where she studied under the conceptual artist Charles Gaines and took a brief detour into video (“CalArts was very post-studio right then,” she says), Hachisuka was ready to return to three-dimensional work. Her first piece was a nearly life-size fabric recreation of the crumpled head of a GMC semi truck with a felt shopping cart and felt pipes and bricks, all things she’d seen at a junkyard in East Los Angeles.

Still, she kept thinking back to her grandmother’s rag rugs — their unpretentiousness and how, studded with bits of Hachisuka’s childhood clothing, they functioned a bit like a family photograph. “I knew what I wanted to make,” she says, “but I didn’t know how

to find the door into it.” One afternoon in 2003, she was sitting on the sofa in her apartment, her cat draped over her arm and across the seat cushion — stretched like a stitch, connecting Hachisuka to the furniture. “My body touching the furniture became a unified thing,” she says. “I thought, ‘What if I make furniture that *is* a body?’”

Video



Though the artist has recently moved toward sculptures that are wall-mounted, she has also made free-standing pieces built around cylindrical armatures. Here, her work “Untitled” (2017). Credit Philip Cheung

She’d found her way in and hasn’t closed the door since. Each of Hachisuka’s pieces starts with an armature — initially they were found couch frames, then foam cylinders, and most recently wall-mounted supports — and a collection of both new and secondhand clothing, some of it acquired from tag sales or her partner’s closet. She stuffs the garments with a natural fiber called Kapok to create volume and density (“Christian Scheidemann, the art conservator, told me that Claes Oldenburg uses it in his soft sculpture, and I’ve been using it ever since”). Finally, she arranges and stitches the individual pieces together into forms that ripple and bulge, at once solid as a compacted car and yet pushing outward as though full of air. In Hachisuka’s earlier couch pieces, a pair of legs might emerge from a seat cushion or the arm of a sweatshirt might wrap around a pillow in a gentle embrace. Her newer work is increasingly abstract. Up close, one can recognize the ribbed collar of a child’s sweater, perhaps, or the elastic waistband of a pair of athletic shorts — the body evident only in its absence.



Tubs of screen printing ink in Hachisuka’s studio, which she shares with her husband, the painter John Williams. Credit Philip Cheung

Even as the artist’s work moves away from recognizable forms, though, it retains an intimate connection to family and home. Initially, Hachisuka made work from clothing she bought at Forever 21, but she felt that reduced it to a comment on fast fashion. Then she

started thrifting clothes, but the pieces became disjointed. After stopping at a tag sale one day on a whim, she found she could put together a loose family structure — two kids, a mother who worked for a dentist's office, a father who went to church — based on a rack of discards, and liked that the clothes told a story both specific and not. "It had this family history that I could never replicate," Hachisuka says.

About 10 years ago, Hachisuka started adding paint to the clothing pieces before she stuffed them. She uses a modified screen-printing process, laying a mesh screen over the garment and applying ink without a preset design. She's seeking a very pared-down way of working, and she lets the folds and wrinkles of the dropped clothing determine the patterns. "Each piece of clothing is like a mini-painting," she says. "And then I stitch them together like a puzzle." Once she has removed the screen from the clothing, she creates a monoprint by applying paper to the back of the screen, capturing a kind of photo negative of the garment. A collection of these prints is currently on view on Van Doren Waxter's website.

Like mending, Hachisuka's art is nearly without ego, and intentionally so — she designed the process so as to remove her own hand and eye from the finished work as much as possible. "I don't want my taste or liking to get in the way of making," she says. "I'm there every step of the way, but when I'm done, looking at it, it doesn't feel like mine." It's more the concept that is personal, with Hachisuka thinking back to watching her mother and grandmother at work all the while. "I've always wanted to return to that space," she says, "even today."