

suspending disbelief

With a theatrical hint of surrealism Amanda McCavour documents the world around her in 3D using only thread

Walking into Toronto's Lonsdale Gallery earlier this year, the wandering tourist or art aficionado would have encountered embroidered life-size images of hands disentangling thread affixed directly to the wall. Further on, under the gallery's skylight, a sea of multicoloured flowers was suspended from the ceiling, recreating the effect of a garden or small flowering prairie.

The visual effect of Amanda McCavour's work is hard to describe. She creates her 'thread drawings' using an old Singer sewing machine, stitching onto water-soluble material. She then immerses each finished piece into water, which dissolves the fabric leaving only the threaded design.

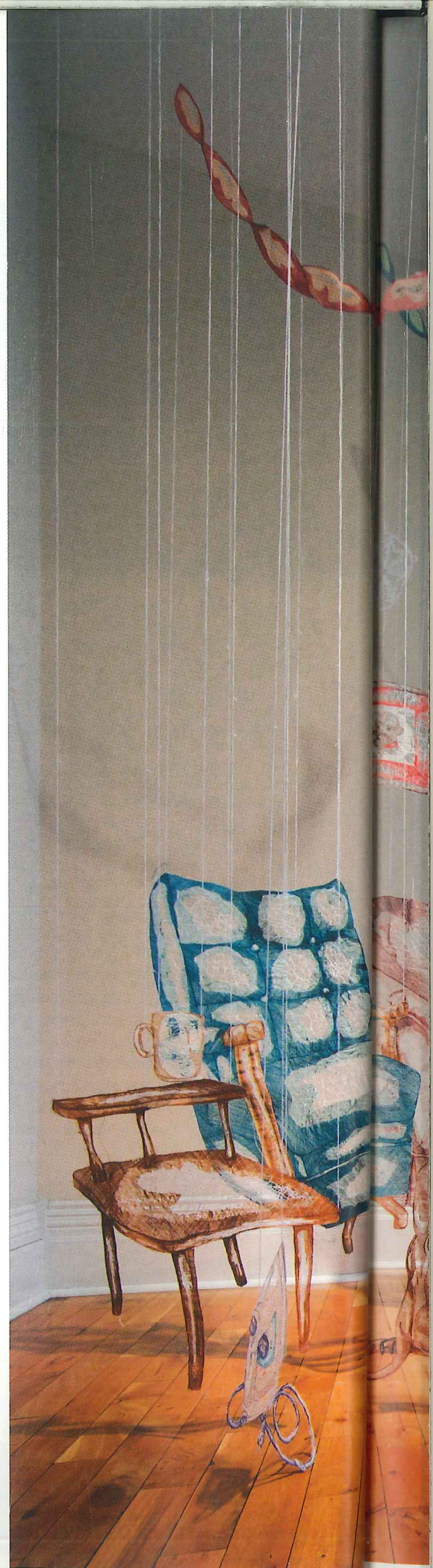
Embroidery is generally conceived of as an art that encompasses both the surface design and the material that it adorns and which serves as its backdrop. McCavour has destabilised this certainty: the embroidered motifs now having as sole support the thread itself or the rather more nebulous ubiquity of space.

The objects, people and abstract designs appear to float, evoking the ephemeral nature of art, things and – perhaps – life. However, if they could effectively be described as literally disembodied, the process of paring embroidery down to its most essential element also, albeit somewhat surprisingly, underscores the very materiality of both the thread itself and the scenes depicted.

I ask Lonsdale gallery manager Stanzie Tooth about this duality. Having spent much time with McCavour's work she responds: 'Throughout all of her series, Amanda shows the tenuousness of her subjects, their fragility and interconnectedness through the contrast of densely rendered embroidery to the airy openness of certain passages in the work', before adding, 'her floating thread drawings were a completely unique form that I had never seen before'.

The two themes on display in McCavour's recent exhibit – the human and the natural world –

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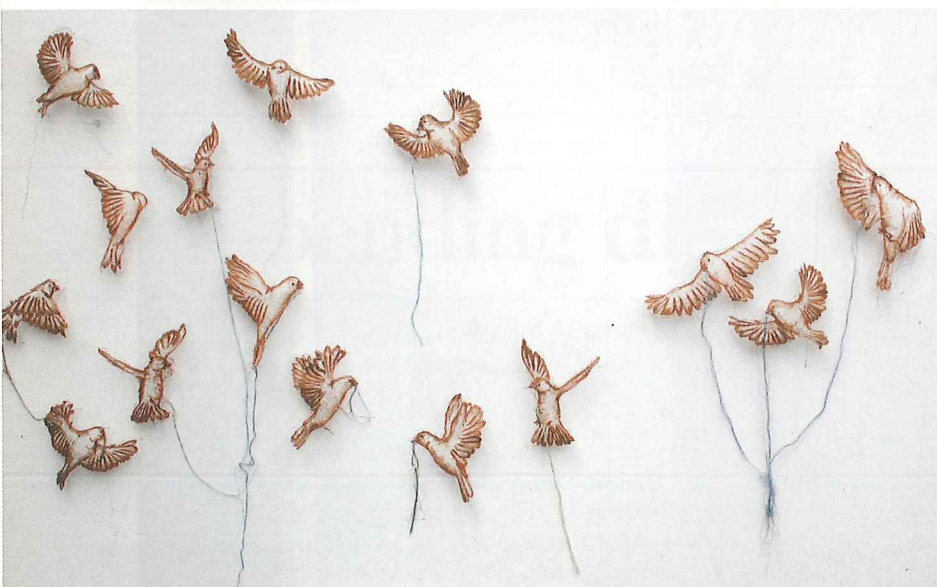




Living Room, 2010-2011
Approx 3 x 3 x 3m. Thread and
machine embroidery. Produced with the
support of the Ontario Arts Council
Photographer: Agata Piskunowicz



PHOTOGRAPHER: CHERYL ROINDEAU



Top: *Floating Garden*, work in progress since 2011. Approx 2.5 x 2.5 x 3m and increasing. Produced with the support of Ontario Arts Council, Surface Design Association and La Maison des Métiers D'Art de Québec

Above: *Birds in Flight*, 2009

Above right: *Stand In For Home* (detail) 2009-2010. Approx 2.5 x 2.5 x 1.35m Produced with the support of the Toronto Arts Council

Opposite: *Ice Box*, 2011. Approx 3 x 3 x 3m Produced with the support of the Ontario Arts Council

All thread and machine embroidery

traverse all her work, which displays an eclectic array of subject matter and styles. However a unity is created by two elements that underwrite all of the Canadian's art: an insatiable curiosity to document the world around her in multiple manners and a desire to explore the infinite possibilities of space, repetition and, most of all, line.

Drawing the line

McCavour, who earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Toronto's York University, effectively sees her textile work as drawing. The turning point that led from privileging pen and paper to thread and needle (or rather sewing machine) occurred while still at art school. In a drawing class, when her then professor, artist Michael Davey, defined the art of drawing simply as line, McCavour suddenly understood the parallels between the graphic and textile arts.

Ever since, without looking back, she has been investigating the linear potential of thread. And her works

exhibit the same spectrum of visual possibilities as drawing – from minimalist and conceptual to figurative and realistic.

In recent years, the artist has produced a body of work premised on abstract pattern. *Ice Box* (2011) inspired by frost and snow crystal patterns belongs to this group. While the sober poetic work conveys the lightness of falling snowflakes, it possesses – like much of the artist's work – a tongue and cheek aspect in its inspiration, drawn not only from nature but also from childhood or seasonal craft activities and literature.

The same subversive humour is central to the well received installation McCavour produced for the Gladstone Hotel in 2010 as part of the Hard Twist textile festival. *Super-Spiro-Scribble Density Test* is made up of a plethora of round complex geometric designs that bring to mind the patterns underlying the physical world or microcosm but equally the visual aesthetic of



PHOTOGRAPHER: AGATA PISKUNOWICZ

Spirograph, the popular children's drawing game invented by engineer Denys Fisher in the 1960s. The piece's playfulness and reference to doodling shouldn't mask its investigation of the formal properties of art. A veritable painting in three dimensions, the artist has maximized its aesthetic impact through the judicious and conscious arrangement of its elements. The

properties of line and thread, references to the world of nature, and the precarity intrinsic to both.

If McCavour's abstract work is both visually and conceptually effective, much of the artist's oeuvre is fully rooted in her skill in drawing. Some works are tour de forces of draughtsmanship, like those that have figurative, sometimes even narrative content.

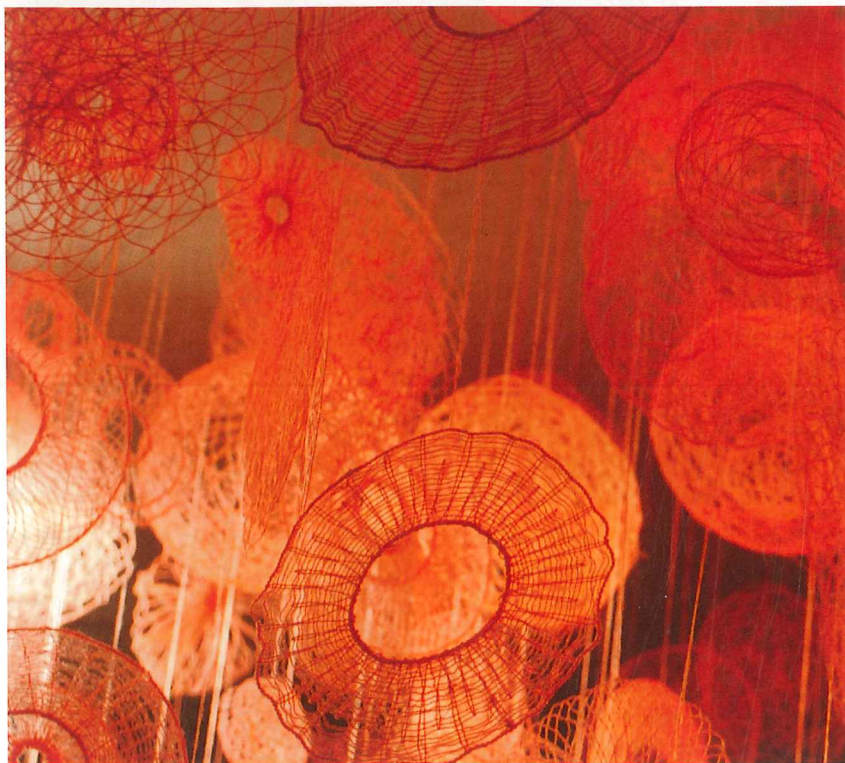
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layering and juxtaposition of varying sizes and seemingly myriad motifs is theatrical. However, the gradation of colour within the piece's overall composition points to a hidden, more subtle and sensitive dimension to McCavour's art.

Accumulate brings the latter to the fore. The delicate strands of hanging flower or leaf-like forms harmoniously bring together many of the artist's concerns: the geometric and sculptural

Untitled is a particularly successful example. The scene depicting a precisely rendered full size woman immersed in countless and amorphous layers and strands of thread remains partly mysterious. The viewer nonetheless guesses that, like the hand and thread pieces, it comments on the historical bond between women and textiles, or textile-based arts and crafts and, therefore, possesses an auto-biographical dimension.





Super-Spiro-scribble Density Test
2010. Approx 3 x 3 x 3m.
Produced with the support
of the Ontario Arts Council

Opposite: *Accumulate*, 2011
4.3 x 2.4m

Many of the works demonstrating the artist's talent for drawing in thread also involve life size figures (always women) in various poses, while others draw upon the animal world. *Birds in Flight* lives up to its title and, akin to the

McCavour effectively sees her textile work as drawing

abstract works, takes full advantage of space as an integral component of the installation.

Domestic interiors also constitute recurring themes. *Stand-in for Home and Living Room* are both textile renderings of rooms of previous apartments in which the artist had once

lived. As if trying to resist memory's lack of precision and the impermanence McCavour associates with the concept of home (she is described by friends as a 'serial mover') the artist has illustrated these settings down to the last detail,

including the humourous large gold framed portrait of a dog. The sense of the artist's urban nomadism is further heightened by the fragile nature of the medium.

Moreover, the indirect reference to the relationship plotted among women, the so-called domestic arts and a

traditional, more fixed concept of home is not happenstance.

Neither McCavour nor her art is naïve. On the contrary, the young woman, well informed and often inspired by fellow contemporary artists, is reflective. If both uncertainty and plurality are key concepts in her art, uncertainty undoubtedly takes precedence as the artist, crafting a home in the world of textiles, declines impermanence in myriad manners – funny, elegant, childlike, girly, rigorous, nostalgic or romantic. ©

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