

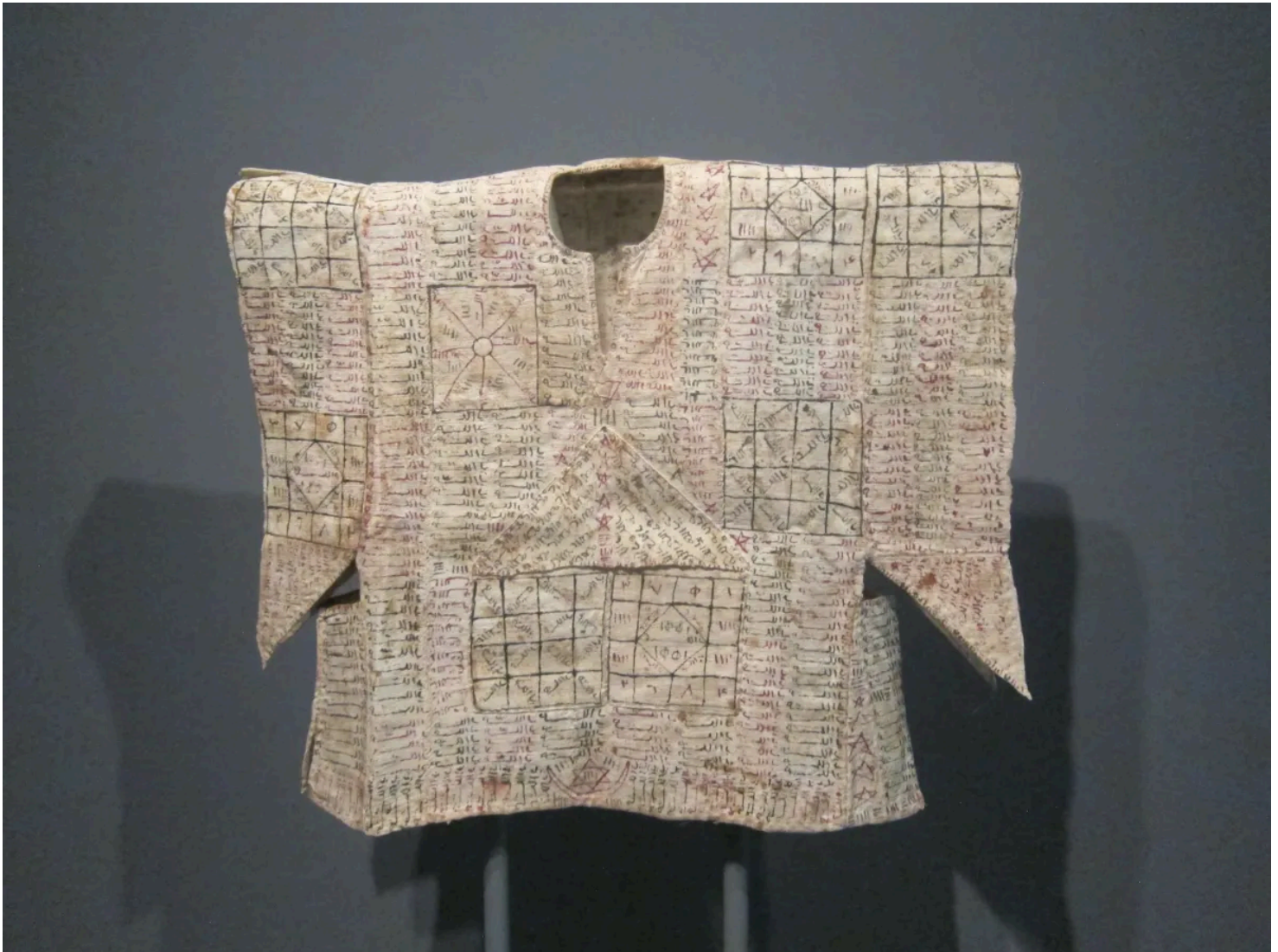
Art Review

# How Textiles Weave Together the Cycle of Life

Four exhibitions currently up in Chicago each take a unique approach to the possibilities of working with textiles today, some with humor, others with gravitas.



Lori Waxman 18 hours ago



A talismanic tunic made in Mali during the 20th century. The “charm gown” protects its wearer both spiritually and physically by being decorated with powerful inscriptions and a special mixture. (all photos Lori Waxman/*Hyperallergic*, unless otherwise noted)

CHICAGO — What to wear this morning? Are the bedsheets clean? Paper or cloth for wiping up the mess in the kitchen? We mostly take such textiles for granted these days, coming, as they do, cheaply and from far away, bereft of meaning, unrevealing of the labor and materials that went into their making.

It was not always so. For much of human history, immense time, skill, and importance have been part of the very fiber of garments worn, tapestries hung, bundles wrapped, blankets dozed under. In my own life, glimpses of this gravitas remain when I sit in the chair draped with a throw my nana crocheted a few years before her death, or when my husband and I sleep beneath the quilt pieced together for us as a wedding gift 20 years ago.

Four exhibitions currently up in Chicago each take a unique approach to the possibilities of working with textiles today. The funniest is by Kiah Celeste, whose spandex paintings, on view in a two-person show at **Document**, confront the sexy ridiculousness of athleisurewear with sculptural tension and material playfulness. Instead of canvas, Celeste neatly stretches monochromatic sports fabric between poplar frames, then pulls and pushes it with found stuff. A hefty slab of Corian juts out the bottom and front of a big maroon number; stacked buckets trap and distend a yardage of baby blue; thin plastic cord tied to a long piece of bowed steel yanks a narrow strip of forest green out to a tender point.



Installation view of *Artifact Unidentified*: Kiah Celeste, Gordon Hall at Document gallery (image courtesy Document, Chicago)

More monstrous is Chicagoan Jacqueline Surdell's solo show at **Secrist|Beach**. The gallery is one of those vast, hard-to-fill spaces, but Surdell's muscular, enormous, unafraid weavings more than hold their own. At 21 feet in length, "Suddenly, she was hell-bent and ravenous (after Giotto)" is monumental in both size and reference. As in her smaller works, Surdell knots and loops and

even glues thick, colored nylon cord upon itself and on metal armatures, sometimes interlacing strips of fabric printed with the images of Old Master paintings. It works and it doesn't, being alternately clumsy and stunning, but it is unfailingly exciting.

Recent landscapes by Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson, framed and hung on the walls of [\*\*Andrew Rafacz Gallery\*\*](#), appear wild and otherworldly though they are absolutely of this earth. Acid yellow mountains burst out of magenta terrain, lime green and neon orange flora pulse alongside vibrating electric blue lagoons. These are visions collected by the artist on annual trips to her native Iceland, laboriously dyed onto unwoven silk threads in her Cleveland studio, then masterfully woven into shimmering tapestries that transmit the precarity and drama of the country's extraordinary natural environment, from glacial lakes to the Northern Lights.



Foreground: Jacqueline Surdell, "My kaleidoscopic view" (2025)

Those three gallery shows are a must-see for contemporary fiber art cognoscenti. [\*\*\*On Loss and Absence: Textiles of Mourning and Survival\*\*\*](#), on view at the Art Institute, should be visited by anyone who has ever touched a piece of fabric, grieved, or had a spiritual moment, which is to say everyone. Drawn primarily from the museum's significant holdings, it presents an astonishingly diverse array of more than 100 objects, from a Malian talismanic tunic to a massive silk scroll depicting the death of the Buddha, to a tondo woven of Velcro and velvet fuzz by Angela Hennessy in 2014. It is perhaps unsurprising that all four of the co-curators of this



profoundly moving and deeply original show — Isaac Facio, Nneka Kai, L Vinebaum, and Anne Wilson — are themselves fiber artists.

*On Loss and Absence* begins with death and never really leaves it behind. Ancient Egyptian mummy coverings are here, as is a 17th-century engraving depicting one of the holy shrouds of Jesus and another, by Goya, of a shawled woman walking among swaddled war casualties. Two ancient cotton masks, painted with supernatural beings, would have emulated heads when stuffed and sewn atop rounded bundles containing the deceased, a practice of the Paracas people, who lived 2,000 years ago along the south coast of modern Peru. Piles of elaborately patterned and appliquéd skirts, including a fabulous wrap edged in black and white checkerboard, might have been accumulated by a noblewoman of the Kuba Kingdom, in central Africa, to signify her high status and line her coffin.



Left: Hastiin Tla (Diné), “Rainbow People Have Arrived (Nááts’íilid Bee Yikáh)” (1925); right: Dorothy Burge’s 10-foot-tall quilted portraits of Michelle Clopton and LaTanya Jenifor-Sublett (2025)

That was for the dead, to smooth the journey into the afterlife, but other items existed expressly for the living, to help with bereavement. “Mourning,” an abstract composition of somber rectangular fabrics, pierced by a painful spike of embroidery, was constructed in 1989 by Michael Olszewski near the end of his father’s life. A photographic quilt densely and sweetly stitched by artist Carina Yopez, together with her aunt and mother, commemorates the long-gone girls depicted on it, including her grandmother, all of whom were part of a sewing group in Mexico in



the 1930s. But nothing quite says grief like an actual piece of the deceased's body, hence the trend among Victorians for jewelry and needlework fashioned from the hair of lost loved ones. Of the dozen examples of hairwork on display, my personal fave is a gold locket from about 1800, with a white braid wreathing an auburn snippet and two death dates engraved on the rear.

Hair appears throughout *On Loss and Absence*. And how not, being the most textile-like component of the human body, not to mention the most painlessly harvested? It decorates a large, heavily patterned wrapper traditionally worn during Asante funeral ceremonies, illustrated as the *nkotimsefuopua* motif, a geometric swirl based on hairstyles worn by royal attendants. It fills the wool plaits that hang from a Bamiléké hat, to be worn by a masked dancer during secret healing ceremonies. And it is the central material of “Lasting ‘Til Sunday,” a generous performance installation by curator Nneka Kai, reprising a weekly childhood ritual when her mother would take time to cornrow her and her siblings’ hair. Braiding is caring.



*On Loss and Absence* includes a case full of Victorian mourning jewelry, including this gold locket. Made around 1800, it features two types of human hair.

Repairing is caring, too. It can take the straightforward form of darning, as in a pair of impressive mending samplers done by Northern European schoolgirls in the early 1800s, or it can be advanced textile conservation, of the kind carried out on a sumptuous Taoist high priest's robe. Paul Schulze, a German design professor who died in 1928, once took a bit of 14th-century Italian silk brocade and imagined the rest of the fabric through trompe-l'oeil watercolor and ink drawing. Display cases brim with such fragments, some resulting from the passage of time and

environmental decay, others from the deliberate cutting up of historical textiles to make them easier to sell, distribute, and catalogue. There's even a fake, intended to fool collectors interested in remnants of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE). All have been meticulously stabilized, yet they radiate loss — loss of actual material, sure, but even more so, of technical knowledge and cultural integrity. A snippet of an Edo-era kimono bears an embroidered character indecipherable because of its separation from the rest of the garment. A trio of exquisite lace edgings represent handicraft supplanted by machined versions.

But loss sometimes reveals. Deterioration exposes processes used by the Nazca people to create a pair of charming garment borders featuring pampas cats. Other ancient Andean methods and iconography have been revitalized by [Noqanchis](#), a weaving collective formed in Peru in 2021 by Alipio Melo, María José Murillo, and Danitza Willka. Their interpretations powerfully prove the continued existence of a culture. They also allow for artists' names to be put to works of weaving art in a way that museums have failed to do for so long. These and other acts of survival fill the final gallery. Kai's mother-daughter cornrowing is here, resisting the systemic oppression of Black people, through their hair as through the justice system, a tortuous history directly acknowledged by Dorothy Burge's 10-foot-tall quilted portraits of two women wrongfully imprisoned by the Chicago police. A quartet of Diné blankets — an ultramodern one from 1925 by the famed Hastiin Tla and a set of classic miniatures made last year by Barbara Teller Ornelas — insists that, against their continued dispossession and disenfranchisement, Native Americans are still here. Last of all is the robe that ought to give all visitors pause: an indigo and crimson *jellaya* made in Ramallah in the 19th century, richly cross-stitched in *tatreez*, a Palestinian embroidery style still practiced today, even as its people suffer genocide.



Colectivo Noqanchis collaboratively created “Sí tenemos ojos/ÑAWIYOQMI KANCHIS (We Have Eyes)” (2024), based on the *kipu*, an ancient Andean record-keeping device made from knotted cords.



A pair of darning samplers made by Northern European schoolgirls in the early 1800s.





On the wall hang elaborate skirts from 19th-century Kuba. Partially visible in the foreground is an Ancient Egyptian faience bead shroud with a scarab beetle.



Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson, "Glacial Landscape #21" and "Glacial Landscape #23" (both 2025), silk and dyes, on view at Andrew Rafacz Gallery



The video "Lasting 'Til Sunday" shows curator Nneka Kai having her hair braided by her mother. To the left hangs an early 20th-century adinkra funeral wrapper of the Asante people. (courtesy Art Institute of Chicago)



A robe decorated with *tatreez*, the traditional Palestinian embroidery style, from 19th-century Ramallah.

**Artifact Unidentified: Kiah Celeste, Gordon Hall** *continues at Document (1709 West Chicago Avenue, Chicago, Illinois) through November 1. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

**Jacqueline Surdell: The Conversion: Rings, Rupture, and the Forest Archive** *continues at Secrist|Beach (1801 W Hubbard Street, Chicago, Illinois) through November 15. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

**Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir Jónsson: Glacial Landscapes** *continues at Andrew Rafacz (1749 West Chicago Avenue, Chicago, Illinois) through November 1. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

**On Loss and Absence: Textiles of Mourning and Survival** *continues at the Art Institute of Chicago (111 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois) through March 15. The exhibition was curated by Isaac Facio, Nneka Kai, L Vinebaum, and Anne Wilson. Melinda Watt served as senior museum advisor.*