

ArtSeen

Julia Bland: *The Half That Ties, the Half that Breaks*

By [Claire Voon](#)



An unshakable sense of magic pervades almost all of Julia Bland’s laboriously fabricated fiber works in her first solo show at Andrew Rafacz Gallery. Cut, stitched, painted, and burned canvases joined with hand-woven textiles hang like tapestries that thrum with entrancing geometric configurations. Even the exhibition’s measured title, *The Half That Ties, the Half that Breaks*, evokes an incantation—a sort of ritual poem seeking to resolve seemingly contrary forces. The language neatly captures Bland’s apparent ambitions: to present a wholeness made by connecting while separating; to find absolute beauty in both mending and marring.

Bland has become known, in recent years, for her alchemic approach to fiber art. The suite of nine works in this gently hypnotic exhibition exemplifies how adventurous she gets in stretching the capabilities of materials such as linen, wool and silk. At times, Bland knots threads to form intricate meshes—humble tangles that mark time with their every node. Sometimes she paints them to introduce color and rich textures. She often uses strands to suture, with surgical precision, fragments of canvas and textiles she has dyed.

In most pieces, all these gestures amalgamate into surfaces that fluctuate form. They work to realize innumerable dimensions and relationships on a superficial plane. *Cut By Rivers* (2019), the show’s centerpiece—and its largest, at nearly nine-by-six feet—hangs near the middle of the gallery, allowing visitors to observe how Bland has constructed the surfaces of both the front and back. It consists of uneven swathes of patterned fabric she stitched together, like a madcap puzzle that reveals more the longer you gaze upon it. Nearby, the small-scale work *Mountain, Soar* (2019) deftly fuses loose grids of thread, stiffened by paint, with pigmented canvas to form a union of triangles, chevrons, and other shapes. Some surfaces almost ripple, while others are brittle, like crusted icing. One can read Bland’s works as haptic records of her endless dialogue with traditionally disparate mediums.

This is not to say that every work consists of complex media-blending. One of the most radiant pieces on view is also the simplest. Measuring approximately 16 by 13 inches, *Tower* (2019) is a lattice of knotted threads that are colored with ink and paint to yield a rainbow-like effect. Bland has suspended her meshwork ever so slightly over a canvas by pinning its edges, like a treasured specimen. Its lightness of being draws you in. The pattern conjures, as the title suggests, something architectural—a tower, but also a tunnel and a suspension bridge, its cables taut against an open sky.

Bland manages to produce such quietly ravishing pieces even on a large scale. The most effective assemblage, *Brave Sister* (2019), is an earth-toned medley that endows the gallery with a spiritual presence. It possesses an extraordinary order of forms: A large triangle of cut-up and reunited canvas completes a delicate grid of black thread; within the equilateral figure, crisscrosses coexist with concentric circles that suggest targets or the growth rings of trees. Exposed stitching further delineates the different surfaces. There is a slight echo of the esoteric, abstract paintings of Hilma af Klint, who used organic and geometric forms to depict unseen forces. As with the Swedish artist’s canvases, once you start looking at Bland’s tapestry your eyes might meander endlessly, seeking to absorb every structural change, every subtle crevice, every strange seam.

Brave Sister also foregrounds one of Bland’s most ingenious processes. Each concentric circle, rather than cut from a singular cloth, is composed of layered fragments of burnt canvas whose scorched edges, notably, resemble minute stitching. Bland sets alight her textiles by burning a small hole in them; the circular void gradually expands as flames eat at the fibers. The technique requires patience: some burnings last as long as 30 minutes. Like the traditional burning of prairies, which clears space to stimulate plant growth, Bland’s controlled conflagration is an act of generation through destruction. It is a rite that renews her materials.

Bland’s best work is born of such painstaking gestures that appear effortless. Fire is so smooth in its consumption; knots are so simple in their logic. Paint is a much more finicky matter, and at times Bland over embellishes with her oils. *Thunder* (2019), a composition of canvas shapes sewn to a thin grid of threads, resembles, from a distance, fantastically flayed skin extended over a portion of netting. It boasts enchanting fiber handiwork—precise wool knots here, undulations of tightly woven linen there. But Bland also daubs, without much conviction, chevrons and other patterns that appear as little more than afterthoughts. They succeed only in distracting from her otherwise technical virtuosity.

These are small missteps in an otherwise bewitching exhibition that upends our expectations of what fiber art can be. Call these artworks woven paintings, painted tapestries, or textile-based assemblages. While they stubbornly evade categorization, they are resolutely material, each conveying an artist’s intense devotion to reinvigorating abstraction.

Contributor

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Julia Bland, *Cut By Rivers*, 2019. Hand woven textile, hand dyed linen and silk, canvas, wool and linen threads, oil paint, 106 x 76 in.

CHICAGO

Andrew Rafacz

November 8 – December 21, 2019



Julia Bland, *Brave Sister*, 2019. Burnt canvas, hand woven textile, linen and wool threads, ink, oil paint, 60.5 x 60.5 in.



Julia Bland, *Thunder*, 2019. Canvas, silk, linen and wool threads, fabric dye, oil paint, 66 x 64 in.