



THE GESTALT SHIFTS OF JULIA BLAND'S WALL HANGINGS

by Rebecca McNamara

Within the convention of the rectangle, **Julia Bland's** woven, cut, braided, knotted, glued, dyed and painted fabrics form an architecturally-scaled wall hanging. One's eye travels up, down, across, over and around lines and shapes that, whether straight or curved, are never rigid. Canvas thickly painted with yellow and lavender suggests solidity while elsewhere, golden-yellow and deep-blue dyes bleed loosely, an embrace of that which can't be controlled: hard and soft, both at work. With each blink or dart of the eyes, the composition rebalances itself somewhere between symmetry and asymmetry, between abstract and pictorial: a static work with no fixed states. Such gestalt shifts have become Bland's preoccupation.

With "Woven in the Reeds" (2025) and other recent work, Bland—experimenting and finding new forms of aesthetic delight—carries on the legacies of her 20th-century predecessors

in both fiber art and painting. That artwork forms her first solo museum presentation (with the same title), at **The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum** in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

The 1960s fiber art pioneers were canonized, in part, by curator **Mildred Constantine** and textile designer **Jack Lenor Larsen** in their 1969 *Wall Hangings* exhibition at **The Museum of Modern Art** and subsequent books, *Beyond Craft* (1972) and *The Art Fabric: Mainstream* (1981).¹ In these projects, they defined a new genre of fiber-based artistic expression, framed in opposition to pictorial tapestries: "The modern weaver is unlike the modern tapestry designer who uses a painter's palette of strong colors. The weaver generally uses single or muted colors; his interest lies in the potential of construction."² For them, and at that time, color and construction were exclusive, and further, overt imagery was incompatible with modern textile art.

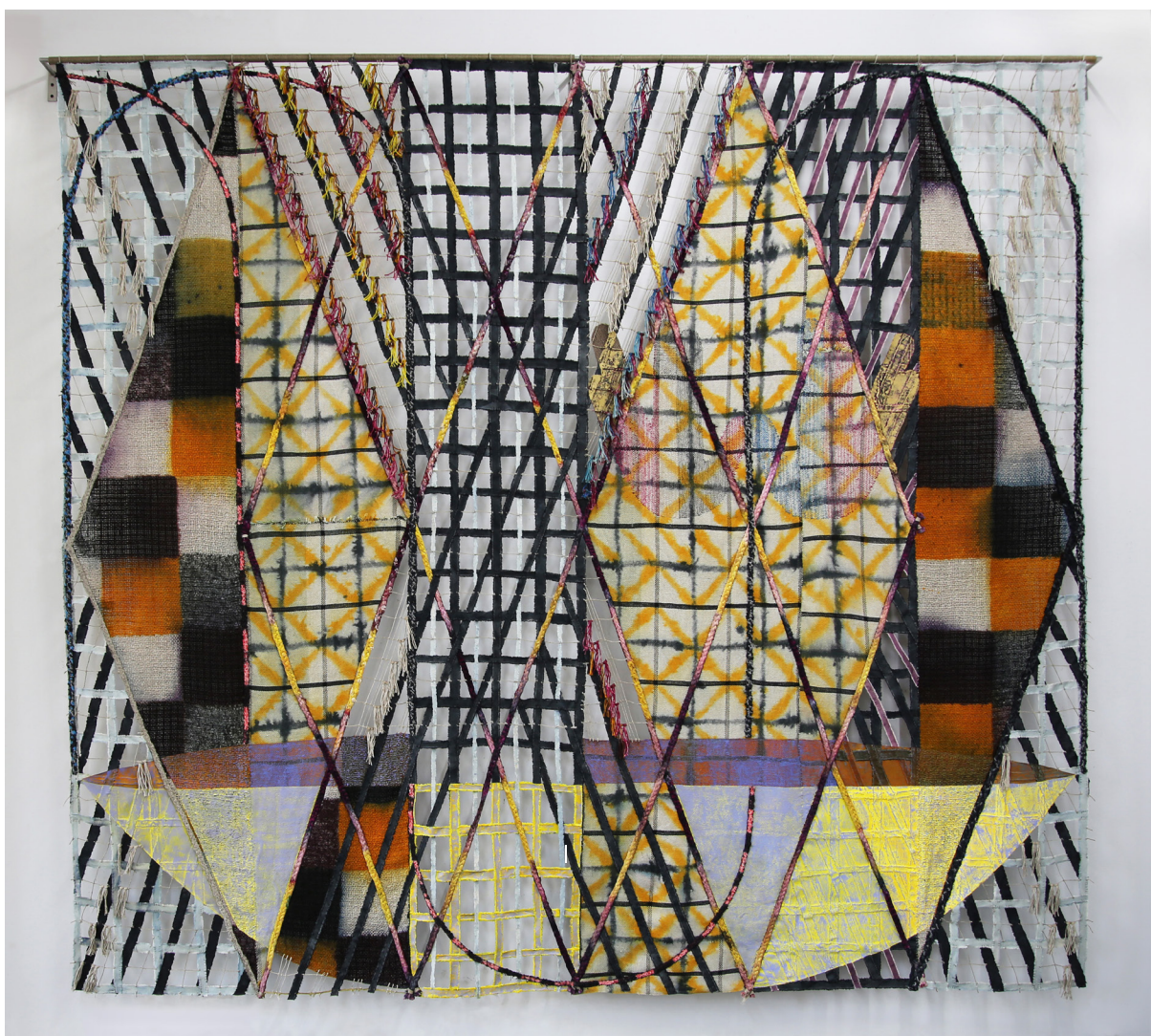
More than fifty years later, as part of a contemporary art world that embraces hybridity, Bland challenges herself to use multiple strategies: “The construction itself has to be complex on its own terms. And the color has to be complex on its own terms, too. And then they also have to both relate to each other in a way that’s more than just the fact of their difference.”³ Just as the viewer’s eyes shift between elements in her finished work, Bland constantly shifts her focus during the process as well.

Academically trained as a painter, Bland received what she describes as a modernist, Bauhaus-driven education at the **Rhode Island School of Design** and **Yale University**. But when

living in Morocco (2008–2010, and again in 2012), she became deeply inspired by the country’s architectural mosaics and dazzling patterns; paint felt limiting. “I was learning about pattern, and I was a painter, and I couldn’t really connect the two,” she says. She received a second-hand loom from a family friend around this time, taught herself to warp it, and began weaving, opening the possibilities for an art in which image, pattern and material share importance. She remembers thinking, “That just opened this other world to me.”

Bland works both on and off the loom, as her 1960s predecessors famously did. Her open-weave structures, like “Moth,” (2019), are a clear descendant of Tawney’s “woven forms.”⁴ Other artists in *Wall Hangings* employed see-through construction as well: Olga de Amaral—whose dimensionality offers a close affinity to Bland’s—and the lesser-known Annemarie Klingler, among

Bottom: **Julia Bland**, *Woven in the Reeds*, 2025. Hand-woven and dyed textiles with linen threads, canvas, bedsheets, fabric dye and oil paint, 98 x 112 inches. Left page: detail. Images courtesy of the artist.





others.⁵ In “Prayer Rug” (1965), Sheila Hicks (who also studied painting at Yale) uses bulbous, crowded tassels that climb off the weaving, adding dimensionality and reminding us of the medium at hand; Bland’s tassels are spread out, enhancing and complicating geometric lines, but share similar purpose.

And in recent years, as Bland deepens her explorations of asymmetry—as inspired by Moroccan patterns—she also links herself to Bauhaus-trained mid-century weavers like **Gunta Stölzl** and **Anni Albers**. She iterates in drawings, but black ink on graph paper offers limited information as to how materials will respond in real space. Her goal is asymmetry in color and form as well as construction—meaning open-air sections with differing physical weights. So if a composition is lopsided, gravity will hold her to account.

Before “Woven in the Reeds,” the most fully realized of that effort toward openwork asymmetry, she explored the idea in subtle yet impactful ways. In “At Dawn, The Shore in Your Eyes” (2020)—whose shapes and colors remind of the spiritual artist **Hilma af Klint**—there is a moth at left and a chrysalis at right, the same body in different forms, transformation read in reverse.

Left page: **Julia Bland**, *Moth*, 2019. Canvas with fabric dye, oil paint, linen threads, wool felt and wax, 104 x 64 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery.

Bottom: **Julia Bland**, *At Dawn, The Shore in Your Eyes*, 2020. Hand-woven linen and wool with hand-felted wool, linen fabric, found upholstery fabric and oil paint, 114 x 142.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery





Julia Bland, *Vision on the Water*, 2022. Linen, canvas, dress, pants, upholstery fabric, fabric dye and oil paint, 53 x 40 inches. Collection of the Tang Museum, Skidmore College, purchase, with funds from the Susan Rabinowitz Malloy '45 Fund for Emerging Artists, 2024. Image courtesy Tang Museum.



Julia Bland, *Helper*, 2024. Hand-woven and dyed textiles with canvas, linen, fabric dye, oil paint, linen threads, bed sheets, a blue shirt and pants, 115 x 115 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery.

In “Vision on the Water,” (2022), a quick read suggests uniformity while a closer study reveals a complex arrangement of braided, painted fabric strips forming both straight and curvilinear lines—arches and an infinity symbol—that generate rhombuses, triangles and other shapes. Negative space is variously devised through open air as well as woven fabrics. Bland’s even, gesturally wrought lines nod toward the orderliness of painting predecessors like **Agnes Martin**. But on this rainbow-hued, geometrically and materially complex work, they are a minimalist’s gesture with a maximalist’s attitude.

That maximalism especially comes forth in the psychedelic palette and colorfully dyed fabrics. *Wall Hangings* was concurrent with the rising popularity of hippie counterculture, but beyond an embrace of the handmade, they seem worlds apart: on one side is experimentation in formalism by artists fighting for inclusion in institutional, elite spaces, and on the other are loose, hard-to-control edges of a tie-dyed garment by those wanting to break free from power structures. Bland somehow brings these concepts together, as she does across many conceptual and physical aspects of the work.

Caitlin Monachino, curator of Bland’s exhibition at **The Aldrich**, says, “I see her work as a testament to harmony, empathy, and spirituality—in the sense of interconnection and looking beyond the self—concepts that feel especially urgent in today’s socio-political climate.”⁶ From a mixed religious background, Bland has a Jewish mother and a Presbyterian father and studied Sufism in Morocco, religious ideas often permeate the work. In “Helper” (2024), seven branches of arrows become a signpost to look upward. When understanding their formation as a menorah, the suggestion shifts, perhaps, to seeking spiritual light in darkness or looking up toward a god. Two beyond-life-size, stylized handprints—perhaps priestly hands if read religiously, the artist’s mark in a more secular interpretation—are depicted through paint and dyes, receding in and out of view, camouflaged by the surrounding abstraction.

Titles sometimes offer clues to these abstracted figurative elements. In a drawing for “Blue Womb,” a curved line reveals itself to be a body—a fetus curled up, when considering the title, but also perhaps a person seated, giving oneself a hug in an act of self-love or loneliness or both.

Those most personal moments are also quietly present in the material memory of some of Bland’s fabrics: bed sheets, a baby blanket, an old shirt. As textile scholar **Jessica Hemmings** has written, “Textiles remember. This is not something that we necessarily ask of them, nor is it something we can divert them from doing. They do it regardless.”⁷ Bland cuts and rips, paints and dyes, weaves, braids and knots fabrics she finds at home, combining them with conventional store-bought supplies,

reminding us that an artist might also be a spouse, a parent, a person with life beyond the studio.

Bland's work is formal and emotional, textile and painting, abstract yet figurative, rife with narratives that can be interpreted in myriad ways. It is a both/and approach that demonstrates a particular spirit of contemporary artists today. For even as she shares affinities with her predecessors, she is creating something wholly original, embedded with multicultural references, her personal experiences and constant experimentation to create hangings that, despite their physical state, never quite sit still.

¹Elissa Auther, "String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art" (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 32.

²Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, *Wall Hangings* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1969). It is worth noting that while the art in *Wall Hangings* did indeed use neutral colors and abstract compositions, the artists' larger bodies of work did not necessarily reflect these strict parameters.

³Julia Bland, interview with author, Brooklyn, New York, April 9, 2025. All other quotes from same source.

⁴"Moth" was previously in dialogue with Lenore Tawney's work in *Even thread [has] a speech*, John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2019, curated by Shannon R. Stratton.

⁵Her closest predecessor is likely Alan Shields, whose early 1970s rope paintings, with their vibrant colors and see-through grids offer at least superficial commonalities. But for Shields—who was not included in Constantine and Larsen's texts—craft techniques and materials were tools toward expanding painting, rather than being employed on their own terms.

⁶Caitlin Monachino, email with author, April 29, 2025.

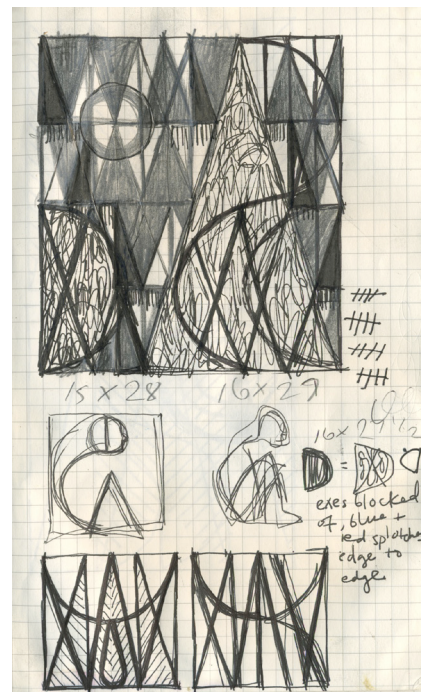
⁷Jessica Hemmings, ed., *The Textile Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2012), 57.

—Rebecca McNamara (she/her) is Frances Young Tang '61 Associate Curator at the Tang Museum at Skidmore College and was an inaugural Lenore Tawney Fellow at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 2023. Her work examines the 19th century through contemporary art, with a focus on fiber art and craft-oriented practices. Her recent publications include *Radical Fiber: Threads Connecting Art and Science* (2022).

wordsbyrebecca.com | @rebeccannemc

—Julia Bland (she/her) (born Palo Alto, California, 1986; lives and works in Brooklyn) works across painting and textile. She attended the Rhode Island School of Design, focused in painting (BFA, 2008) and Yale University focused in painting and printmaking (MFA, 2012), and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2013).

@whoalia



Julia Bland, *untitled drawing*, 2023. Ink and graphite on graph paper, 8.25 inches x 5.125 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.



Julia Bland, *Blue Womb*, 2023. Hand-woven and dyed textiles with linen threads, cotton, a blue shirt, bed sheets and baby blanket, 120 x 101 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery.