

Art **Reviews** Weekend

When Paintings Are Stitched, Unstitched, Twisted, and Knotted

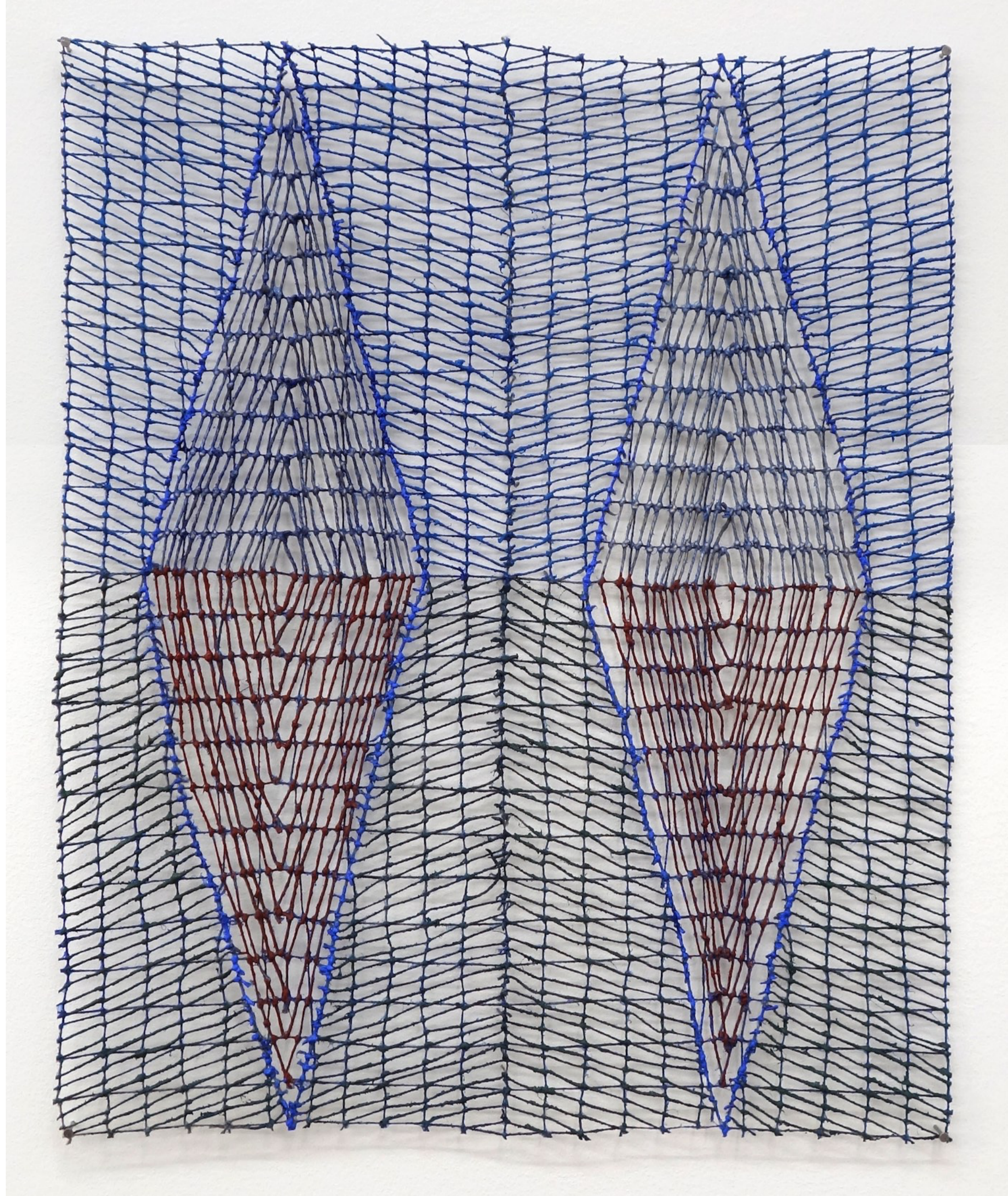
Julia Bland combines weaving with paint to make works that don't quite fit comfortably in a single category.



by John Yau
April 8, 2018



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Julia Bland, "Slow Rip" (2017), linen threads and oil paint, 13 3/4 x 11 1/4 inches (all images courtesy Helena Anrather)

In an interview with Thavma Phillips (*Art Fuse*, 10/24/2017), Julia Bland said this about her use of the loom in her hybrids of weaving, painting, and, more recently, sculpture:

Before the loom, I was ripping and sewing my paintings. I wanted the composition to come from the object itself, to be connected to the surface rather than superimposed. [...] I don't always work on the loom, but it continues to be a source of surprise and inspiration.

Bland's comment brought to mind the work of Al Loving and how the art historian Katy Siegel, in "Self-Made Painting," her essay on his work, described "the beginning of the dyeing, tearing, cutting, and sewing in 1972," about which "Loving tells a prosaic tale of accidents and incidents, including his daughter spilling paint in the studio and then washing it off a canvas, and his own decision to cut out the "good" passage of an unsuccessful painting rather than throw the whole thing out."

Bland seems to want to generate her work out of threads and fibers, to weave, stitch, unstitch, twist, and knot together. She will use dye and apply paint, as well as burn the fabric, causing concentric rings to appear. Each process she uses underscores Bland's open-ended, experimental approach to her materials. For Bland, weaving is more than a means; it enables discovery.

To have a sense of what I am getting at, you should go see *Julia Brand: Underbelly* at Helena Anrather (March 2 – April 15, 2018), in Chinatown. There are three large wall works and a sculpture — the first by this artist — composed of four sections hanging down from the ceiling, forming a semi-enclosed space, along with two smaller pieces, one of which could be seen as a sketch made from linen threads stiffened with oil paint.



"Julia Bland: Underbelly" at Helena Anrather, installation view: "Broken Clock (Twice a Day)" (2016) and "Siren" (2018)

If you check out the artist's [website](#), you will see that she makes line drawings on gridded paper. The lines are in fact threads, and the filled-in sections of the drawings are solid areas of fabric. As the works in this exhibition suggest, Bland likes to make pieces that are at once layered, solid, and open. She wants viewers to be aware of the wall.

Bland combines weaving with paint to make works that don't quite fit comfortably in a single category, that are simultaneously fabric art and painting. In this exhibition, her materials include a bedspread, black velvet, canvas, wool, silk, denim, fabric dye, oil paint, and wax. I began to think of each of different fabrics that Bland uses in her work as kind of skin, as in "Broken Clock (Twice a Day)" (2016), where there are sections that mimic snakeskin. Located on the central panel, these sections join the right and left sides, as a bright yellow snake undulates across and up the composition.

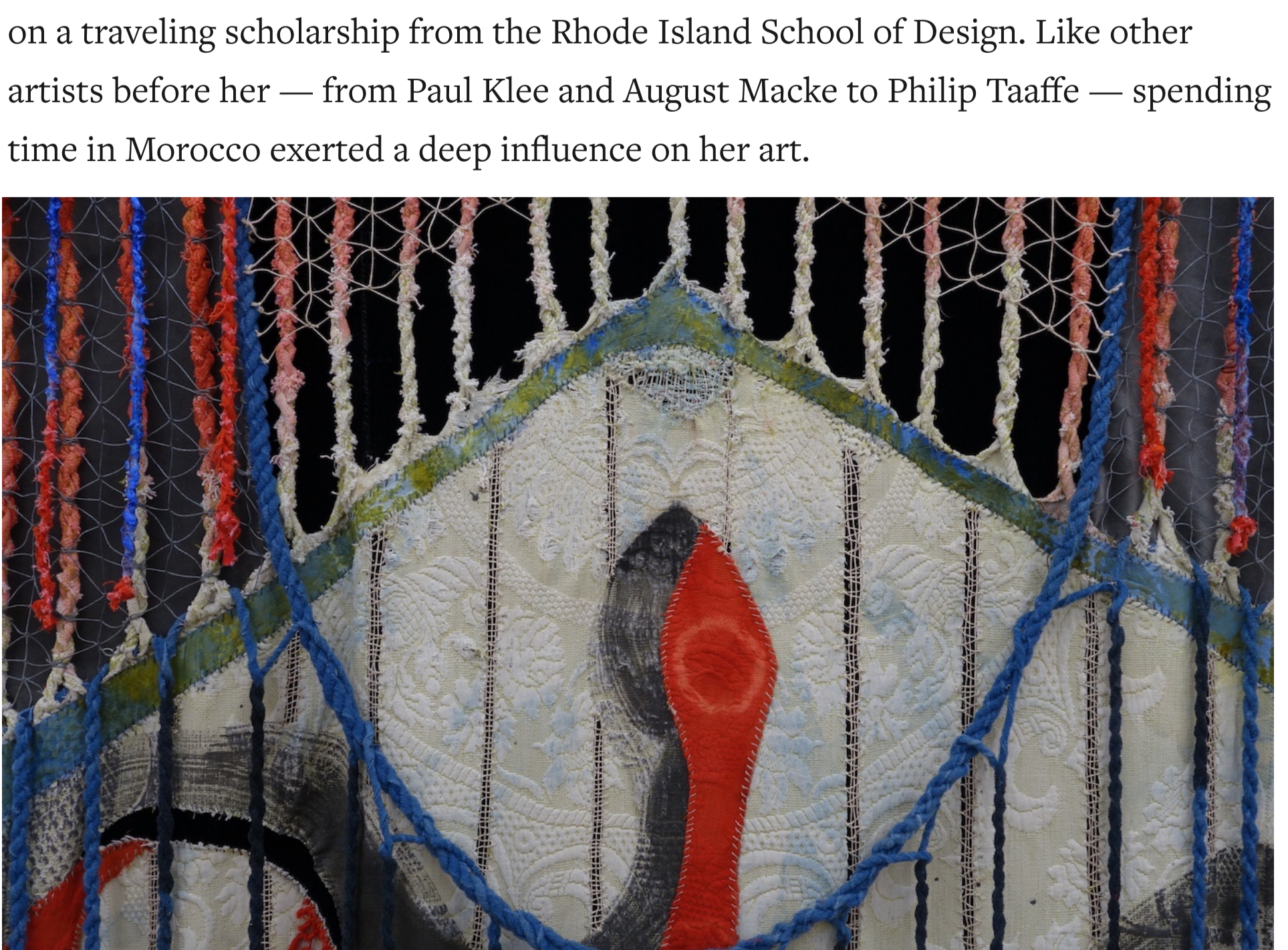
There are a lot of things to scrutinize in these works, from the color and surface of each section, to the different materials and processes that Bland has employed, to her pictorial synthesis of geometry and representational form. She is particular about every inch of the surface, from the weave to the color to the kinds of stitches she makes. One constant in Bland's work is the interplay between tactility and visuality. We are always seeing a thing, rather than an image.



Julia Bland, "Nest" (2017), bedspread, velvet, canvas, wool, linen threads, wax, dye, ink, and oil paint, 112 x 66 inches

A snake is also a central motif in "Nest" (2017). It seems that the primary material comprising this work was a bedspread the artist used when she was younger. By unstitching the bedspread, she has turned it into a pentagonal house-like shape that forms the base of this vertical work, with the snake's head pointing up toward the pentagon's apex. A strip of dyed green fabric has been sewn into the pentagon's upper four sides, forming a border, as well as demarcating a shift. Bland has twisted the strands of the unstitched bedspread around each other to form approximately 30 rope-like cords rising to the top of the piece. The cords turned red, echoing the snake, and later blue as they rise to the top, where they culminate in knots. The cords call attention to gravity and its defiance: the unthreaded bedspread seems to cascade down, a few inches in front of the wall, while the snake rises up. A section of black velvet has been placed behind cords.

Between 2008 and 2012, when Bland began studying in the MFA program at Yale, she lived in Morocco, where she had initially gone to study Sufism and Islamic art on a traveling scholarship from the Rhode Island School of Design. Like other artists before her — from Paul Klee and August Macke to Philip Taaffe — spending time in Morocco exerted a deep influence on her art.



Julia Bland, "Nest" (2017), detail.

Bland's use of snakes, phallic-like geometric forms, and triangles, some of which are bisected, conveys an interest in occult and mystical imagery without ever becoming blatant about it. The origin of "Nest" might have been a bedspread the artist once used, but she has transformed it into a materially rich object, at once decorative and magical.

In Sufism, the snake can be a symbol of the Base Self (our inner demon), as well as a sign of death and rebirth because it can shed its skin. In the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, there are many different spells against snakes to protect the deceased in the afterlife, including a passage where the deceased recites: "I am a long-lived snake; I pass the night and am reborn every day." The fact that "Nest" was once a bedspread, and one under which Bland once passed the night, must have been a catalytic spark for her imagination.

Julia Brand: Underbelly continues at Helena Anrather (28 Elizabeth Street, Chinatown, Manhattan), through April 15.