



ABSTRACT MIXED MEDIA ARTIST GRETHE WITTROCK

# Contemporary Expressions

OVERWHELMING STILLNESS AND HARMONY  
BY TRUDI VAN DYKE



Grethe Wittrock

Textile artist Grethe Wittrock indulges twin passions: her Danish homeland and environmental fragility. She pares them down into emotionally charged abstractions. Trained as a weaver, she's had her work evolve to include tactile experiences with knots, braiding and meditative processes of repetition with slight variations. Incorporating methods and techniques originating from historical processes, she transposes her work into contemporary expressions.

Grethe makes a deliberate attempt to develop the sculptural possibilities of her media while honoring its natural qualities. This reverence for the tactility and patterns found in nature produces in her works an overwhelming stillness and harmony.

Grethe's large scale works are both sensual and mysterious. "My art is a way of incorporating my thoughts and feelings into an actual three-dimensional form," she says.

Grethe's choice of material, often weatherbeaten, worn and stained sails from her native Copenhagen, is important. She found inspiration about 10 years ago in photos of sailing ships. Then she tracked down a Danish sea captain who agreed to provide her with sails that were no longer serviceable. The sail itself is illustrative of its history: Lines and creases, cracks, stains and seams lend the artist her canvas and inform her creativity.

As an image forms, Grethe dyes, seams, cuts and realigns the pieces. Images are portrayed with layered





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compositions. Her work successfully becomes a vessel for stories illuminating the interplay of ageing and the environment. To further explain her infatuation with the weatherTex beaten fabric, she explains how the sails “reveal their distinct histories, each wrinkle marking a storied and windswept past.” By using reclaimed material in this way, she metaphorically aligns the experiences of her seafaring ancestors with those of migrating birds. The precisely crafted work provides a subtle reflection on a shared reliance on the natural elements for survival.

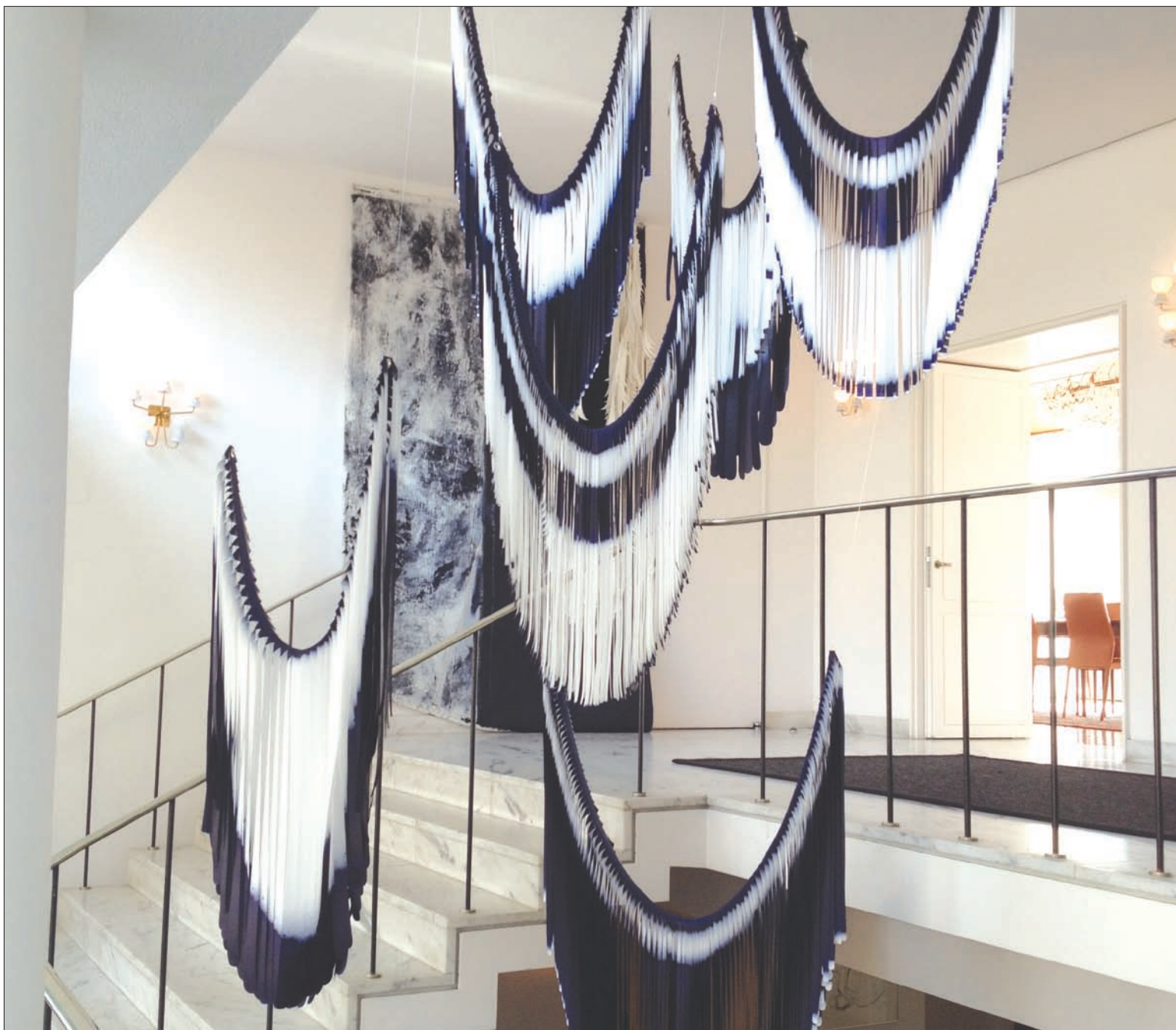
Grethe's piece “Black Swan” is developed in layers of hand-cut sweeps of sail cloth dyed in dark blue-black gradations. Sketches of her preparatory work resemble those of Da Vinci drawings as she thinks through which parts of the swan will convey the feeling of flight. Layers and shadows confidently communicate the impression

of airlift and movement while retaining the impact of an abstraction.

Grethe discusses her attraction to the structure and shapes of nature and natural phenomena. The 110-inch length of “The Blue Whale” simply hung by grommets consists of two visually interacting layers made from one sail. The base layers’ shadings and variations of blues inspire a feeling of ocean waters with wide variations, turbulence and areas of calm. The top layer is painstakingly hand cut in curves on sailcloth crossing in and out of the fabric grain. The resulting dimensional effect reinforces the impact and helps the viewer feel that the whale has somehow metamorphosed into his environment.

The depth of Grethe's passion for materials was developed when she studied extensively in Japan, emerging with wearable art pieces based on knitting





Page 30: "The Black Swan," sail cloth, dyed and cut, 78' x 28' and detail

Page 31: "The Horse," paper dress, The Jeune Couture Collection, handwoven papyrus yarn, printed and geometrically cut

Above: Installation "Migrating Birds & Greenland Landscape," sail cloth, dyed and cut, Royal Danish Embassy, Washington, D.C.

Opposite: "Gold Reserves Copenhagen, 1939-49," 6' tall

and weaving with Japanese paper yarns. She treats the paper yarn as she would fine linen and cotton and uses the same techniques weaving the papers into fabric. This fully natural material is then taken by collaborating colleague Ann Schmidt-Christensen to make minimal elegant shapes intended to pay homage to the kimono.

Focusing on a series of work for her 2017 exhibition, *Nordic Currents* was inspired by the reality of a disappearing landscape of Greenland (which is part of Denmark) and supported by the Danish Arts Foundation. Her intent was to illustrate the pristine beauty of the Arctic landscape and make the viewer reflect "on the importance of protecting its unique ecosystem."

"Arctic Fjords" is a triptych engaging an additional technique of punching holes tediously by hand one at a time using numerous size punches to present patterns, provide shadows and illusions of movement. Grethe

turns from discarded sails to new sail cloth for this piece since the holes need to have crisp edges which would not be achieved on the weathered sails. The pieces hang in transition from high ceilings and encompass thousands of holes. The viewer can peer through them at various angles and appreciate shadowing and their design.

Grethe recently was exhibited in a 2018 show at the renowned Brown Grotta Arts in Wilton, Connecticut. She is preparing a body of work that will be exhibited in Seattle, Washington, at the Nordic Museum through September.

Grethe is a graduate of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Denmark, and studied at the Kyoto Seika University, college of Fine Art in textile studies.

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