VALISE

Sholis, Brian. *"An Interview with Christy Matson"*. Valise, November 11, 2024.

Christy Matson
Wild Geographies, 2024
Acrylic on paper, indigo, linen and cotton
64 x 54 3/4 in
162.6 x 139.1 cm

Valise user Christy Matson is an artist based in Los Angeles. Her latest exhibition, "Index Color," opened November 9 at Philip Martin Gallery in Los Angeles and remains on view through December 21. Below, we discuss how she creates her "woven wall-based works," what is gained and lost as we translate the world and artworks into pictures, and art museums' recent embrace of textiles.

Brian Sholis: Let's begin with your process, which, if I understand it correctly, goes from analog to digital to analog.

Christy Matson: I've developed an idiosyncratic way of working over the last twenty years. The tool I use most is the jacquard loom, which is unique among looms in that every thread can be controlled individually. I've come to think of it as a drawing tool—not dissimilar to colored pencils or an oil pastel, which I also use. My loom doesn't have quite the directness of picking up a pencil and making marks on paper, though. It requires that I think through how to translate specific marks on paper or shades of color into weaving. So what I sketch or draw on paper is only the basis for a finished weaving that might have important differences.

BS: It seems like that translation goes two ways. It's not just that the loom imperfectly recreates what you drew, but also that, in knowing you're heading to the loom, you probably draw differently, too.

CM: For sure.

BS: If I was to generalize a "trend" from work you made ten to fifteen years ago to what you're making today, I'd suggest you've gone from what I'd call mathematical shapes—diamonds, triangles, rectangles, grids—toward organic shapes, with wavering lines and patterns that do not emphasize their repetitiveness. Can you talk about that evolution, both from a technical perspective and from the perspective of what you want to make images of?

CM: Technically, nothing has changed—I'm using the same techniques. But my interests have definitely evolved. When I first began experimenting with this loom, I was interested in exploring its capabilities in a reflexive manner and showing viewers the feedback loops that occurred between my hand and the machine. I would often reference weave structures themselves, but explode them in different ways, or use algorithms to make choices. I'd make sound recordings of the loom, for example, then translate those into woven patterns. That's where those "mathematical" shapes, as you described them, emerged.

I still love those explorations, but in recent years I've looked a bit further beyond the studio for inspiration. I think what I'm making today is rooted in landscape, in the relationship of my body to Los Angeles and its environs: the Angeles National Forest, the beach, the desert, the mountains. I'm interested in perspective shifts—at one moment I may become fixated on something I'm walking past, some flowers along the sidewalk, and at others a succession of hills trailing off into the distance. Picking up my head, looking beyond the loom and the studio, has altered how I think about patterns, about color.

BS: The exhibition we're discussing is opening at your gallery in Los Angeles. Would you show the work differently, or would you make a

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Penstemon, 2024
Acrylic on paper, linen, Plötulopi, and cotton
33 x 39 1/2 in
83.8 x 100.3 cm

different body of work, if you were presenting it in one of your other galleries outside the city?

CM: The work is the work, and I'd show this anywhere—not least because I'm not just going to Elysian Park and getting out my sketchbook. I'm not drawing from life. Instead, I'm presenting works that communicate the feeling of how I experience spaces or landscapes.

The title of the show is "Index Color." That term has a specific meaning within the world of weaving. But the phrase is resonant in other ways. The traditional understanding of photography is that it was "indexical," an accurate picture of a particular place at a particular time. But generations of photographers have poked holes in that idea. And my process, in which I make drawings or sketches, bring them onto the computer to manipulate them and prepare them for the loom, then weave them, likewise undermines any sense that these are "pictures" of a given place. With all the opportunities for selection and editing that goes into our creative processes, what even is an index anymore?

BS: One part of this I'd like to discuss more is your mention of shifting perspectives. You talk about zooming in on flowers, then zooming out. If I understand correctly, every weaving must necessarily be a grid, right? So even if you're creating organic, wavering lines, a zoomed-in view shows the warp going one way and the weft perpendicular to it. Likewise, when someone looks closely at one of your works, they can't help but notice the textures—some parts of the surface are higher than others, the color comes from individual threads, and so on.

Those haptic qualities feel distinct from, say, the smoothness of our phones, which we often interpose between ourselves and the landscape.

CM: Yes, and yet I always have the impulse to take out my phone and snap a photo of something I encounter out in the world. And those photos often pale in comparison to my memory of the experience, right? It's why I often take photos in Macro mode, really close up; that somehow feels more satisfying to me.

About the work itself, though: no matter how great the documentation is, and I've been fortunate to have great pictures of my work and shows, there are certain qualities of the work that just never translate. What you gain in the ability to share widely, you lose in a kind of fidelity.

BS: I wonder if those haptic qualities, those have-to-be-there experiences, are part of why, in the past two decades, art museums' embrace of textiles has accelerated. I'm thinking of the "Quilts of Gee's Bend" exhibition at the Whitney in 2002–03, which was the first "blockbuster" art-museum textile show I saw. Or the big Anni Albers show at Tate Modern eight or so years ago, or "Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction," which was on view recently in your town and opens this week in Canada.

CM: It's funny you mention the Whitney show. I remember standing in line to get into the museum and overhearing one woman say to another, "All these people are here to see quilts?" in such a dismissive tone—a tone representative of that time.

I had studied textiles in the late 1990s and thought that, maybe, if I was

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Christy Matson
Manzanita, 2024
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109.9 x 101 cm

lucky, I could get a job teaching in a community college or something. I was really invested in something that didn't offer many paths forward. But that Gee's Bend exhibition, or seeing an artist like Sheila Hicks get incredible late-career attention after a show at the Bard Graduate Center, was so exciting. These shows keep popping up, and the more of them there are the more people begin to understand and respect the creative aspect of textile practices. Something similar has happened with ceramics.

BS: From very early on, you were making unique works meant for the gallery context, rather than, say, collaborating on designs meant to be produced in bulk.

CM: And I get asked far less often today than at the outset of my career about the distinction.

BS: It connects back to the haptic qualities of the work: people recognize that these are not only unique objects, but also that encountering them in person is a unique experience. I wish I could travel to LA to see the show.

CM: Thank you.