

# W

Finkel, Jori. “*The Textile Artists Bringing Fiber Art Into the Future*”. W Magazine, December 9, 2025.



Christy Matson  
*Verbena*, 2024  
Acrylic on paper, linen and cotton  
34 3/4 x 39 3/4 in  
88.3 x 101 cm

*“Fusing age-old techniques with digital tools, a new generation of creatives is expanding the tradition of tapestries—and filling art galleries and museums to a degree never seen before.”*

When the sleek new Peter Zumthor–designed building at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has its grand opening, in April, there will be some unexpectedly sensual touches: glass walls that curve dramatically, metallic curtains that are light and gauzy, poured concrete walls that look in spots like gray-on-gray Gerhard Richter paintings. Completing the tactile-futuristic aesthetic will be a new weaving from L.A. artist Sarah Rosalena, stretching some 26 feet to span the main wall of the museum restaurant, and visible from outdoors. The artwork brings together NASA satellite images of Mars to create a surreal topography that is at once deeply familiar and unfamiliar—evoking Earth, but not this Earth.

What makes the textile, rich in icy blues and desert-sand rusts, even stranger: It’s a digital creation, combining age-old and cutting-edge technologies. Which is to say, the cotton, wool, and synthetic yarns were not woven on a wooden floor loom but on an industrial, computer-programmed machine in the Netherlands that produces supersonic textiles. “I could have actually handwoven the work, but it probably would have taken me a full year to do it, and my looms aren’t large enough,” says Rosalena, who learned the process from her mother and grandmother, of Wixárika (Huichol) descent, and now teaches computational craft at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Instead, the final piece was fabricated, after she’d spent six months testing samples of fibers, colors, and patterns, in just five days.

Combining loom skills with Internet-age tools, Rosalena is one of several artists breaking down the hierarchies that separate craft and fine art, weaving and computing, ancient and new technologies. These artists are helping to expand and explode the European tapestry tradition that flourished during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when textiles that could surpass the status of painting were commissioned for the walls of royal palaces. And they are filling art galleries and museums with experimental weavings to a degree never seen before. As the curator Su Wu, who organized a survey of tapestry for Dallas Contemporary this year, puts it, “The artists that I’m interested in are wrestling with how to be irreverent within a field that’s so tied to traditional ways of making. I find that very exciting.”

But even more than other forms of textiles, such as quilting or knitting, weaving has a strong hold on contemporary artists, in part because of its rich connection to computer culture. The loom, after all, involves a binary process of placing the weft (horizontal) threads over or under the warp (vertical) threads. The Jacquard loom, a machine invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard in the early 19th century in France that uses punch cards to program the lifting and lowering of warp threads, is widely understood to be the inspiration for Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine, a high-level calculator considered a precursor to the modern computer.

“I think about technology really as a continuum,” says Jovencio de la Paz, who, like Rosalena, does most of their work on a Thread Controller 2 (TC2), a digital Jacquard loom designed to fit in an artist’s studio. “Sewing needles were once made of bone and pine, and that was replaced with a steel sewing needle and then a sewing machine. Those technologies are all an expression of ingenuity,” they say. De la Paz has lately been using the TC2 at the University of Oregon in Eugene, where they teach, to make largely monochromatic, waffle-weave textiles that recall the black-on-black wood-relief sculptures of Louise Nevelson. To make the deep waffle pockets, which would be “profoundly time-consuming and wildly impractical” on a standard loom, they teamed up with a computer engineer to develop special software for the TC2.

De la Paz considers their work “a collaboration” with the digital loom. “The tools are creating the compositions, but I am choosing all of the fundamental qualities—like what the yarns are, the colors, the material—and that combination produces this hybrid aesthetic.” It’s not at all, they added, a matter of hitting Control-P and sitting

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Christy Matson  
*Crag*, 2024  
Acrylic on paper, linen and cotton  
37 x 45 1/2 in  
94 x 115.6 cm

back to watch the machine take over. “You’re still standing there. You’re still passing the shuttle, just as you would with a loom from a thousand years ago.”

The Los Angeles artist Christy Matson, who once taught de la Paz at the Art Institute of Chicago—yes, weavers tend to know one another—says she works exclusively with the TC2 to achieve painterly effects such as color gradation and shading that would be “incredibly difficult,” if not impossible, to create otherwise. Her woven landscapes have the atmospheric softness of watercolors, and in fact they start as small paintings on paper that she refines in Photoshop.

With such powerful tools, do we even need the weaver anymore? That question is raised by Qualeasha Wood, who goes much further in her reliance on digital technology, outsourcing the weaving process to a textile mill in North Carolina. She got the idea during a break from college at the Rhode Island School of Design, while curling up at her grandmother’s house with a blanket decorated with baby pictures of her and her cousins, which her aunt had ordered as a gift online. Now she makes digital collages in Photoshop to send off to the mill and embellishes the resulting textile in her Philadelphia studio, whether beading it by hand or embroidering it.

Digital imagery is also the explicit theme of her pieces, which include selfies, screen grabs, Apple logos, and pop-up error messages, freezing the endless stream that floods our brains all the time. “I take screenshots all day long,” she says. “I take screenshots of my laptop freezing. I take screenshots of my phone glitching out.” For her recent show at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, she did a performance called Attention Economy: She set up a bed in the gallery so she could doomscroll in her cocoon while visitors watched a live feed of her tiny screen on a TV nearby.

For Wood, one pleasure of outsourcing the process is being forced to relinquish control. The color palette is limited, and accidents happen, like the time the mill took one of her thank-you notes—which said “Thanks so much” with a smiley face—and reproduced it in the corner of a tapestry. But the world of contemporary weaving is vast and varied, and other artists in the field prefer not to use digital tools. Fourth-generation Diné (Navajo) weaver Melissa Cody uses a loom like her ancestors’ to make her works, which often feature pixelated images nodding to the 1980s video games, such as Pac-Man and Frogger, that she grew up with. Diedrick Brackens, one of the most celebrated artists in the field, has also stayed old-school, and likes to dye his own yarns to achieve subtle effects.

Some analog-only artists talk about how the process of weaving, with its rhythmic repetitions, seems to change or suspend the flow of time. Time passes “in a very slow way while I’m working, like I have all the space in the world,” says Julia Bland, a Brooklyn artist who recently had a solo presentation at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, in Ridgefield, Connecticut. She uses different techniques—and paints her fabrics—to make pieces that edge into painting and sculpture. With large lozenge forms made of fabric and webby triangles created by negative space, her work gets compared to the open-warp weavings of 20th-century pioneer Lenore Tawney.

Known for bringing taboo subjects like child abuse and domestic violence into her narratives, Erin M. Riley says that digital technology leaves her cold. She makes her tapestries, which can be nearly photographic in their precision, on a traditional loom in her Brooklyn studio. Most recently, for her fall show at PPOW gallery, in New York, Riley created some weavings that are irregular, not rectangular, in shape. One mimics a classified ad she glued into her journal in high school, which offered a 1995 Honda Civic as “single owner, well maintained, 89K miles, \$5,000.” She managed to re-create not only the newspaper typeface but also the jagged edges of the torn-out ad. Riley says she finds meaning in the hands-on process and is fast enough for her purposes without using a digital loom. She sees this work as a kind of “productive procrastination, a sort of stimming, or a way of keeping yourself busy so you don’t do destructive things.”

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Christy Matson  
*Shadow Notes*, 2025  
Watercolor on paper, linen and cotton  
13 1/4 x 13 1/4 x 1 in  
33.7 x 33.7 x 2.5 cm

These nearly musical rhythms also appeal to the Zurich-born, L.A.-based artist Christina Forrer, who creates vivid, sometimes cartoony characters such as witches and clowns—and plenty of woodland creatures, too—in scenes that look like they could have come from a Swiss fairy tale. “For me, the process of making is where I find my joy,” she says. “I like to be in the piece, almost like drawing, where I can change whatever I want at any moment in time.”

Riley and Forrer both make tapestries in the narrow, technical sense: weft-faced fabrics where different threads are used across a single row to create patterns. But the tapestry category is often used these days to refer to any weaving made to be hung on the wall. John Paul Morabito, who makes fringed curtain-like pieces in exuberant, queer-coded colors, started calling their work tapestries around 2016. “I don’t think many of us were using that term before then. It was a dirty word at that time, for whatever reason,” they say. With her Dallas show, Su Wu stretched the notion even further, proposing that tapestries don’t necessarily have to be a textile or hang on the wall—they are simply artworks where the image is wholly inextricable from its “canvas,” as opposed to being painted on or added to a surface.

A drive to experiment with materials is one trend that cuts across both groups of weavers, those who embrace digital technologies and those who don’t. You can find Bland integrating strips of baby blankets and bedsheets into her pieces—letting her life “overflow,” as she says. Matson has experimented with surplus denim, while Rosalena has at times replaced yarns with long pine needles, a staple of Indigenous basketry that reconnects her work to the earth. “With pine, I see my weavings as alive, as part of the life cycle,” she says. Conceptual artist Analia Saban, who brings the curiosity of a scientist to her art-making, used a digital loom to weave linen threads together with long strands of dried acrylic paint in a series that touched on the history of painting. In another, linen and copper wire evoked the history of computers.

Meanwhile, the Brazil-born, L.A.-based artist Clarissa Tossin uses no loom at all, focusing on one of the most abundant unnatural resources on the planet—used Amazon boxes—and interlacing the strips by hand. It’s a way not only to recycle cardboard, she says, but to confront the deforestation and exploitation of the Amazon River basin and address environmental issues, one of her core themes. It takes her a couple months to produce one of her larger weavings, such as those on show in her current survey at the Museum of Art of São Paulo.

In a culture of same-day delivery and instant downloading, these artworks represent acts of labor or full-body, sometimes back-breaking, acts of devotion. They take time and mark time, with each intersection of warp and weft representing a different moment, as though the loom itself were a sort of time-keeping device. And just as a woven work of art points to a pair of hands making it, even if a machine helped along the way, it’s easy to imagine it coming undone or unraveling. This might be another reason why this practice seems so intimate and human compared to some other art forms: A weaving always contains the threads of its own destruction.