

Spotlight

Ruth Laskey

(MFA Annual 2004) by Evan J. Garza

In recent years, contemporary painting has seen a surge of artists re-evaluating the use of their materials, and in turn re-examining the medium of painting itself—expanding it in the process. Not only does San Francisco’s Ruth Laskey produce her own dye, but she also weaves the fabric on which it’s placed. There is no fiber in her work which is not touched, woven, or augmented by the artist, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

The daughter of two professors, Laskey earned her undergraduate degree in Art History from UC Santa Cruz and later, after taking summer classes at California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC), where her father teaches writing, she realized she wanted to pursue a studio program for painting and drawing.

Laskey has hit quite a stride since she was included in the 2004 MFA Annual while in grad school at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, a period in which her work shifted from something closely resembling painting to something much more conceptually and materially rooted in the practice of weaving. That woven patterning in Laskey’s work has also had a dramatic effect on her compositions, wherein the geometric forms in linen are the result of the weaving process itself.

“Out of undergrad,” Laskey tells me, “I started experimenting with materials and feeling like that was a really important part of the process of painting—investigating the materiality of it. The first step was to make my own paints, and once I did that, the whole materialist notion really exploded. By making my own paint, I’m really invested in the materiality of my work.”

Laskey’s practice of careful appreciation for her materials points to a shift in values in emerging contemporary art-making...





Twill Series (Peach)

2010

hand-woven and hand-dyed linen

23.5 x 17.5 inches

Image courtesy of Ratio 3,
San Francisco, CA



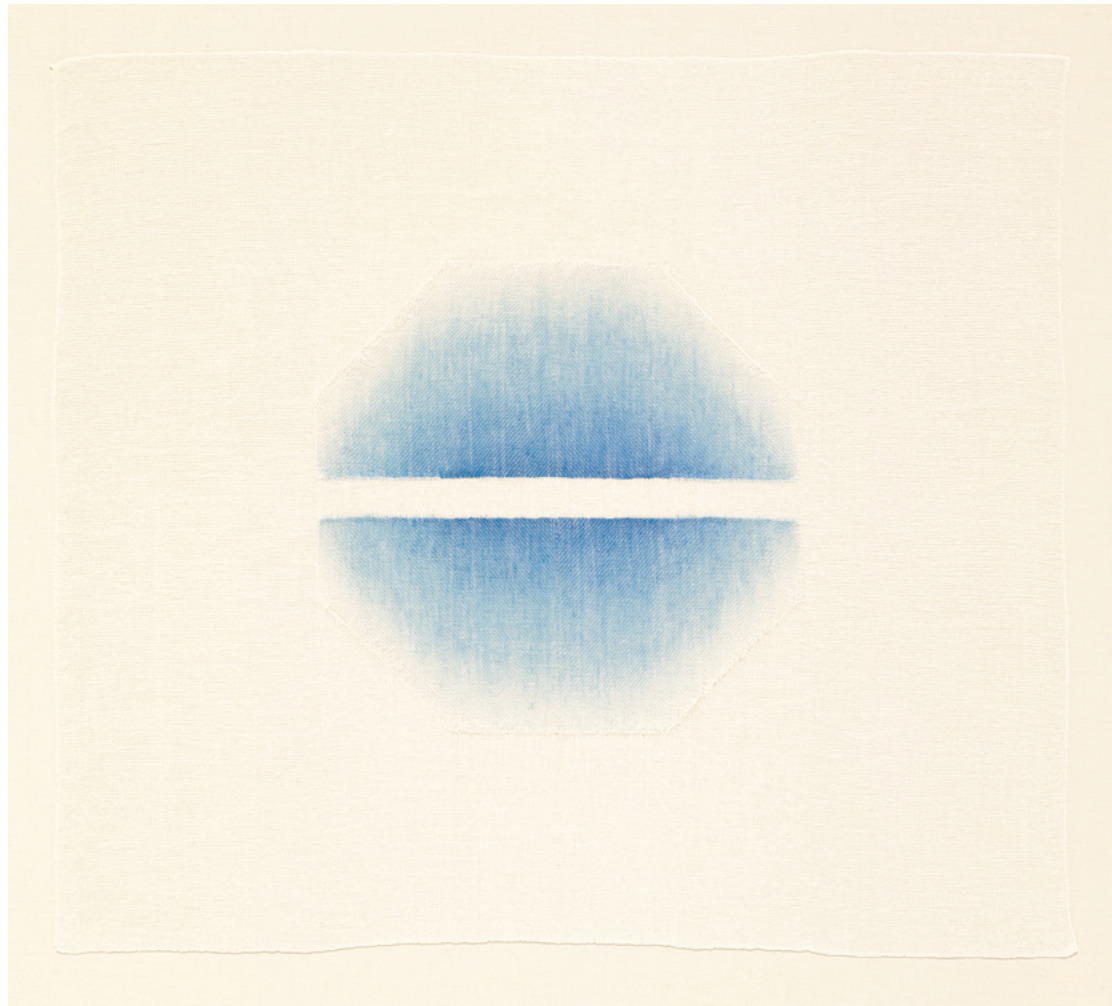
Twill Series (Sky Blue)

2010

hand-woven and hand-dyed linen

21 x 24 inches

Image courtesy of Ratio 3,
San Francisco, CA

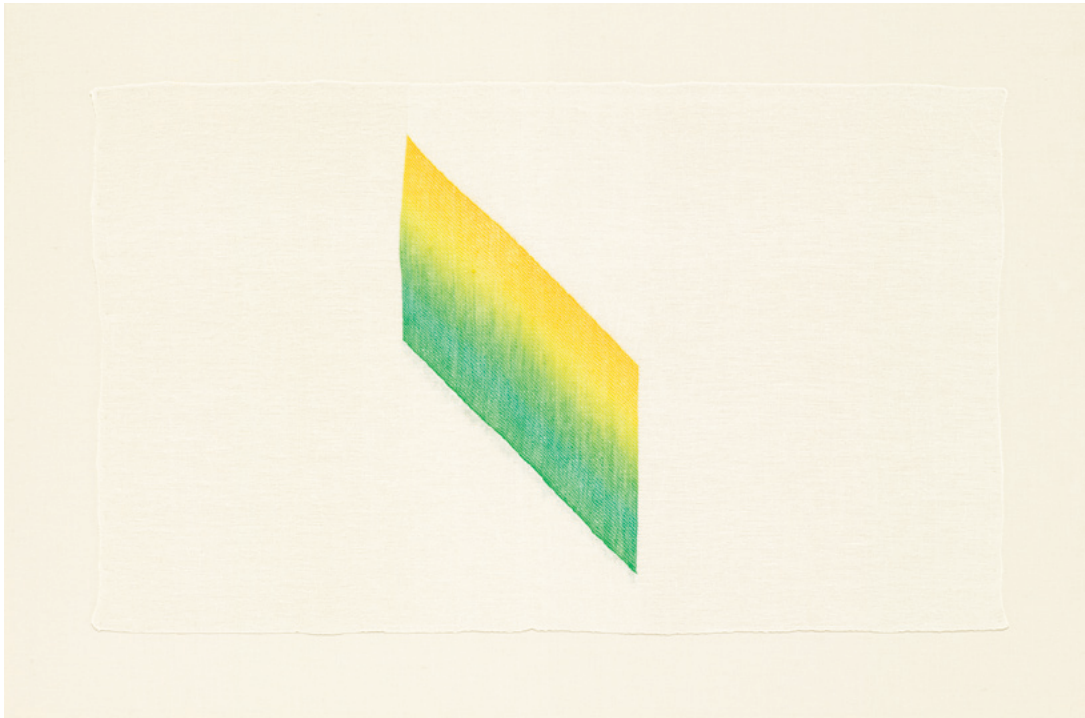


While working at CCAC in 2001, Laskey took a weaving class, and while it seemed like a strange direction to her at the time, her work would never be the same. After creating her own linen textiles on a loom, she began painting on the material, composing organic forms on the surface of the unprimed linen. Laskey, however, was interested in much more than just surface qualities, and by the time she started her master's program, she would nearly abandon painting altogether.

"My work changed quite a bit," she says, "mainly that big leap [from painting to weaving]. Before, the work was about making organic shapes. And so, between the two years of grad school, I made that big leap and said, 'Ok, I'm not going to use the paint anymore, I'll just do the weaving,' and that's when the geometric [forms began]."

Laskey's compositions are marked by their inherent ties to the act of weaving, with colorful geo-

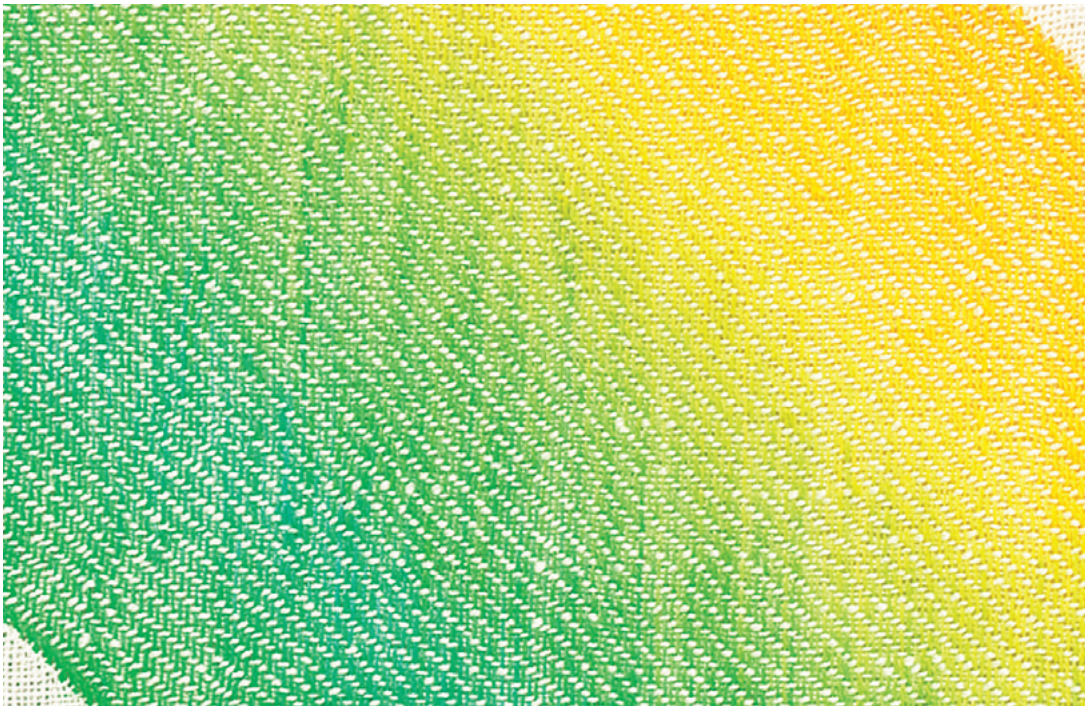




Twill Series (Yellow Green)
2009
hand-woven linen
21 x 24 inches
Image courtesy of Ratio 3,
San Francisco, CA



*Twill Series (Cayman
Isle Green)*
2010
hand-woven and hand-
dyed linen
18 x 27 inches
Image courtesy of Ratio 3,
San Francisco, CA



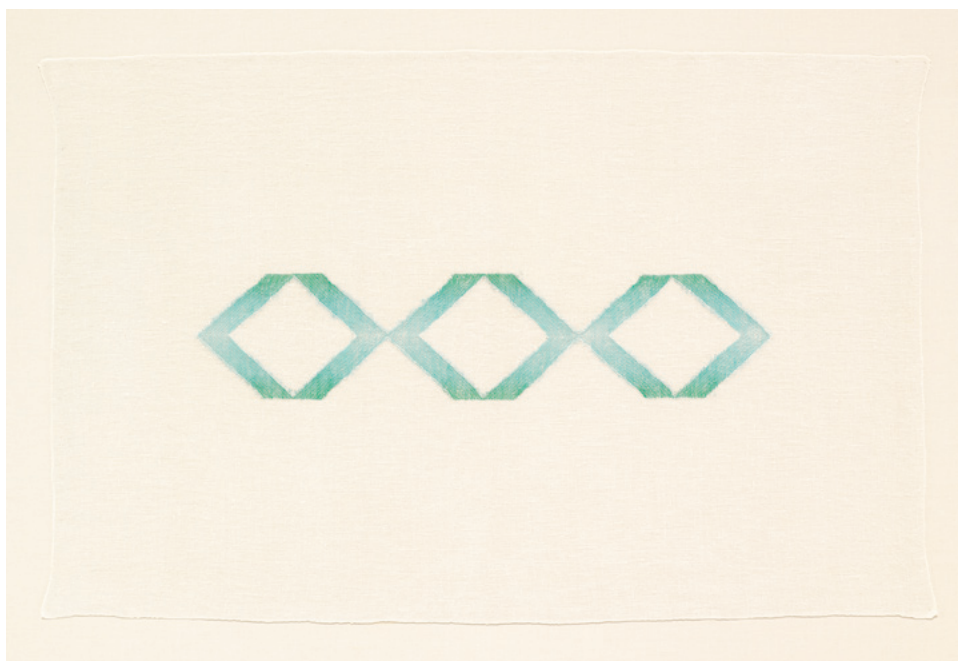
“By making my own paint, I’m really invested in the materiality of my work.”

metric figures cast in white linen fields of negative space. What is most remarkable about Laskey’s practice is her ability to draw by creating woven patterns. Her imagery is rooted in the structure that the loom creates by its nature, with elegant gradations in color and form carefully planned in advance of the weaving by dyeing threads of linen. The result is as subtle as it is meticulous.

This shift—“from painting to no painting” as she puts it—has produced some of the most celebrated work in Laskey’s career. She was recently awarded a prestigious SECA Art Award through the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art (SECA), a biennial prize given to a small handful of Bay Area artists whose work will be featured jointly at SFMOMA.

“[The SECA Art Award] is really exciting for me because I grew up here,” she says, “and SFMOMA is where I really learned about art. So, it’s exciting for me to now be featured in that institution.”

Art historically, there is a great appreciation for artists who create their own materials, but the artist to whom Laskey may have the strongest ties—from the incorporation of geometric forms to the use of the loom—is Anni Albers. Perhaps the best known tex-



tile artist of the last century, Albers was a student of the Bauhaus, where the collective manifesto was ‘starting from zero’—purported in large part by her future husband Josef Albers—and the concept of starting from scratch has everything to do with Laskey’s work.

“As a very young painter, my motivation was not feeling invested in the materials. I couldn’t just pick up a tube of paint off a shelf and go about it that way. I wanted to get to the fundamentals of things. I think there’s something happening currently—and I don’t know if it’s something that I’m connected to or not—but the whole D.I.Y. movement, with a lot of people doing things on their own and starting from scratch.”



"For weaving, [Anni Albers] is number one for me in the way she thought about things, and the work as well," she says. "I don't usually look at too many weaving artists. I'm definitely more concerned with painting and drawing. "[Anni Albers] is definitely someone I'm thinking about. If anyone has really dealt with process and materiality a lot, it's her."

With that said, Laskey has certainly carved out a place for herself within contemporary practices. At a time when major international artists have perfected the 'studio staff,' with figures like Jeff Koons and Julie Mehretu making work with the help of dozens of assistants, Laskey's practice of careful appreciation for her materials points to a shift in values in emerging contemporary art-making where conceptual framework and technique go hand in hand.

"It's all based on my thinking about giving the loom its own expression," Laskey explains, "and thinking about what forms can come out of the patterning. Then thinking about how I can push that in various directions... I'm interested in seeing where it takes me, and following the process along that journey—seeing how far the loom will take me." ■

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*Twill Series (Black Cherry/
Amethyst/Fire Red)*

2007

hand-woven linen

19.75 x 18.25 inches

Image courtesy of Ratio 3,
San Francisco, CA

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*Twill Series (Deep Orange/
Dark Brown/Purple)*

2007

hand-woven linen

19.75 x 18.25 inches

Image courtesy of Ratio 3,
San Francisco, CA

