

"The globalization of exchanges puts an end to the universalization of values [...] The universal has become globalized..." Jean Baudrillard¹

From Skin to Landscape: On Agustina Woodgate's Rug Collection

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At first sight, Agustina Woodgate's colorful furry constellations resemble psychedelic kaleidoscopic collages. A closer look at the ornamental pattern and the symmetric arrays that glow in spectacular coloration reveals that these are, in fact, ragged furs of stuffed animal toys. Arranged in symmetric dispositions of centrifugal flux like wind vanes, these large-scale rugs may also evoke semi-abstract landscapes. Their vivid coloration as well as their nature-related titles – *Milky Ways, Seven Seas, No Rain, No Rainbows, Peacock, Rose Petals, Galaxy, and Home* – reinforce their reading as cosmic terrains. At the same time, the way they are installed interferes with such a reading, lending them their identity as weaves of skin rugs; patchworks made of deconstructed teddy bears.²

¹ Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global," in *Power Inferno* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), p. 63; English version: François Debrix, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/the-violence-of-the-global/>.

² A few words about the surprising history of the teddy bear: According to Wikipedia, the teddy bear was developed simultaneously by two toy makers, one in the US and the other in Germany, in the early 20th century. It was named after President Theodore Roosevelt following an incident on a bear hunting trip in Mississippi in November 1902 in which he refused to shoot a bear. "It became an iconic children's toy, celebrated in story, song, and film. Since the creation of the first teddy bears, which sought to imitate the form of real bear cubs, 'teddies' have greatly varied in form, style, and material. They have become collector's items, with older and rarer 'teddies' appearing at public auctions. Teddy bears are among the most popular gifts for children and are often given to adults to signify love, congratulations, or sympathy. [...] Early teddy bears were made to look like real bears, with extended snouts and beady eyes. Modern teddy bears tend to have larger eyes and foreheads and smaller noses, baby-like features that enhance the toy's cuteness. Teddy bears are also manufactured to represent different species of bear, such as polar bears and grizzly bears, as well as pandas. While early teddy bears were covered in tawny mohair fur, modern teddy bears are manufactured in a wide variety of commercially available fabrics, most commonly synthetic fur, but also velour, denim, cotton, satin, and canvas."

Like Woodgate's multidisciplinary work as a whole, this collection, created between 2010-2013 and assembled here for the first time, is characterized by a demanding, labor intensive work process which involves experimental investigation and repetitious, monotonous acts. Such was the case when she created a soaring watchtower from 3,000 bricks of human hair in *Tower* (2008), or when she clandestinely sewed tags inscribed with poems into thrift-store clothing in *Poetry Bombing* (2011), and later, when she sanded down maps and created new representations of the world in her *New Landscapes* series (2012). Almost all of her works reveal an inquisitive approach to space and material. Alongside the meticulous planning stands out her embrace of the accidental, so that side effects and by-products often become central elements. Woodgate's approach to material parallels her relationship with space in her site-specific works; she peels back layers, revealing the depths of an object or the history and cultural memory lying dormant in space.

Each of the rugs presented here conceals the totality of concerns seeking the artist's solution: from body politics, through memory and identity formation apparatuses, to mass production practices in the era of globalization, and the ways in which rituals, narratives, and traditions (whether Western or Eastern) shape our relation to objects. However, beyond these grand themes, the idea that triggered the entire series originated in a private childhood memory associated with Pepe, the scruffy, worn-out teddy bear she carries with her even now, as an adult, from one country to another, from studio to studio, as a memory capsule, a Madeleine cookie. The first teddy-bear image emerged in a 2008 video, in which the artist is seen wearing a giant bear costume, dancing to a song written by her grandmother for Pepe. That same year she first took four teddy bears apart, emptied their filling and stripped them of their furs. The result showed itself two years later in the form of a rug reminiscent of an outstretched bear made of teddy "skin" sections (*Home*, 2010).

Work on the rugs thus begins with an act of collecting. Scores of bags overflowing with worn, second-hand stuffed animal toys gathered from thrift stores, family, and friends fill the studio, waiting to be recycled. Woodgate never uses new toys, only ones that have had a "life." She clearly belongs to the species of collector-artists who, besides the collecting obsession characterizing their conduct in general, are fascinated by categories of taxonomy, organization, and ordering, aiming to inspire magic by infusing new meaning into old objects. Psychologists tend to define the urge to collect as an obsession whose clinical manifestations include piles of cardboard boxes and overcrowded storage rooms. Scholars who study this phenomenon agree that its pathological extreme is "compulsive hoarding." Most of the artists who exhibit symptoms of this collecting fever, are motivated by it as an artistic strategy and operate in diverse contexts of memory, nostalgia, commemoration, nature-culture relations, and modes of presentation and representation. Indeed, such notions as gathering, accumulating, sorting, cataloging, and excess, embodied in the concept of "collection," guide Woodgate's choices and practice as well. Moreover, the paradox underlying the phenomenon of collecting – the simultaneous preservation and expiration of life – is embodied in every rug she makes.

Following the act of collecting, the rug-making methodology begins with an act of deconstruction and unstitching performed in the studio with the help of a team of assistants and volunteers. Her first significant discovery was that all stuffed toys are made of 16-18 pieces, always sewn together identically. Faithful to the material and method, Woodgate never interferes with the system: she will never cut the units to adapt them to the final design or force an "unnatural" behavior on the material. During the objects deconstruction, as she extracts the stuffing and saves the tags, hearts, and sound machines from each toy, she separates and gathers similar parts in piles by color: right hands apart, left hands apart, a pile of right legs, and a pile of left legs, cold colors, warm colors, blacks and whites separated, and finally, all the bellies together, and so on. She would next reassemble all the pieces as if they were a jigsaw puzzle in a symmetric pattern based on a mirrored image, like a Rorschach blot.

Although the final re-stitching of the pieces is done in a technique that resembles the quilt – quintessential American folklore associated with applied arts or female tradition – the manual crafting itself, or the “artist's unique touch” has no special significance for Woodgate. She is more interested in the concept of “labor” as opposed to mass production. Indeed, crafts and popular art are associated in Western consciousness with the nonindustrial world in the pre-modern era. The hierarchical distinction between the crafts belonging to folk art, outsider art or women's art, and high, elitist art remained valid for many years and continues to shape the field of contemporary art. The reasons are many, mostly associated with the fact that manual crafts came to be seen as functional, decorative, and old-fashioned by the modernist movement, which zealously guarded against them. Moreover, modern art, and especially conceptual art, rejected the time-consuming dimension of art making, attributing the work's value to its conceptual makeup and devaluing the process of its execution. The multiplicity of detail, the use of ignoble materials, the labor-intensive production process, associated with physical exertion and with materiality, the visual accessibility, the seductive and pleasure-inducing aspects – all these led manual crafts to be marginalized, outside the modernist (clearly masculine) canon.

A fundamental change in this conception occurred with the first feminist wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when radical women artists attempted to restore the culture of traditional female crafts as part of their effort to define what is often referred to as female “essentialism.” Artists such as Harmony Hammond, Faith Wilding, Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, and others turned to manual crafts as a political act that challenged the modernist hierarchy. This feminist contribution was essential to the launching of a wide-ranging postmodernist strategy, which enabled handicrafts to be used in a manner no longer considered to be inferior. Beginning in the 1980s, the use of craft techniques became an increasingly legitimate part of the artistic canon, as leading artists employed traditional crafts for social criticism. Women artists such as Rosemarie Trockel, and later Ann Hamilton and Annette Messenger, gave new meaning to the term “labor intensive.” During the 1990s, male artists such as Mike Kelley, Lucas Samaras, and Jim Hodges adopted similar strategies, and began using craft techniques in order to destabilize the modernist canon.

The contemporary preoccupation with these traditions and their reevaluation are part of a global trend that reflects a longing for a simpler life that stands out in contrast to today's global, commercialized art world – and which involves a great deal of nostalgia and ecological idealization. In Woodgate's art, too, the use of an inexpensive, recycled, accessible material, transformed into richly-textured fabrics, redefines their meaning and enhances their tactile, sensual facet. In an age in which the uniform and anonymous colors of the global village dominate everything we see, the manual treatment (even if not necessarily by her own hands) of mass-produced objects indicates her striving for uniqueness and distinctiveness.

The re-stitching of the stuffed toys and their spreading like rugs thus expose their unfinished appearance, stressing the fact that they were not sewn at an assembly line, in homage to the handicrafts and popular crafts created throughout history by the industrious hands of women who were banished from the modernist paradise. As in oriental carpets, the patterns recur symmetrically, the top section being mirrored in the bottom section. By virtue of the process-minded, meditative praxis and the ongoing presence of the temporal dimension involved in the acts of unstitching and re-stitching, these works have a therapeutic nature. The dozens of hands and hundreds of hours invested in unstitching and re-stitching – a process which took many months – lend the rugs magical, ritual qualities, charging them with a sense of compassion, salvation, and healing; these are reinforced upon learning that some stages of the production were performed as part of Woodgate's communal activity in the Lotus House Shelter for homeless women and battered wives.

Clearly, however, the core of the engagement with the teddy bear lies in its potential as an energetic conduit, connecting one with childhood and emotional memory. Many women artists have turned to the collective memory of childhood as part of the pursuit of identity issues – whether motivated by nestling, nostalgia, exorcism, or as an act of infantilization. This is true of Zoe Leonard's installation of frayed dolls at Paula Cooper Gallery (*Mouth open, teeth showing*, 2000), Kim Dingle's uncanny doll paintings, or Annette Messager's stacks of stuffed animals (*Histoire des petites effigies*, 1990). Woodgate's choice of the teddy bear is motivated by the law of conservation of energy. She ties her private childhood memory to countless childhood memories of others, infusing objects that have sweetened the solitude of many toddlers with a new life. Much has been written about the toy as a surrogate self or, a “transitional object,” as it is commonly referred to in developmental psychology. The unstitched and reassembled toys were indeed once transitional objects, which ostensibly assimilated a wide range of feelings. Therefore, Woodgate seeks the worn, shabby appearance as a heart-rending reminder of a lost childhood world. She wisely and sensitively fuses the pleasure in reminiscence and the pricking torture of memory, without falling into the trap of nostalgia.

Woodgate's bodies of work appear diverse and very different from each other: on the one hand, tactile excess and vivid, lush coloration in the rug works; on the other hand, frugal, subtle conceptual minimalism, as manifested in *World Maps* and *World Globes* from the *New Landscapes* series on which she has worked concurrently in recent years. In these series she reveals oceans and continents by a Sisyphean act of scraping off the print color layer with sandpaper, sorting and storing the fine dust by hues: from the brown spectrum of the continents, valleys and mountains, through the greens of the woods, to the tonal range of blues of oceans and rivers. Despite the distinctive visual differences between these two bodies of work, their analogies are quite striking. Both reveal obsessive, labor intensive exploration of the surface; both reflect a conceptual engagement with representation, embedded with a playful-pedagogic aspect (the globes and maps represent the world; the stuffed toys stand for the fauna). Moreover, the unstitching is analogous to the erasure of the “skin of the world” from the surface of the maps and globes. In both cases, the idea of dismantling the immanence of things, eliminating layers, and revealing past experiences through removal are key concepts. In other words, one may say that the poetic transformation of geographic borders and political conflicts into dust is analogous to the transformation of the rugs into galactic landscapes.

However, while the globes and maps are associated with constitution of “male” geographical bodies of knowledge identified with modeling and disciplining of nature in the prestigious cultural sphere, the rugs possess more minor “female” facets, being touched by carnal aspects that pull them downward, to the realm of the “natural.” The engagement of female artists with animals has been addressed in feminist literature as part of the discussion of the affinities between nature and culture and as one manifestation of the female protest against the infuriating equation of woman=nature/man=culture. As part of this discourse, women have teamed with the beastly, emphasizing the caring, compassionate facet, and employed the body as a symbolic arena in which the struggle over the politics of representation takes place. Thus, the skin – the border marking the boundary of the organism – became the metaphorical billboard of identity. In Woodgate's case, caring is accompanied by the objection to the hunting and killing of animals. These two ideas are brought together, as Woodgate leads them to the poetic pole, while enhancing the metaphoric power of the skin/fur as a sensitive vulnerable body part, revealing and protective, which defines the boundaries of the body. In this way – without heart, without contour, without face – the bear's whole body is squeezed into the margins of the envelope containing it, into the layer of its protective fur now turned into landscapes of memories.

The affinity between the repugnant and the seductive has fascinated Woodgate from the very outset of her artistic career. In one of her early projects she collected her own hair as well as hair cut in a nomadic mobile salon she set up in various cities in the United States and Latin

America, from which she created sculptures (*Tower, Sand Castles*, 2004–2008). A link is called for between the hair collecting project and the fur rugs as part of the discourse of the uncanny and repressed. A key concept in this context is Julia Kristeva's "abject" which is founded on the body as a symbolic system, as a metaphor of inside and outside, a system managed by a regime of prohibitions which generate a hierarchical, symbolic order determining what is clean and what is dirty, what is correct and what is despicable, what is approved and what is rejected, what stays inside and what is excreted and banished from the system. This process of rejection, removal, or exclusion of waste is analogous, according to Kristeva, to different levels of social ordering and disciplining, namely – culture. Hair, skin, and fur separated from the body clearly belong to the inferior rungs in the nature-culture hierarchy.

These aspects ought to be supplemented by the fact that the natural setting of rugs, like that of stuffed toys, is in the domestic sphere, and that both have a protective emotional significance. The first carpets were produced in Asia (4000 BC) by nomadic peoples, and served as protection and shelter. In some cultures (e.g. Bedouin culture) they are used for sleep and hosting. In other words, domestic contexts tie the substance from which the rugs were made (the toys) with rugs themselves, and the domestic is the kingdom of the woman, a realm of yearning and a promise for happiness. Add to this the fact that the age-old tradition of carpet-weaving is Oriental, as opposed to the Western tradition of quilt-making. Another paradoxical aspect has to do with the stuffed animals' conditions of production and the fact that the majority of these toys are manufactured in countries such as China and Indonesia to supply the demand of the West. In this respect, Woodgate's rugs pay tribute to the oriental carpet-making tradition, alluding to the historical and ritual value of the materials, as well as to the affinities between commerce, tradition, East and West, and modernity, in the era of globalism. The rugs' installation at the Art and Culture Center of Hollywood indicates that Woodgate is particularly drawn to the specific meanings in the arrangement of rug designs, and how different histories of the rug represent stories of the past and ways of tracing archetypes in physical and material forms.

Woodgate has also researched the history of the building. It turns out that the property was used in the 1920s as a private home. The main space in which the rugs are installed was once a garden (as indicated by the traces of the fountain inside the hall), and by the 1960s became a funeral home. Much like Ann Hamilton, who always responds to the history of the sites in which she exhibits, Woodgate also attributes meaning to the history of the structure, to the fact that it was once a domestic space associated with rituals, memory and death, meanings which are reinforced by the *Rug Collection*. The analogy to Hamilton is also relevant here in the context of the acts of unstitching and erasure running through her works. Nevertheless, the artist who notably employed stuffed animal toys into his sculptures, and who influenced Woodgate, is Mike Kelley. Kelley's teddy bears, like Woodgate's, conjure up the childhood world as the initial state of being and becoming. Unlike his aggressive critical approach, however, Woodgate's quiet, poetic subversiveness stands out.

One of the striking aspects of the use of traditional handicrafts is the decorative quality. Works involving handicrafts tend to be pleasing to the eye, and their ornamental complexity affords an experience of pure pleasure. Research shows that the visual examination of a richly colored and textured ornament provokes a pleasurable stimulus in the brain; the beauty embedded in a crowded weave of different colors causes the viewer sensual joy that cannot be verbally described. The excess characterizing Woodgate's rugs indeed sets a pleasurable sensual quality in motion, re-evoking concepts related to beauty that were excluded from the modernist discourse. They provoke thoughts about the relations between ornament and fetishism, and between decorativeness and memory. Hence they may also be interpreted as a reminder of human hubris as a fancy "vanitas" collection, which – like the dying candle, the withered flower, and the skull – indicates the ephemeral nature of time and life.

Translated by Daria Kassovsk

The Art and Culture Center of Hollywood is privileged to present this outstanding body of work by Agustina Woodgate from her Skin Rugs series. For the first time ever these dynamic, intricately produced pieces by Woodgate, one of South Florida's leading young talents, will be exhibited together as they were intended to be. The Center is pleased to acknowledge the following without whom this exhibition would not be possible; Anthony Spinello of Spinello Projects who has been a champion of Ms. Woodgate's work for several years, at times working closely in a collaborative spirit with her; The Related Group for generous support in providing funding towards the publication of this catalog accompanying the show and Tami Katz-Freiman for her insightful essay. This exhibition is funded in part through a grant from FAB! (Funding Arts Broward), who sustains quality in programming in the arts in Broward County through the donations of their dedicated membership.

Jane Hart, Curator of Exhibitions
Art and Culture Center of Hollywood

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