

HOW TO STRETCH CANVAS

Homa Shojale is into canvas.

While it is typical for an artist to make works on canvas, Shojale takes a different path, making works in canvas. To approach the material as a basic starting point for making artwork is one thing. It is a different thing to see it as an occasion to subtract, not to add. Shojale's working process entails taking the fabric apart strand by strand. Since making large pieces requires her to seal herself on the material to unthread it, she quite literally makes her art in the canvas.

The unraveling transforms the identity of the material. While not quite the spilling of an atom, Shojale's methodical unweaving of the canvas liberates energy, releasing forces that were previously held in check. Every removal of a strand alters the physical aspect of the piece and thereby produces a new spatial condition. Dismantling the canvas thread by thread can proceed until all that remains is a single thread, or, going just one step further, a chaotic pile of threads that were once organized in an orderly structure.

Canvas is a textile and a textile is a primal technology. To make threads and to knot them or loom them - these acts belong to the origins of technology. The textile is also a basic tectonic. As a sum of intersecting elements, it shares kinship with architecture. Its strands, woven one over another, can be compared to fundamental elements of building, the post and beam.

It is fair to say that Shojale's art partakes of an architectural agenda, defining space. Her works stand upright, she makes columns; the smaller ones, spines, cantilevered off the wall, the larger ones spanning from floor to ceiling. They are all subject to fundamental physical and spatial determinations, to which their position in relation to wall, floor and ceiling attests. The byplay of fluidity and rigidity in the pieces endow them with presence; they acquire distinctive characters.

Some of the pieces evince their identity by wearing it on their skins. They are marked along the spine by slender bands of secret calligraphy, cursive lines running between feathered edges. Here, the textile draws a path to a text Isle, where a story told in a whisper just below the threshold of audibility, unfolds.

Shojale's art is not narrative, so it is misleading to say that it "contains" a story. Taking canvas away from the wall, where it historically relates to the function of window, separates it from a long-standing pictorial tradition. Shojale's work is not representational; it presents.

Nonetheless, being in the presence of her space-defining entities inevitably provokes a desire to make out something of the elusive story of the spine. We can discern its outlines. It has levels - above/between/below - where figures, composed by varying degrees of fringe/middle, engage in a range of actions: climbing/subsiding/standing. It undoubtedly combines witfulness with sobriety, and balances recititude and abandon. To try to say more about it would be "as futile as explaining a spider's web in terms of geometry" (E.B. White).

To add depth to the background against which Shojale's figures appear, we can imagine her workspace: the opposite of threadbare, it is rather rich, or ripe, with threads. These threads tie it to sister spaces: the loom where Penelope deceived her suitors, the site of Arachne's fatal contest with Athena, the room where the miller's daughter watched Rumpelstiltskin spin straw into gold, among others. These kindred sites of arduous labor and dramatic contest highlight several of the qualities of Shojale's artwork: alchemical, mythic, romantic. If one twists these strands together, they merge into a single line. The artist herself tells us the direction of the line. Not without struggle, it ascends.

Shojale knows the point where undoing flips over into doing, unmaking into making, taking apart into building. She recognizes that the only way to emerge is to dive-in. She invites us where she has gone: into canvas, in search of the innermost, where matter and spirit interweave.

Jonathan Miller

Jonathan Miller teaches at the College of Architecture at Illinois and reviews films on Chicago Public Radio. He also writes essays and makes things. His artwork has been exhibited in the U.S. and Europe, and is represented by Steve Caudill Photography + Fine Art.