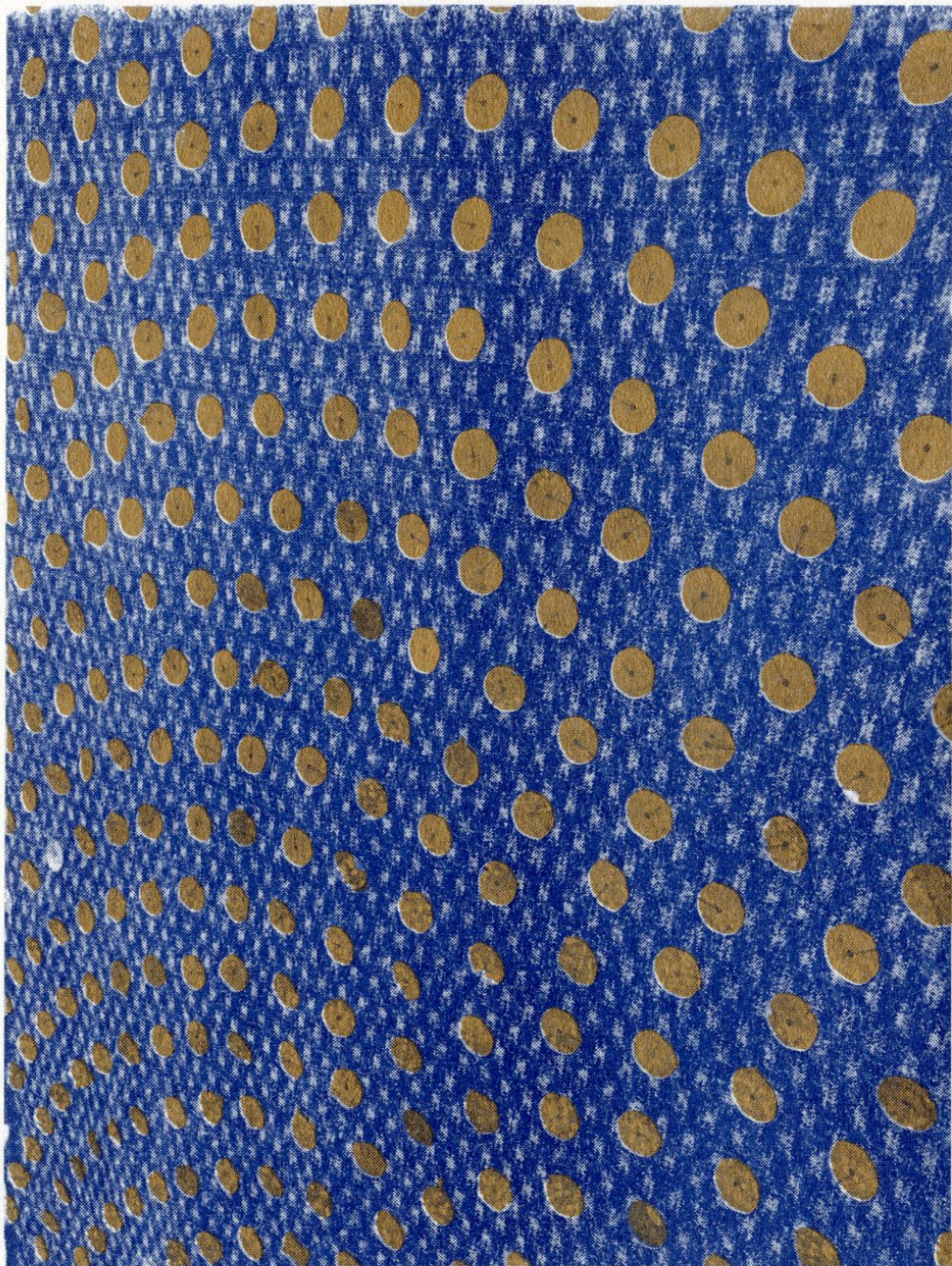


JOLIE BIRD



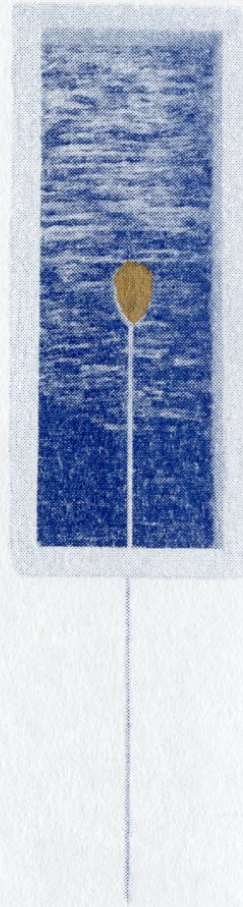
**THE
DISCIPLINE OF
CONSTRUCTING**



Detail, *Untitled* (2019). Vintage kasuri cloth, sequins and cotton thread

Choosing Thread

For nearly three decades, Jolie Bird has committed herself to working with fibres. Her dedication to her medium has allowed her to develop a distinct artistic vocabulary. In looking at her work, I am immediately struck by the precision and care invested into each detail. My eyes work to take in each individual thread while simultaneously exploring the woven or thread-wrapped object as a whole. The meaning of Bird's work is difficult to separate from the process of its making; the two are bound together and her exhibition, *The Discipline of Constructing*, has taken a decisive turn toward elevating process as subject.



Untitled (2019). Sumi ink box lid, hemp, indigo, hatpin and gold leaf

Deeply invested in materiality, Bird's studio practice reveals a dedication to slow techniques and a mastery of traditional processes. Working with thread, she moves between acts of revealing and concealing, as she wraps complete objects, creates intricate patterns, or uses the traditional Japanese Kasuri technique that maneuvers the act of wrapping and concealing fibres to reveal a pattern when woven. Her works are seamlessly contemplative and steeped in minimal design. As if borrowed from a Giorgio Morandi still life, Bird works in a restrained palette of whites, indigo, and gold, working with natural fibres and dyes.

Artists' studios are idiosyncratic and generally private spaces. I've had the privilege of visiting many studios over the past decade, Bird's included. I am always fascinated by the additional insight I get by seeing first-hand how

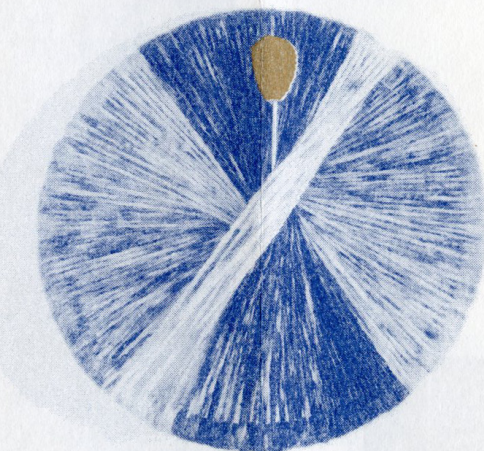
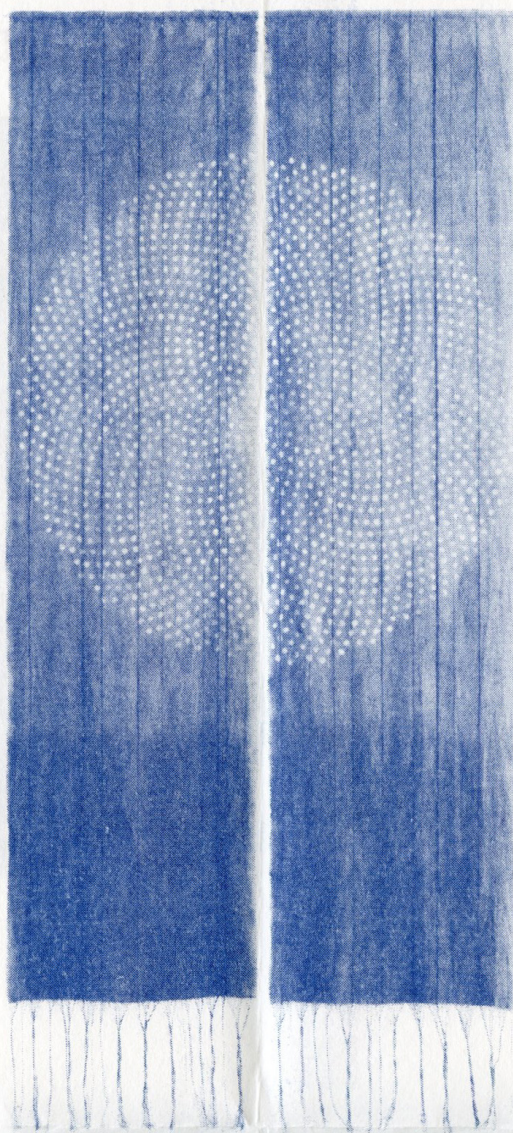
artists work. Is the space clean or dirty? cluttered or organized? Does the artist stockpile materials? Do they need an open space to think and to work? Are there remnants of previous projects visible? The curiosities go on and on. *The discipline of constructing* brings parts of the functioning studio into the gallery, putting the artist's process on display and elevating the collaboration between the artist's hands and her tools as an integral part of the exhibition and of the work itself. Within the exhibition, the tools function as symbols of care and of usefulness, placed prominently throughout the exhibition, elevated to the status of art objects. Bird's practice is as much about concentration and the dedication of time as it is about the final work produced. Thinking further about time as material Bird writes:

"Fibre, through its very nature, communicates time; like various traditional techniques, this binding process is not complicated to do but requires a long span of attention, patience and stamina, making the process inherently connected to its meaning. Wrapping is a tactile process; as I apply the thread, I form an intimate connection with each chosen object."¹

In an attempt to describe the ineffable difference between handmade and mass-produced objects, Tanaka Yuko writes, "[i]n handmade articles [...] time is present and alive. Though inanimate, such handcrafted items embody the 'biological time' attained during the growth of the raw materials and the long process of their manufacture."²

While there has been no recent shortage of op-eds and think pieces on the mental and emotional value of needlework and other handicrafts as contemporary anxiety balms, these pieces often focus on the need to keep one's hands busy and mind occupied, but spend little time critically examining the larger systems that idle hands and anxious minds might be serving. In her recent book *How To Do Nothing: Resisting The Attention Economy* artist and author Jenny Odell writes: "Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram act like dams that capitalize on our natural interest in others and an ageless need for community, hijacking and frustrating our most innate desires, and profiting from them. Solitude, observation, and simple conviviality should be recognized not only as ends in and of themselves, but inalienable rights belonging to anyone lucky enough to be alive."³ While Bird's practice is highly productive and a far cry from doing nothing, the intensity of time, attention, and intimate focus required for her work is a rare and enviable space she has created with great intention. The elements of repetition, time, and concentration in all of Bird's techniques summon a meditative state, reinforcing the focused and disciplined nature of her craft.

The pursuit of perfection is made evident through Bird's public performance of process. In her wrapping pieces, where the artist painstakingly wraps objects or patterns in precise enveloping rows or coils of thread, time and attention become a material, with the artist immersed in a balance of skill, challenge, and reward. By performing the act of wrapping, as witnessed in the artist's 2018 project *1597; Harmonious*



above: *Untitled* (2019). Ramie, cotton, chemical dyes, indigo and potassium permanganate

below: *Untitled* (2019). Brass, hemp, indigo, hatpin and mercerized cotton

Frequencies and in the creation of a new work in *The discipline of constructing*, Bird brings a potentially solitary practice out of the studio and into the public realm. The Fibonacci Sequence produced in the central woven panels in the exhibition is based on a pattern regularly found in nature and perhaps most recognizable in the patterning of the sunflower's florets or seeds. The Fibonacci Sequence can also be read as a nod to structure, referencing the mechanics or engineering of natural forms. Echoed in Bird's work, the pattern reveals a reverence for order and structure, the very basis of weaving, rope making, and knots. Bird creates order out of potential chaos with thousands of individual threads brought together to create a reliable and useful whole.

In *Notes on a Crisis in Beauty*, Andy Patton imagines how a not-so-distant future aesthetic experience might change in the face of a rapidly shifting ecological and political landscape, a world on the verge of potential collapse. He asks: "Will we still turn to huge video installations or immense (and immensely costly) projects? Instead of instilling awe and amazement, will such works appear overblown, uncaring, like invading armies? Will technology appear not as shiny and new but the very enemy that led us to this place? Will something like the inwardness and the careful limits of a still life by Morandi be the path forward in a world where constraint now appears beautiful? Once each of us has been complicit in murdering the world with excess, will discipline or diminishment gain in loveliness?"⁴

Working in textiles can only be a weaving together of past and present. So what does it mean for an artist to choose thread in 2020? To look backward to tradition as they respond to the complexity of the present? To make work slowly when contemporary life is moving at an ever increasing pace? What is the value of time and attention and of connecting with the simple materiality of everyday things? It seems to me that in choosing to work with thread, Bird is consciously choosing to quietly resist the contemporary fastness that is seeping into our daily lives, and by sharing this practice publicly is inviting us to consider and enjoy a productive slowness too.

April Dean

¹ Bird, Jolie. www.joliebird.com/wrapping. Accessed Dec 4, 2019

² Yuko, Tanaka. *The Power of the Weave, The Hidden Meanings of Cloth*. International House of Japan: Tokyo, Japan, 2013. p 175.

³ Odell, Jenny. *How To Do Nothing: Resisting The Attention Economy*. Meville House Publishing: Brooklyn NY, 2019. p xi.

⁴ Patton, Andy. "Notes on a Crisis in Beauty." *Momus*. www.momus.ca/notes-on-a-crisis-in-beauty/ Accessed Aug 20, 2019

Jolie Bird is a fibre artist who lives and works in Calgary, Alberta. She completed her MFA at NSCAD University, Halifax in 2013 and has also studied at the Alberta University of the Arts, Capilano University, North Vancouver, and the Kawashima Textile School in Kyoto. Bird works predominantly with fibre but also includes other mediums, found objects, and installation into her practice. She is drawn to slow techniques like hand-stitching, weaving, and wrapping for the investment of time needed to complete the work. Repetitive and slow-building in nature, the process becomes mentally and physically demanding, while at the same time feeling intuitive and somewhat meditative. Working slowly with simple tools and only her hands, she forms an intimate connection with the artwork. Her work has been exhibited locally, nationally and in the United States.

April Dean is a visual artist living in Treaty 6 territory, in Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada). Her father's grandparents were early settlers of what is now farmland in The Battlefords area in Saskatchewan (also Treaty 6), which is how she came to live, as a third-generation settler, on Treaty 6 lands. She maintains an active studio practice of all things print media; combinations of installation, 2D & 3D works, and video. She is an arts + culture administrator, advocate, and teacher. With formal training in photographic technology and printmaking, her work is often constructed of lens-based and language fragments. In 2012, she was granted a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Fine & Media Art from NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is the Executive Director of the Society of Northern Alberta Print-Artists (SNAP), a non-profit & artist-run centre.

This pamphlet is produced in conjunction to Jolie Bird's exhibition, *The discipline of constructing*, at Stride Gallery.

January 17 - March 6, 2020.

image on the front (right): *Untitled* (2019). Cotton, hemp, linen, indigo, potassium permanganate
image on the front (left): *Untitled* (2019). Cotton, hemp, linen, indigo, potassium permanganate, weaving weights
and gold leaf