

Jacqueline Surdell

WEAVING TOGETHER THE UNLIKELY

BY CHRISTINA NAFZIGER



The artwork of Jacqueline Surdell is the result of an evolution, of revolution, of revelation. She creates her beautifully monstrous forms through an amalgam of woven rope, paint, metal, and the seamlessly imposed, unlikely material of exercise equipment. Jacqueline's piece "Lagoon" struck me like a bolt when I viewed it in person, with its deep black rope knotted and wound so tightly that it pushed out of the frame that held it, coming out towards me not unlike the work of Lee Bontecou, before falling down to the floor. For me, this piece had shattered the idea of a flat canvas, or even a woven canvas, and instead created a piece that was almost every medium wrapped into one. Instead, Jacqueline takes the once 'craft' process of weaving, braiding, and macramé and forms a genre of her own that is at once fiber art, sculpture, painting, and wall relief.

The colors that Jacqueline uses in her work expand upon the earthy tones present in the fiber art movement in the 70s. They are black, neon blue, electric yellow and orange, sometimes creating a science fiction/futuristic tone. A piece may be complexly knotted in heavy black, but then loose rope and neon hues break up the space, creating a glitch. In her recent solo exhibition *Vaulted Breath / Winded Spirit* at Heaven Gallery in Chicago's Wicker Park, Surdell's works were hung from metal bars, with the largest piece including what appears to be matted hair, creating a strange cyborg creature that is hung on the wall and pours down onto the floor. This piece, titled "[Her]" was on a wall by itself, looming over the rest of the exhibition, watching you with its neon green "eye" and its macramé tentacles falling to its side. Jacqueline explains that the exhibition was about the idea of voyeurism in relationship to the rise of social media. In our studio visit, she discusses how everyone is always watching everyone else via social media—we put so much information out there, yet it is near impossible to tell what is real.

"We thought social media was going to allow us to have access to all of this knowledge and truth because we can see everything, but it really does the opposite. Because there is so much information out there, we can't sift through it all for the truth. It becomes this mutant of information," Jacqueline explains. "My piece '[Her]' reflects an entity that has seen and knows too much, is mentally and physically disturbed. It's as if it has been excavated from a tar pit and removed from its natural space or habitat. Even the paint on the surface of the rope doesn't cover all of it—the rope shows through the paint, as if it were worn down so you can see the bone. It's kind of the All Seeing Eye—and if you were the All Seeing Eye, could you even handle that because of all the trauma we experience? What happens when we digest this information stuffed into an episode of 60 minutes, packaged neatly for us by this biased system? What now?"

This exploration of “voyeurism” can be seen throughout her work as a whole. One of the most identifying elements of Jacqueline’s work that to me is so quintessentially her own is her use of sports equipment. Sports have always been a huge part of Jacqueline’s life growing up, as she played volleyball all the way through college. She explains that there is a type of “voyeuristic quality to sports,” where “everybody is signed up for this idea that you are performing.” There is a solid link tying together the performative quality in sports to the performative qualities in Jacqueline’s work. Although she has done performance art in the past, her textile/mixed-media work is incredibly performative and labor-intensive, similar to playing a sport. Athletes engage in repetitive system of movements, and that is exactly what happens when weaving and knotting rope. In performance, there is movement, so you are actively testing the durability and endurance of the medium of the body. And in the case of Jacqueline’s practice, she is using other mediums such as rope to test durability and endurance. Although the end result is static, these materials are still actively being tested.



JACQUELINE DISCUSSES THE INFLUENCE OF BEING AN ATHLETE ON HER ART PRACTICE:

“Some people say they don’t understand the jump from being an athlete to being an artist. But rope, to me, is my body. I’m testing it. I was always small and undersized for a volleyball player, but I worked hard. Rope also works really hard. I was super flexible and scrappy—rope is the same way. It can be wound and coiled in different ways. You can do so much with a piece of rope! It can hold so much weight, but it doesn’t look like it can. Rope is like a muscle; even a muscle that is not being contracted is still there holding you together. The rope is still holding the piece together the whole time. There is constant tension in each piece.”

The braided-cotton rope Surdell uses to weave her intricate pieces is not colored using the traditional method of dying. The artist prefers painting on its surface—often in black, another unlikely element that transforms and transcends her pieces into another realm. With a background in painting that started with her grandmother (a landscape painter), Surdell explains that, to her, painting directly on the surface of her macramé creations feels natural, as it is similar to applying paint on a canvas. If you think about it, what is a canvas if not a surface made of woven thread? She is cleverly using the same basic materials as a traditional painting on canvas and using them in drastically different ways. However, she does not apply her paint with a brush—she informed me that this process requires a more industrial method: a paint gun.

“I spray my work with a paint gun, which I love because the paint is enamel and house paint, and/or deck stain, which goes back to my grandfather and how he used painted houses and built cabinets (and other side jobs) in addition to his full-time job in the steel mills on the Southside of Chicago. Everything I make references my family legacy. I learned from my grandfather the hellish process of making steel and, like rope, the strength and tension in the material. In my research I went to several factories to figure out the best way to get the steel rods that I needed, which was really interesting. I learned so much about these materials and about what my grandfather did with his life in the steel mills. I love learning about these materials. You want to respect and know where the materials you use come from.”





The attention that Jacqueline gives to the materials she uses—their history, their use, their place of origin—is quite extraordinary. She researches each material she uses extensively, as they are often homages paying tribute to her family history. When discussing the industrial materials that she uses in her work, like the steel that is used to hold up her wall hangings, she explains:

“I want my work to stay true to my experience...I never worked in the steel mill, so it would be inauthentic for me to embrace the material as my own. Instead, the steel functions to hold up my extremely heavy pieces, as if my grandfather, my Dzia Dzia, is holding me up. That’s my relationship to steel as a material—just one step removed.”

In addition to the intense physical labor that goes into each of Jacqueline’s pieces, she incorporates many different aspect of who she is—her family history, her athleticism, her artist background—into each piece, causing each piece to becomes and extension of herself. She is literally weaving all of these different parts of herself together into her complicated forms, taking her history and the materials’ history and creating new form, a new genre.



*“I WANT MY WORK TO
REFERENCE HISTORIES
OF PAINTING,
OF SCULPTURE,
AND OF CRAFT,
BUT TO BE VERY
SPECIFICALLY MINE”*

- JACQUELINE SURDELL