

# “Journey’s In Place”

## Fiber Art by Carole Harris

by K.A. Letts, *Spring Quarter (April/May/June) 2021 Reviews*



“Fabric has memory, it holds on to time.”

*Carole Harris*

In her solo show, “Journey’s in Place” at Hill Gallery in Birmingham, Michigan, Detroit’s most eminent fiber artist continues her journey through the world and through art history with 24 new fabric and paper collages. Each piece appropriates and amplifies the visual language of contemporary abstraction, revived and enriched by the artist’s extensive knowledge of traditional crafts and materials. During a career spanning half a century, Carole Harris has followed her inner compass, persistently applying a fresh eye to the material potential of fiber as an art form.



Carole Harris, *Flowers for Breonna*, 2020, mulberry paper, threads, fabrics h 19” x w 21.5”. Photo courtesy of Hill Gallery.

Taught needleworking in childhood by her mother, Harris’s early work employed traditional American patchwork quilt techniques to create richly colored artworks reminiscent of the idiosyncratic geometry of the Gees Bend quilters. The formal influences on her work have changed and grown over time, though, as the artist has continued her research into worldwide textile traditions. Her art practice now includes influences from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean as well as visual strategies absorbed from modern abstract expressionists like Richard Diebenkorn and Al Loving. Her aesthetic vocabulary ranges from traditional American quilt-making, felting, dyeing and embroidery to the influence of Boro. This traditional Japanese craft involves the reworking and mending of textiles through piecing, patching and stitching, treating damage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise. Exposure to this concept seems to have freed Harris to embrace the intrinsic beauty of imperfection in her materials as a source of expressive power.

SIMONE DESOUSA GALLERY

For additional information, please contact gallery director Simone DeSousa

444 W. Willis St | Units 111 & 112 | Detroit, MI 48201

email [simone@simonedesousagallery.com](mailto:simone@simonedesousagallery.com)

cell 734.255.1406

In this most recent body of work, Harris continues to innovate. She has added yet another dimension to her creative output with an exploration of the traditional art of Joomchi. The technique, which is similar to felting, is a Korean method of making textured and colored paper by hand from mulberry fiber.

It results in a product stronger and tougher than traditional paper and lends itself well to combination with fabric and other materials. Harris makes full use of this adaptable craft by layering fabric with the mulberry paper in dense strata that suggest an almost geological accretion of material, layers of color and texture literally embodying history, memory and time's passage.

She says of her recent work:

*It's not as precise and pristine as some of the things that I did before, but I think that's what happens over time. Time kind of fades things, and gives a nice little patina, and has nicks and scars and scratches that give something character, but it also tells a story. A lot of what I do has holes in it, but I like the holes because it reveals something about what's below the surface or what's behind it. Often in life, what you see on the surface doesn't begin to tell the whole story.*

Her 2020 artwork, *Flowers for Breonna*, demonstrates some of the artist's procedural strategies. The modestly sized combination of fabric, mulberry paper, applique, and hand stitching makes full use of the expressive qualities of the torn and irregular edge of each constituent piece. A variety of hand-dyed fabrics, from pink cheesecloth to teal muslin to heavily worked mulberry paper, form the ground of the artwork. Hand-stitched embroidery, random chartreuse stitched dashes and strings of deep green on the surface of the artwork intimate stems, the loose threads and frayed edges of the layers of fabric implying light and air. Alternate red and green layers, placed one over the other, create a concentric frame for the composition within; elliptical voids allow a glimpse of the material underneath. Small circular, blossom-like appliques are attached to the surface with traditional French knot embroidery. Harris uses each technique with the easy mastery of long practice; each mark made fulfills a formal goal entirely outside the normal confines of traditional craft.



*Left:* Carole Harris, *Momento*, 2018, mulberry paper, threads, fabrics, h 34.5" x w 36.5". Photocourtesy of Hill Gallery.

*Right:* Carole Harris, *Migration*, 2020, mulberry paper, threads, fabrics h 40" x w 38". Photo courtesy of Hill Gallery.

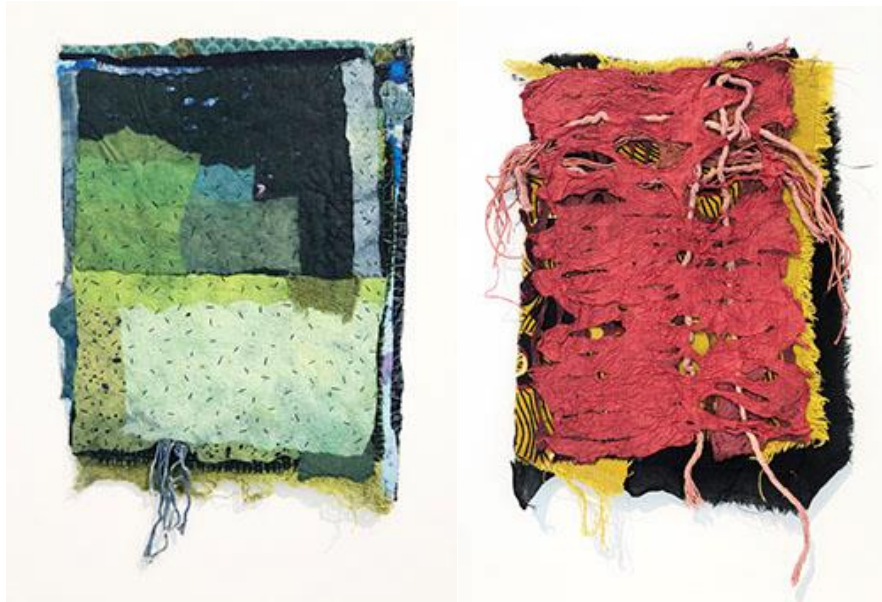
With *Momento*, Harris makes more extensive use of the free form planes and subtle tonalities of the mulberry paper and fabric. Her skillful manipulation of warm pinks, reds, oranges and yellows shows the artist to be an accomplished colorist as well as a master of formal composition. Four oval striped figures dominate the lower portion of the composition, with small ochre holes echoing the freeform shapes at the edges of the artwork. The patient intentionality of the recurring, colored lines formed by the layers of fabric and paper creates a sense of inevitability that would be difficult, or impossible, to reproduce in painted form.

In the larger artworks now on display in the gallery, Harris sacrifices some of the attractive tactile features of sensuously edged smaller pieces in order to highlight surface and pictorial elements on a more monumental scale. A particularly successful example is *Migration*, which depends not at all on the intrinsic interest of the layers outlining the edge of the composition. The mulberry paper takes on the quality of a hide or skin, marred and scarred. The relatively limited palette employed in *Migration* suggests printed material such as a map or a set of cryptic



Carole Harris, *Aftermath of a Dream*, 2020, mulberry paper, threads, fabrics h 34.5" x w 36.5". Photo courtesy of Hill Gallery.

directions to a mysterious destination. The running hand stitches on the surface are extensive and appear to refer to the contour maps of marine charts. Harris leaves us to imagine for ourselves a trip to the stars, a voyage to an unknown destination or a psychological journey through time.



**Left:** Carole Harris, *Blue Then Green*, 2020, mulberry paper, threads, fabrics h 12" x w 15.5". Photo by K.A. Letts.

**Right:** Carole Harris, *Etude*, 2020-01, 2020 mulberry paper, threads, fabrics h 12" x w 9". Photo by K.A. Letts.

As the critical boundaries between previously gendered crafts and fine art have become increasingly porous over the last few years, we can hope that the achievements of fiber artists like Harris will find a broader and more appreciative audience. This recent body of work amply demonstrates her continuing innovation:

*I now draw inspiration from walls, aging structures and objects that reveal years of use. My intention is to celebrate the beauty in the frayed, the decaying and the repaired. I want to capture the patina of color softened by time, as well as feature the nicks, scratches scars and other marks left by nature or humans. I want to map these changes and tell the stories of time, place and people in cloth, using creative stitching, layering and the mixing of colorful and textured fabrics.*

In this collection of new work, Harris employs the vocabulary of formal abstraction, enriched by the tactile surfaces, voids, edges and textures of her materials to demonstrate, in a uniquely felt way, ephemerality and endurance, persistence and memory. Her artworks show her to be a master of her materials as well as an acutely sensitive observer and maker, actively exploring and expanding the limits of her chosen medium.

K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the *New Art Examiner*, a working artist ([kalettsart.com](http://kalettsart.com)) and art blogger ([rustbeltarts.com](http://rustbeltarts.com)). She has shown her paintings and drawing in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.