

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Weathering is what I would like to do well

by Figgy Guyver



Gazing at the sky and watching the clouds imperceptibly transform, I am reminded of the sketches Constable made on Hampstead Heath round the corner from where I live. These things make us see and feel afresh, accompanied by a sense of playful childish delight.

– Rosa Lee

It's the opposite of what you might expect. Reading this quote by the artist Rosa Lee (1957–2009), it dawned on me that we fuss over how the world we live in, lives in art – or, to put it another way, how art reminds us of life. But isn't the inverse more interesting? If Constable's cloud studies live in you, as they did in Lee, you might instead look up at the sky and catch a glimpse of his gesture – your mind, suddenly, grazing another's. There's a pleasure, an intimacy, in seeing the world through someone else's eyes. Lee continues: 'It's about the sudden apprehension of detail, handmade and acutely observed.'

Apprehend, from *apprehendere*, to seize or grasp: hands, touch, are there from the start. No more so than in the textile art of Barbara Levittoux-Świdarska (1933–2019), whose wildly raw soft sculpture *Cloud (Chmura)* 1986, is a record of her hands twisting and pulling, teasing and smoothing her materials. 'The artist leaves a trace of her energy on every millimetre of the fabric', writes the curator Marta Kowalewska; 'they are a part of me,' the artist said, 'the most significant, unintelligible one'.

Levittoux-Świdarska balanced her time between textile art and painting. In 1959 she completed a diploma in weaving from the renowned Academy of Fine Arts in her hometown of Warsaw, Poland, a hotbed for emerging textile artists and the founding site of the influential Polish Textile School. This network of artists would go on to develop an unique lexicon inspired by Polish folk traditions and using locally available materials such as pine needles and birch bark (more far-flung options were scarce following the end of the Second World War). Likewise, in Levittoux-Świdarska's paintings, the natural colours of her native Poland weather her canvases. In *Stormy Clouds (right side) (Burzowe chmury, dyptyk, prawa strona)* 2002, brown oil paint is scrubbed into the canvas like a muddy stain, as if an autonomous creation by mother nature herself.

In February 1993, the British artist Shelagh Wakely (1932–2011) collaborated with the vagaries of the weather to make an exquisitely beautiful installation at the Museu do Açude, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In its courtyard was a large, rectangular pool that Wakely coated with a thick layer of bronze powder, which formed a skin, crimped by the ripples of the water. As February falls in Brazil's rainy season, each evening the glittering surface was pierced by a heavy downpour, 'looking beautiful but destroying it', the artist recalled. Every morning, before the museum opened, the bronze skin was replaced.

Wakely was interested in the 'continuity rather than the monumentality of nature', writes Guy Brett in her obituary, perhaps because her early life was comprised of prolonged encounters with the outside world. Wakely grew up first in the Lake District, 'Shelagh and I ran wild', her sister remembers. 'We explored the fells on our ponies, ... we fished, swam and rowed boats on the lakes and tarns'. Then, in the late 1940s, her family moved to Kenya, where she lived among ecologists and research scientists. She studied agriculture, researching grassland agronomy before pivoting to art in 1958, when she enrolled on a painting and screen-printing course at Chelsea College of Art, then, a decade later, a research fellowship at the Royal College of Art. What resulted was work that grasped at something beyond the material world: how it feels to be a conscious organism among other living, breathing things. *Untitled* 1979 is teeming with life. It's our watery planet, or the feeling of a rainstorm, bacteria replicating in a petri dish. Or *Le Rougissant* 1985, which translates as 'the reddening': a sensation of a blush deepening, the pink residue at dusk. 'Art is a never-ending need for intensification of the contact with reality', writes art historian Anna Maria Leśniewska.

In your head runs the rhythm of a pattern of thought. And another, and another. What if an artist could paint its shape? 'Abstract painting', argues Jim Mooney, 'possesses the capacity to represent ... *Being* itself'; if it's good, it can be an intimate encounter with another person's inner life. Born in Hong Kong in 1957, Rosa Lee moved to the UK with her parents as a young child. She studied Art History at the University of Sussex, then went to St Martin's School of Art, before completing a MA at the Royal College of Art in 1988. She liked Bridget Riley's op art illusions that play with what a viewer brings to the experience of looking at her art, and began making paintings inspired by Riley, as well as grids, calligraphy and organic geometry. Lee's early work dares you to call it decorative (which is not an insult, by the way). You could say her paintings look like lush jacquard fabrics or the loops of cursive handwriting.

Lee, however, was more interested in fighting a 'battle with logic', as she put it. Sometimes her paintings feel like the muddy state of waking up from a dream, or Lee again, 'things on the tip of your tongue but just beyond ready articulation'. For instance her *Lexigram* series from 2002 – named after an obscure linguistics tool whereby symbols are used to represent words (notably used to train bonobos and chimpanzees in the 1970s) – gets towards the feeling of words as they tumble out of you. But most of the time her work shrugs off attempts to pin interpretation to it. 'In the end meaning is embodied in the activity', says Lee, articulate as ever. In *Ariadne* 2002, thick oil paint is pushed around the canvas and built up gradually, like pucks of gum stuck under a table's ledge. It's a rhythmic advance, a routine that's occasionally broken. Which, in the end, is what living is.

'Weathering is what I would like to do well', writes the Scottish poet Alastair Reid in his 1978 poem *Weathering*. Weathered objects carry this accumulation of touch: 'an oak mantel / in the house in Spain, fingered to a sheen'. They are lasting evidence of someone else's life.

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Barbara Levittoux-Świdarska was one of the most important yet often overlooked textile artists who transformed tapestry from flat decorations to avant-garde installations. Born in Warsaw, Poland, Levittoux-Świdarska came to prominence in the 1960s when textile entered into mainstream contemporary art. Like fellow Polish textile artists Magdalena Abakanowicz and Jolanta Owidzka, Levittoux-Świdarska followed the Eastern European tradition, incorporating locally sourced materials and rural practices to improvise new textile art-making methods and forms.

Levittoux-Świdarska studied painting and tapestry (in 1958 and 1959 respectively) at the acclaimed Academy of Fine Arts, the foundational site and training ground of the Polish Textile School, a post-war generation of artists who changed the perception and direction of textile art in Europe. This network undertook research on rural textile practice and responded to post-WWII material constraints through the incorporation of local materials, while also responding to repressive ideological shifts as part of a centralized government effort to promote a nationalist identity rooted in folk tradition. What emerged was a distinctly Polish and politically-charged weaving tradition that Levittoux-Świdarska continued throughout her practice.

Over the course of more than half a decade, Levittoux-Świdarska created a cohesive body of sculptures and paintings that, through a focus on materiality, structure and form, added new dimensions to Polish textile art. While her early practice focused mostly on paintings, depictions of simple, everyday objects juxtaposed with geometric solids and clean, minimalist lines, Levittoux-Świdarska shifted almost completely towards the creation of textile art by the 1970s. Coinciding with the wider Polish textile tradition, Levittoux-Świdarska utilized materials close at hand, like pine needs or birch bark, nestled next to yarn, cotton and fabric. She wove or glued these natural fibres together with man-made ones, such as wire, plastic or industrial scraps, to create two-dimensional textiles that were minimal, intimate and emphasized the spatial relations between objects. The netting-like structures - imperfect shapes characterized by seemingly erratic, densely formed and dramatically entangled arrangements - portray a sense of 'emptiness,' revealing the skeleton of the weave and the 'thinking' behind the patterns.

Levittoux-Świdarska's work has been exhibited widely since the early 1960s, when, following graduation from the Academy of Fine Arts, she participated in important group shows at prestigious institutions in Warsaw, including the National Museum, Museum of History, Palace of Culture and other regional state galleries of art. Between 1966 and 2013, she staged more than 40 solo exhibitions of her work, and took part in numerous group exhibitions in Poland and abroad, most notably 'Fibre Structures from Poland's New Wave of Textile Artists', which toured various venues across the United States including the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. Her work has featured in important biennales celebrating textile art, including the International Tapestry Biennales in Lausanne in 1975, 1985 and 2009, and she was included in every edition of the International Textile Triennial organised by the Central Museum of Łódź, Poland from its inception in 1975 until her last participation in 2012. Her work is represented in notable private and museum collections, including, amongst others, the National Museum in Warsaw and Poznań, as well as the Textile Museum in Łódź. In 2010, she received a life-time award for her achievements in textile.

Rosa Lee (1957–2009) was a Hong Kong-born British painter, teacher and writer. She was known for her layered and textured paintings created using oil and wax and constructed using lace-like

stencils and spray through paper doilies. “Lee’s paintings demand a shifting of critical categories towards a re-evaluation of the ‘merely’ decorative in painting.”

She was selected for the John Moores Painting Prize in 1989, winning one of 10 awards given as part of the exhibition. Her work is held in collections including The New Hall Art Collection at the University of Cambridge, Victoria Gallery and Museum at the University of Liverpool and the Maclaurin Art Gallery at Rozelle House, Scotland.

Her writing was published in academic and arts press, and included articles on feminism and painting, the work of Bridget Riley, and the working processes of painting and teaching.

Lee studied art history at Sussex University, and painting at Saint Martin's and the Royal College of Art. She was born in Hong Kong and died in London.

Shelagh Wakely was part of the alchemy of the British Sculpture Movement of the 1980s, with fellow artists Richard Deacon, Shirazeh Houshiary, Barry Flanagan and Anish Kapoor, amongst others. With a prolific career spanning more than four decades, Wakely produced an impressive body of work comprising sculpture, installation, drawings, prints and video. A pioneer of installation art, her artworks are illusionary plays on perception that disturb patterns of thinking and seeing and are characterised by tender marks, ghost-like and evanescent, made with a variety of media: from clay to wire, cut silk to gilded fruit, ink on paper to canvas. Despite the diversity of her work, her oeuvre circles around a cluster of themes relating to fragility, time, aging and decay, all united by her singular interest in 'the surface' - as a shield, a barrier, a sign, a veneer. Her sensuous work was also inspired by the flamboyant and lavish decorations of Brazil, along with the work of Brazilian artist Tunga (1952-2016), with whom she collaborated in the 1990s.

Wakely was born in a small village in England and spent much of her youth in Kenya surrounded by ecologists and natural scientists. After a spell as a research agronomist, she turned to the arts, studying painting and screen-printing at the Chelsea College of Art (1958-1962). Wakely worked as a textile and clothing designer in the 1960s but a research fellowship at the Royal College of Art (1968-1971) led her to sculpture. Early exhibitions were held at the Serpentine Gallery, London, UK (1977); Institute of Contemporary Art, London, UK (1979); The John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, UK (1982); and The Showroom, London, UK (1989). Her work was posthumously featured in a solo exhibition 'A View from a Window' at Camden Arts Centre, London in 2014 and was included in Manchester Art Gallery's group exhibition 'Speech Acts: Reflections-Imagination-Repetition' in 2018; in 'Psychic Wounds: On Art and Trauma' at The Warehouse, Dallas, in 2020-2021; as well as recently in 'A Very Special Place: Ikon in the 1990s' at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, until 30 August 2021.

Later in her career, she worked on numerous outdoor installations, including Rainsquare at South London Gallery (1994) and other public commissions for the Royal Albert Hall, London, UK (2001); Marunouchi Building, Tokyo, Japan (2002); Beckenham Beacon Hospital, Kent, UK (2009); and Nottingham University Hospital City Campus, Nottingham, UK (2010).