



# TEXTILE

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## *Textile Memories*

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# Exhibition Review

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## ***Textile Memories: Copenhagen, Denmark: HEIRLOOM Center for Art and Archives, 4 November 2022 – 8 January 2023***

*Textile Memories* marks the first exhibition presented by the new organization *HEIRLOOM center for art and archives*. Founded and run by curators and art historians Stine Hebert and Johanne Løgstrup, the Copenhagen-based nonprofit will initiate and exhibit international projects associated with artistic archives. The center focuses on “exploring artistic legacy and overlooked collections in dialogue with contemporary art” and pays particular attention to “ephemeral practices and discussions around gender, identity and transnational exchanges.”<sup>1</sup> Their first exhibition, a six person group show, brought together contemporary and historical textiles to “examine the current necessity—in light of the colonial past—to take new approaches to our understandings of people and communities.”<sup>2</sup>

Exhibition curator Johanne Løgstrup explains that the contemporary works by Majd Abdel Hamid, Julia Jupiter Child, Melanie Kitti and Oscar Lara “contextualise in each their own way the significance of art in relation to global, spiritual and craft traditions.”<sup>3</sup> But it is Danish Artist Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (1911–1984) and her

husband, the South African artist Ernest Mancoba (1904–2002) that comprise the exhibition’s main focus. *Mancoba*, the printed monochrome textile that takes center stage in the gallery space, was exhibited by Sonja Ferlov Mancoba at the 1947 annual crafts exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Copenhagen. While deemed a critical success at the time, the curators acknowledge that later versions of the textile did not become the hoped for commercial success.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1948 and 1950, the Mancobas were members of the avant-garde movement CoBrA. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Ernest Mancoba acknowledged that the couple faced “a certain form of silent opposition to Sonja and me” from some members of the group, reflecting that “probably it was also our very conception of mankind and of art that not only contributed to our isolation from some in the group, but also invalidated us in the appreciation of the official art world, especially, later, in the eyes and the evaluation of certain critics and art historians.”<sup>5</sup> While textile design was not the field either artist were known for, *Textile Memories* “traces the history behind



**Figure 1**

*Textile Memories* installation view at HEIRLOOM center for art and archives, Copenhagen, Denmark.

the overlooked textile, which falls outside the respective practices of the two artists, yet embodies an artistic vision that characterizes both” and suggests the textile was likely the result of collective work by the couple.<sup>6</sup>

On the gallery’s ground floor, the *Mancoba* textile is presented on a low table near the street windows (Figures 1 and 2). Nearby, tables hold supporting materials that contextualize the work, including documentation of a variation of the print and a photograph of Sonja Ferlov Mancoba dressed in a shirt made of the print.<sup>7</sup> The table also contains useful information

about the other works in the exhibition designated with a simple but effective system: information pinned directly to the tables refers to the *Mancoba* textile, while raised text and images explain content related to the group exhibition (Figure 3).

Downstairs, video documentation of Oscar Lara’s eight-year artistic research project *Within Heritage Movements* (2013–21) played. The project confronts the history of a group of pre-Columbian *Paracas* textiles “illegally transported from Peru to the Ethnography Department at the Gothenburg Museum in Sweden”<sup>8</sup>

in the 1930s “before eventually being returned over the course of the past 20 years.”<sup>9</sup> Diplomatic channels facilitated the smuggling of the textiles to Sweden as well as their subsequent repatriation. Lara’s video documentation records the exacting creation of replica textiles by Swedish professionals financed through Swedish funding, which Sharon Lerner, Curator for Contemporary Art Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru, has noted, “mimick[s] an inverted colonial labor structure by having a South American employ underpaid Swedish labor to pirate Peruvian heritage.”<sup>10</sup>

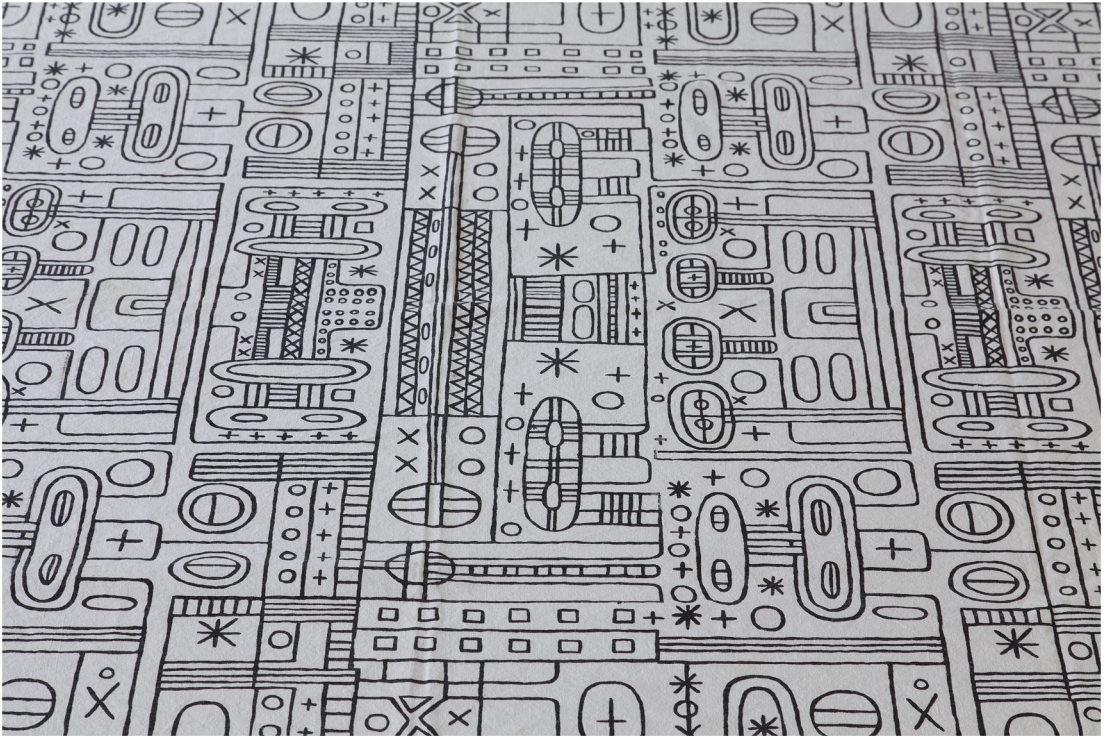


Figure 2

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba with Ernest Mancoba, *Mancoba* (1951) textile (used as tablecloth) (detail).

While much is often made of allowing art to speak through the visual, this is truly a readers' exhibition. The curators have made the wise decision to not conceal the fact that background knowledge is necessary to appreciate much of the exhibition content. After watching Lara's fascinating video, I had to return upstairs to reread the exhibition text and then watch again. The video work *Double Sheet* (2021) by Majd Abdel Hamid includes a subtitled interview with Syrian opposition leader Riad al-Turk describing the experience of 17-years of solitary confinement while the artist listens and unravels a sheet and deserved my a similar re-reading and re-viewing.

This fascinating exhibition makes clear the place textiles can—and do—occupy in capturing complex, often fraught, histories. Ironically, these engrossing stories at times take up greater importance than the textiles themselves: the *Mancoba* textile is arguably materially less interesting than the histories it helps to tell; Lara's *Within Heritage Movements* exists for this exhibition as a video with the replica textiles currently stored in the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg<sup>11</sup>; Majd Abdel Hamid's two smaller embroidered works are less accessible than the video work, which itself requires reading and returning. Julia Jupiter Child

and Melanie Kitti's work offer very different contributions to the show based in Child's acrylic on denim "sustain[ing] a telepathic communication between women in the community" and Kitti's interest in "expand[ing] our understanding of what constitutes domesticity and the home."<sup>12</sup> What this requires is an agile viewer, willing to move between esthetic and historical registers and adjust their perspective to the differences of each work. This is possible, but requires visitors willing to engage in a similar effort each of the artists has made—these textiles are far from *merely* decorative and nothing is given away lightly.





Figure 3

Oscar Lara *Within Heritage Movements* (2013–21) supporting material (detail).

## Notes and References

1. <https://heirloom-caa.org/en/about>.
2. Winnie Sze, Åse Eg Jørgensen and Johanne Løgstrup, *Textile Memories* exhibition statement.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Obrist, Hans Ulrich. 2010. "An Interview with Ernest Mancoba." *Third Text* 24 (3): 380.
6. Winnie Sze, Åse Eg Jørgensen and Johanne Løgstrup, *Textile Memories* exhibition statement.
7. Ibid.
8. Lerner, Sharon. "Curator for Contemporary Art Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru." Accessed 28 December 2022. <https://oscarlara.com/within-heritagemovements/>.
9. Winnie Sze, Åse Eg Jørgensen and Johanne Løgstrup, *Textile Memories* exhibition statement.
10. Lerner, Sharon. "Curator for Contemporary Art Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru." Accessed 28 December 2022. <https://oscarlara.com/within-heritagemovements/>.
11. Oscar Lara explains: The replicas "are stored in the exact same location where their originals were kept until 2021. Then, the original collection was fully sent back to Peru and my replicas took the opposite route (from Lima to Gothenburg)." Email correspondence with the artist 28 December 2022.
12. Winnie Sze, Åse Eg Jørgensen and Johanne Løgstrup, *Textile Memories* exhibition statement.

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