

Alighiero Boetti, Anthony Akinbola, Miranda Fengyuan Zhang, Sanford Biggers, Jordan Nassar, Helen Mirra and Thomas Grünfeld

Thread Routes

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"I am a creator of rules. And once I've created these rules, these games, these mechanisms, I can play or make other people play."

- Alighiero Boetti, 1984

After nearly three decades since the passing of Alighiero Boetti, one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, MASSIMODECARLO is delighted to announce a group exhibition dedicated to one of Boetti's most cherished artistic mediums: textiles.

In an extraordinary convergence, *Thread Routes* – a title that pays homage to the eponymous film series in 16mm by Kimsooja, who is currently exhibiting at MASSIMODECARLO Hong Kong – displays the artistic visions of Alighiero Boetti, Anthony Akinbola, Miranda Fengyuan Zhang, Sanford Biggers, Jordan Nassar, Helen Mirra, and Thomas Grünfeld, fostering an "impossible" dialogue that defies the confines of time, space, and artistic styles. Textile emerges as the centrepiece, embodying the power of connection. It serves as both subject and object, unravelling the narratives, traditions, and personal stories of each artist.

Through the intricate interplay of every weave and thread, the art of textiles transcends its material form and becomes a gateway, preserving the echoes of history and encapsulating the very essence of time and space. Rooted in this ancient craft, interwoven with delicate knots and bound by resilient threads, *Thread Routes* unfurls a tapestry of unparalleled artistic expression.

Born in 1940, Boetti initially aligned himself with the Arte Povera movement before embarking on a distinct artistic trajectory of his own. In search of a transformative experience, he found solace and inspiration in the vibrant city of Kabul, Afghanistan. His first encounter with the city in 1971 marked the beginning of a profound connection that would shape Boetti's creative journey for the next 23 years until his passing in 1994. Beyond being a mere traveller, Boetti immersed himself in the fabric of Kabul's culture, going so far as to establish the renowned One Hotel and making recurrent visits until the region was unsettled by the Soviet invasion in 1979. Yet, it is Boetti's extraordinary collaborations with Afghan craftswomen that remain as his most remarkable

achievements, commissioning them to craft monumental embroideries that embody the essence of his artistic vision.

Drawing from the legacy of Boetti's collaborations with artisans, students, and craftspeople, as well as his insatiable curiosity, the contemporary artists featured in *Thread Routes* embody a shared inquisitiveness and fascination with both remote traditions and contemporary practices.

Among them, Jordan Nassar, a New York-born artist with Palestinian roots, weaves enchanting landscapes devoid of specific locations. While elements of his art convey the yearning and diasporic experience of Palestinians, Nassar invites viewers to establish their own personal connections with his work, drawing upon their own truths and memories. Employing embroidery as his medium, Nassar assembles intricate mosaic-like panels of patterns. Reminiscent of Boetti's approach, Nassar collaborates with craftswomen from Palestine, resulting in grid-like compositions that blend mountainous vistas with delicate floral motifs.

In a similar vein, Helen Mirra, an American conceptual artist, embarks on a more abstract exploration of landscapes, employing a subdued colour palette and rough textiles. Mirra's textured works evoke the very essence of fields, soil, and water. Her profound fascination with nature and ecology stems from immersive hikes, where the landscapes she encounters leave an indelible mark on the materials, structures, and forms that manifest in her installations. In her *Unbleached handspun, dark blue*, the simplicity of the title belies its evocative nature, evoking imagery of water's flowing embrace and the rugged textures of the earth's surface.

Miranda Fengyuan Zhang, a Shanghai native now based in New York, finds inspiration in her grandmother's resourcefulness during wartime. Unravelling sweaters to create new ones, her grandmother's ingenuity deeply influences Zhang's artistic expression. Through the fragments of wool, Zhang skillfully weaves together diverse cultural influences, transcending boundaries in her artwork. Drawing from the spontaneity of traditional Chinese ink paintings, Zhang embraces improvisation, avoiding rigid or modified elements. While her pieces may not directly depict Eastern imagery, her artistic

philosophy embodies the innate sensibility rooted in Eastern traditions.

Anthony Akinbola, a Nigerian-American artist, roots his work in culture and tradition, transcending the boundaries of race to foster recognition of our shared humanity. Through his renowned durag compositions, he celebrates diverse cultural narratives, inviting dialogue on identity and representation. Inspired by the durag's embodiment of Black pride, Akinbola weaves vibrant strings like an abstract painter on canvas. At times, Akinbola's creations seem to resemble objects, flags, or landscapes, while in others, colours intertwine and blend, forming a kaleidoscope of abstraction. Through this interplay, our gaze is pulled back to the essence of these transformed objects, now art in their own right.

Similarly, Sanford Biggers draws inspiration from textile cultural traditions embedded in Afro-American history. In his artwork *Sweven*, he combines multiple fabrics, including the log cabin antique quilt and various patterned textiles. The log cabin quilt, rumoured to have been used as a symbol of safe houses during the Underground Railroad, holds historical significance within the artwork. Biggers employs a hybrid approach, blurring the line between painting and sculpture to convey multiple perspectives and the ever-shifting nature of meaning across time and space.

Characterised by a remarkably diverse practice, German artist Thomas Grünfeld presents his coloured felts in *Thread Routes*. Embarking on a creative journey that began in 2005, Grünfeld ventured into the medium of textiles, giving birth to his "felt pictures." Within this domain, he went beyond the confines of three-dimensional expressions, delving into the mystical depths of flat, secluded surfaces. Here, the interplay of space, form, and representation intertwines as Grünfeld deftly weaves together fragmented shapes to compose intricate scraps of imagery. Unfolding beyond the boundaries of tangibility and flatness, Grünfeld unveils a two-dimensional realm of wonder.

The works in *Thread Routes* intricately weave together continents and cultures, displaying the creative legacies of artists from diverse backgrounds.

Beginning in Southeast Asia with Boetti, traversing Europe with Grünfeld, and finally arriving in the American West with Biggers and Akinbola, these works, whether woven, spun, or knotted, bear witness to the artistry of a generation. At the intersection of diverse cultures, practices, and philosophies, *Thread Routes* pays homage to the timeless tradition of textiles, inviting contemplation on the threads that have woven our collective identity.