


SURFACE DESIGN



COLOR

CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF FIBER AND FABRIC



Jesse Harrod

CATEGORY IS: RAINBOW LINEN REALNESS

by Danny Orendorff

The official statement for *Passing Fancies*, contemporary artist **Jesse Harrod's** most recent installation of macramé sculptures, notes that the seven large dangling tubular forms included within are “inspired by the microscopic structure of the linen stalk.” That, and Harrod’s incorporation of flax-based linen cloth into the work to add dimension, may be true and enough to qualify its inclusion in ***The 7th International Linen Biennale of Portneuf*** (BILP 2017 for short) this summer in Quebec, Canada.¹ But Harrod’s curious title and her extensive portfolio of colorful work to date indicate much more going on than that alone.

The individual pieces included in *Passing Fancies* are each treated to a delicate dusting of florescent pink, marigold, and magenta acrylic paint applied to the surface using an airbrush gun. Primarily composed from strands of organic cotton rope, a much more affordable material than linen, they are given shape by way of circular metal bars suspended between alternately loose or taut stretches of laboriously hand-knotted

macramé. Installed before many windows inside a sun-soaked room of **Moulin de La Chevrotière**, a landmark mill built in 1802 housing a third of the work included in the BILP 2017, the sunlight literally *is*—while producing the visual effect of—bleaching the lightly tinted cloth back to its natural off-white hue. In this context, viewers see color fight for visibility and struggle against erasure, poetically speaking back to both the BILP 2017’s overarching theme (“The Past Unnoticed”) and the queer-conceptual content of Harrod’s artwork at large.

This new muted work is something of a departure for Harrod, who has certainly never been color-shy. A razzle-dazzle palette of bright and vibrant colors have consistently featured in the South African-born, Canadian-raised, and now Philadelphia-based artist’s work since even before receiving widespread attention for her massive 2010 sculpture *Frosted Pink Lipstick Smeared All Over His Face*. The mutable 20-foot-wide work debuted as part of Harrod’s MFA exhibition at the **School of the Art Institute of Chicago**. It is composed of hundreds

of purposefully garish flowers, first laser-cut out of plywood and later coated with various found chintzy floral textiles, paint, and sparkly embellishments (sequins, rhinestones, and glitter). Harrod's work is inspired in part by the vibrant visual delights and economic resourcefulness of do-it-yourself drag queens, as well as the potential for funky floral anatomies to serve as metaphor for budding queer bodies and uncommon communities. It is exemplary of a thrifty and eclectic queer-craft aesthetic that began to emerge in the late 1990s and 2000s among artists like **Sheila Pepe**, **Josh Faught**, **Allyson Mitchell**, and **LJ Roberts**.

In 2013, Harrod shifted the focus of her artistic practice away from the production of floral "cloth sculptures" and began experimenting with macramé to produce dense and detailed 3D shapes in space. Color helped provide continuity, as did a sustained and sensitive interest in genderqueer and transgender communities, anatomies and sexual practices. No longer working with a mélange of colorful cloth and trimmings, Harrod gravitated towards the acidic, attention-grabbing neon of commercially available Paracord (a strong and somewhat elastic nylon rope used by the military, rock-climbers, and bedroom kinksters alike).



Top: **Jesse Harrod *Frosted Pink Lipstick Smeared Across His Face*** 2010, cloth, wood, metal, embellishments, acrylic trimmings, embroidery, embellishment work, sewing, painting, 10' x 20' x 5'. Installation view at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Sullivan Galleries, Chicago, IL. Photo: Jessica Labatt.

Bottom: **Jesse Harrod *Passing Fancies*** 2017, cotton, linen, metal, acrylic, knot tying, 86" x 36" each, series of eight. Installation view at Moulin de La Chevrotière in Deschambault, Quebec, Canada, featured in 7^e édition la Biennale Internationale du Lin de Portneuf (BILP 2017). Photos: Denis Baribault. Detail left page.





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No longer working with found-materials, macramé has allowed Harrod to become more purposeful with color choices and combinations, as well as more abstract with her references to the wondrous diversity of bodies, parts, and pleasures. The pair of dangling orifice-like *Mascot* works from 2015 debuted as part of her solo show *Toxic Shock and the Hotdog* at Philadelphia's **Vox Populi**. Multiple curvaceous macramé textiles, composed from black, yellow, magenta, teal, and hot-pink Paracord, are layered and folded over each other until serpentine Möbius strip-inspired shapes are achieved. In other installations—like the eight steel-framed *Ranger* artworks that leaned against the walls of Brooklyn's NURTUREart gallery in 2015, and her display of three suspended *Pensile Arrangement* pieces for a 2014 show with **Aaron McIntosh** at **Virginia Commonwealth University's FAB Gallery**—Harrod arranges single-color macramé elements into site-specific scenarios, allowing her endless opportunities to play with color and form in space post-production.



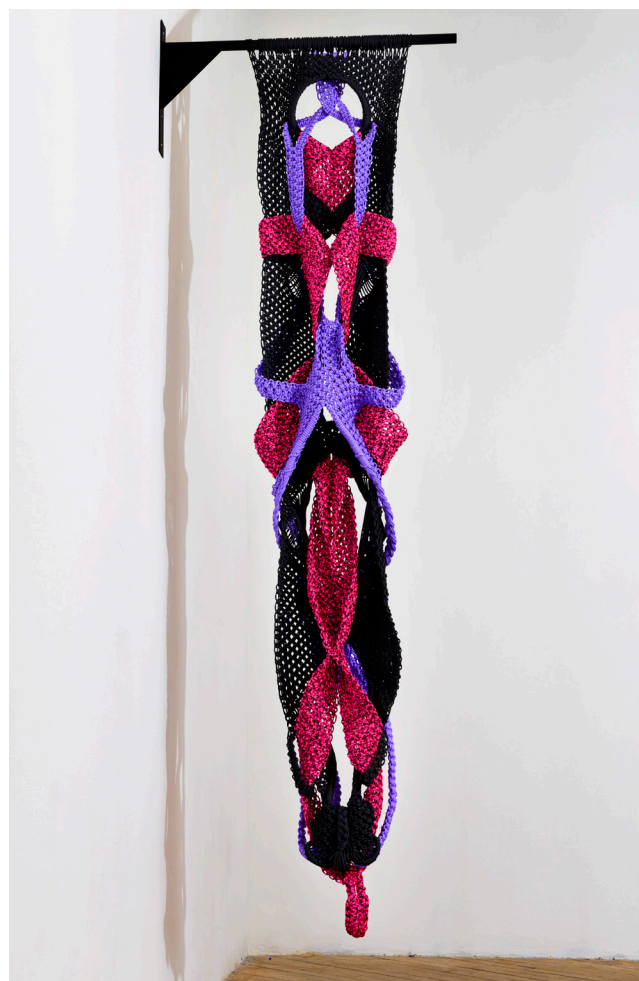
Left page, top: **Jesse Harrod *Rangers*** (installation view) 2015, Paracord, plexiglass, metal, knot tying, 67" x 16" each (installation dimensions variable). Photo: Stephen Probert. Courtesy of the artist and NURTUREart, Brooklyn, NY.

Left page, bottom left: **Jesse Harrod *Pensile Arrangements 1, 2, 3*** 2013, Paracord, cock rings, beads, metal, knot tying, dimensions variable. Photo: Terry Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts' FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA.

Left page, bottom right: **Jesse Harrod *Rangers - Blue One*** (detail) 2015, Paracord, plexiglass, metal, knot tying, 67" x 16". Photo: Stephen Probert.

Bottom left: **Jesse Harrod *Mascot 1*** 2016, Paracord, metal, acrylic, knot tying, 72" x 24" x 4". Photo: John Carlano.

Bottom right: **Jesse Harrod *Mascot 2*** 2016, Paracord, metal, acrylic, knot tying, 72" x 24" x 4". Photo: John Carlano.





Harrod's methods of making, layering, and display reached even greater depth, literally, earlier this year in the basement of New York City's **SculptureCenter**. She draped over a dozen macramé pieces of varied color and shape along a 25-foot-long cave-like corridor viewers could pass through and linger within. Titled *Taught Tight Tender Sway*, the immersive dungeon-esk setting amplified the inherent sensuality of Harrod's artwork, which has consistently included references to the queer sexual subcultures of S&M, kink, and bondage by incorporating such metal bedroom hardware as beads, harnesses, and cock rings. A layer-upon-layer kaleidoscope of color, texture, and form, *Taught Tight Tender Sway* represents Harrod's successful attempt to transform the orgiastic design logic of earlier works into an embodied experience for viewers.

Located at a compelling juncture of post-disciplinary fiber possibilities and queer explorations of pleasure, labor, and materiality, Harrod's move to macramé has allowed her to take up more formal, spatial, and experiential considerations within her sculptural practice. It is also no wonder that this turn towards more nuanced and formal experimentation would also reignite her passion for drawing. While the macramé works reveal an interest in multidimensional line work, her drawings are hardly abstract or geometric. Instead, they are drawn using crayons, markers, and colored pencils with a contemporary, post-punk, queer-feminist anarchy and amateurism reminiscent of **Dorothy Iannone** and **Carol Rama's** earlier psycho-sexual works on paper.

The suggestive nature of Harrod's sculptural forms find their explicit counterparts in drawings like *Meatball Sub* (2015) and *If I Had Three Vaginas* (2015). They contain graphic depictions of cartoonish femme figures and their pink and purple vulvas, anuses, nipples, breasts, and phalluses engorged, stretched, and saggy enough to resemble the ovoid shapes found within her textile sculptures and installations. Yet, the parallel between Harrod's drawings and her sculptures and installations is most directly represented by her 2016 drawing *Bodies*, in which a gaggle of over 50 (blue, green, yellow, red, etc.) figures are organized in various mid-coitus positions across a long horizontal plane. Again, color provides continuity, as the layered human figures featured in *Bodies* come in just about every shade imaginable, just as her textiles do in the site-specific sensory installation *Taught Tight Tender Sway*.

Return to the scene of the *Passing Fancies* installation in Portneuf, with knowledge of Harrod's commitment to exploring

Top: **Jesse Harrod** *Taught Tight Tender Sway* (frontal installation view) 2017, Paracord, cock rings, beads, metal, knot tying, 25' x 10' x 8'. Photos: Lisi Raskin. Courtesy of the artist and SculptureCenter, Long Island City, NY. Center view bottom.



a queer, polyamorous, polymorphous, and playfully perverse aesthetic. It would seem that it is not only the relatively modest material of cotton (however knotted or painted) that Harrod hopes to pass as fancy in a context dedicated to the much more highbrow material of linen. The term “passing” also refers to the contentious historic and contemporary strategy of queer people, gender non-conforming individuals, and people of color to “pass” as straight, cisgender, or white within everyday contexts, conditioned by white heteropatriarchy in which it is overwhelmingly disadvantageous and potentially dangerous to simply exist as not those things. The delicate fragility of Harrod’s *Passing Fancies* gives form to the precarious, self-compromising feelings of having to pretend you are something you are not in order to survive or excel. But it is in the color of the work itself that Harrod deviates; disobeying the monochromatic palette and homogeneous material mandated from beyond, she produces something much more meaningful, personal, and political instead.

¹ 7 edition la Biennale Internationale du Lin de Portneuf (BILP 2017) was held June 17–October 1, 2017 in Portneuf, Quebec, Canada. biennaledulin.com

Jesse Harrod is the Head of Fibers and Material Studies at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. Her work will be included in *Haptic Tactics: Queer Strategies for Abstracting Touch and Desire* in early 2018 at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, New York, NY. jesseharrod.com

Harrod is also featured in the book *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* by John Chaich and Todd Oldham (Ammo Books, March 2017). To read a review, turn to page 66.

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Harrod’s *Passing Fancies* gives form to the precarious, self-compromising feelings of having to pretend you are something you are not in order to survive or excel.

Top: **Jesse Harrod *Bodies*** 2016, acrylic on paper, drawing, 62" x 15". Photo: John Carlano.

Bottom: **Jesse Harrod *If I had three Vaginas*** 2015, pen, pastel, acrylic, watercolor on paper, drawing, 24" x 36". Photo: John Carlano.