

Connecting Threads

Q&A with Beth Blankenship



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You grew up in a beach environment. How has this experience influenced your current body of work?

Because I've always lived near an inlet of the Pacific Ocean, there's a special place in my heart for sea life.

The vessels that make up *Connecting Threads* tell ocean stories. A few of them make reference to events that occurred in Alaska; some of them explore broader narratives—such as the effects of climate change—and others simply celebrate the beauty of the marine environment.

Can you contrast your approach to stitching by hand versus with a machine?

I call myself a bead and fiber artist because I tend to use one of two approaches: I hand-stitch beads with needle and thread or I machine-stitch thread onto water-soluble fiber.

When I create an artwork with machine embroidery on water-soluble fiber, the interdependence of the threads is obvious. With my beadwork, the threads may be harder to see but they are still there—holding everything together.

Both approaches are underpinned by the philosophy that one thing standing alone is fragile but an interconnected web of life is strong. Stitching with thread, whether by hand or machine, gives shape to this fundamental truth.

How did you develop this method of sculpting with connected threads?

I started stitching on water-soluble fiber about 4 years ago. I'd been hand stitching beads for over 20 years and I was looking for a technique that was faster. With beadwork, I'd stitch all day and come away with something that fit in the palm of my hand—it's a slooow process. Drawing with a sewing machine is faster—but not fast—after a day in the studio, I can come away with something that fits in my lap! I'm learning to embrace my attraction to slow, meditative processes.

The thread vessels came about because the water-soluble fiber I use is very pliable so it felt natural for me to move from 2-dimensional to 3-dimensional forms.

What is your planning process for a work? Do you use a sketchbook?

A big reason I create original artworks is because I love the challenges that crop up when I try something new—does this water look like water? Will this design stand on its own?

A piece tends to start with written notes about the concept as well as a really rough sketch. Then, I search online for inspirational images to pull snippets from and alter. I have moved away from drawing in my sketchbooks. Now, I tape together separate pieces of tracing paper to create my designs. The real drawing comes when I'm at the sewing machine. All of those little pieces of paper end up being slipped between the pages of my sketchbooks so you could say I still "use" them!