

IN REVIEW

Baltimore, Maryland

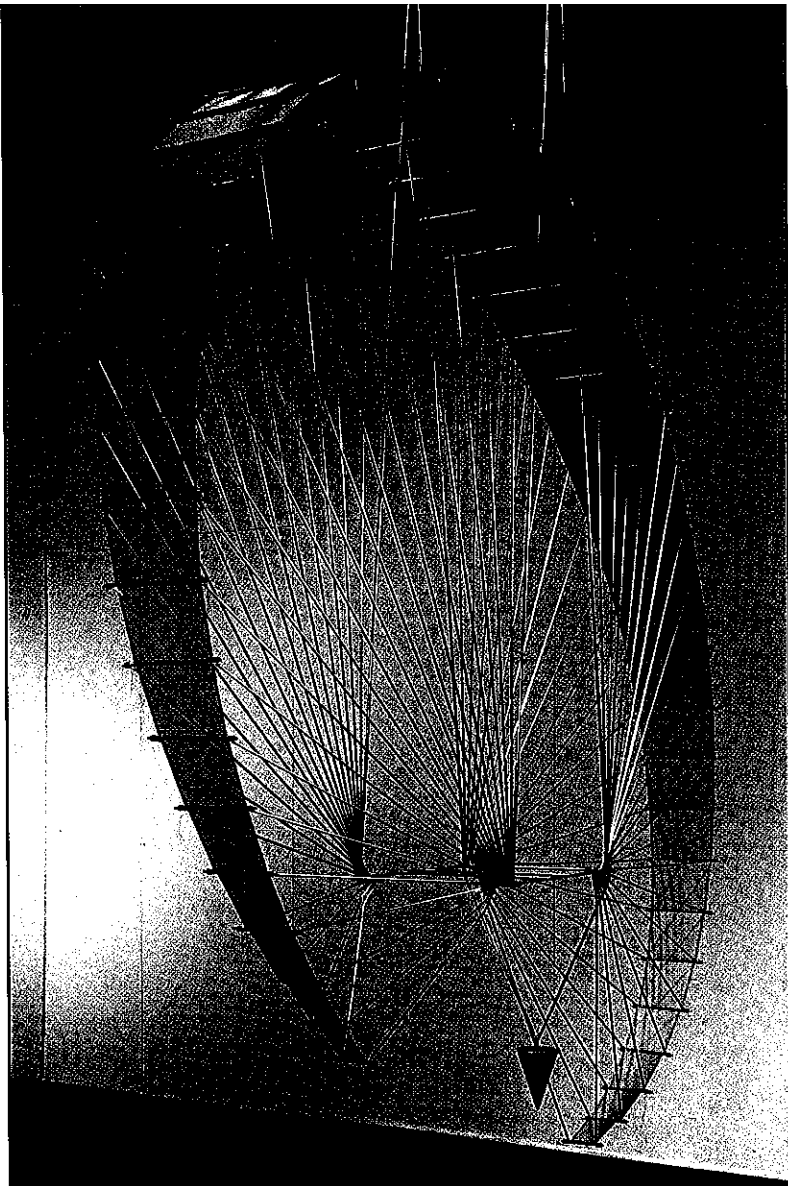
Reviewed by Cara Ober

Warren Seelig: Textile per se Maryland Institute College of Art

Warren Seelig: *Textile per se*, a retrospective at the Maryland Institute College of Art (December 4, 2009–March 14, 2010) is a sprawling and thorough examination of the materiality of fiber art. In varying bodies of work from the 1970s to the present, the Rockland, Maine-based Seelig explores traditional and non-traditional textiles, illuminates the essential qualities of the media, and illustrates the thinking modalities that develop accordingly.

According to Textile Curator and MICA faculty Susie Brandt, Warren Seelig “makes visible the potential of fiber art on campus” for MICA’s growing fibers department, which currently includes over one hundred majors. Since the late 1970s Seelig has had an exponential influence on the expanding role of contemporary fiber arts through his studio practice, writing, curatorial projects, and teaching. This exhibit is the first time Warren Seelig’s disparate bodies of work have been viewed all together, a rare opportunity for viewers. From wall hangings, to handwoven three-dimensional sculpture, to metal spoke and axle pieces, to his luminous *Shadowfields*, Warren Seelig’s work is consistently non-narrative and process-based, with a focus on intelligent craftsmanship.

Brandt purposely included one of Seelig’s earliest wall hangings from 1972 to illustrate the artist’s facility for structure and ability to invent original woven grids of fabric. Titled simply *Five Panel #2*, this brown and tan grid of woven squares appears to reflect a minimalist aesthetic, but closer

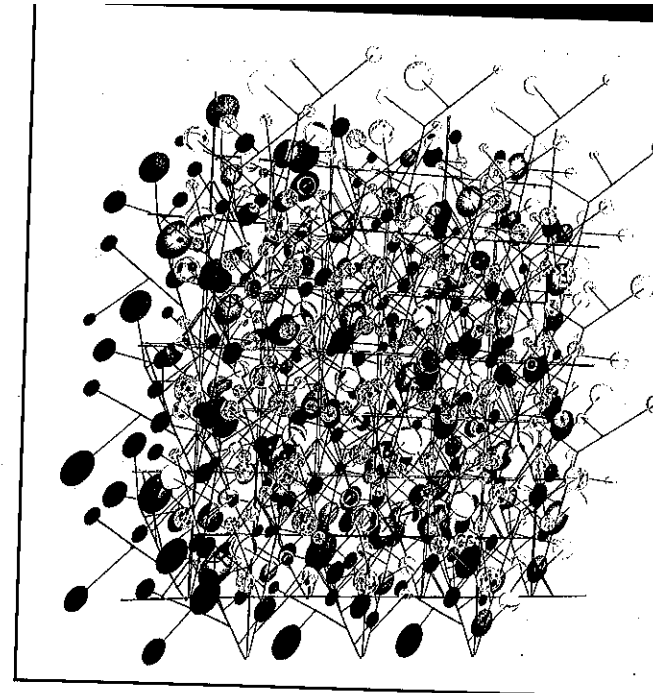


WARREN SEELIG *Blue Oval* Stainless steel spokes, frame, lathe-turned-counterweight, vinyl-coated mesh, 124" x 92" x 18", 1994. Photo: Jack Ramsdale.

inspection of both sides of the cloth reveals an unorthodox and unusually complicated structure.

After initial success and recognition by MoMA Curator Mildred Constantine, Seelig continued to develop his work in an idiosyncratic direction, first in a series of woven vertical shields and relief sculptures in the 1980s, *Shields* and *Cinctures*. Employing a palette of earthy colors, plus black and red, Seelig handwove each piece as double cloth, where planes of cloth are woven simultaneously. The artist would insert sculpted “skeleton” frames between the layers, so that each piece would emerge from the loom fully formed and three-dimensional. These pieces are woven with sewing thread for an impossibly smooth finish, appearing to be machine-made because of their consistency and tiny details. When many of his contemporaries were creating loose, expressionistic woven works, Seelig challenged the notion of the artist’s hand,

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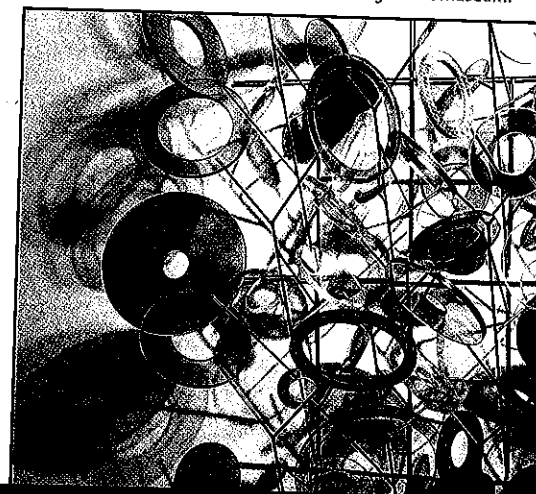


WARREN SEELIG *Shadowfield/Crystal* Stainless steel, Lucite balls, 24" x 24" x 3.5", 2009. Photo: Jack Ramsdale. Collection: Barbara and Jonathan Bick and family.

while positing the Bauhaus ideal of craft as art and form as process.

Warren Seelig’s next body of work took the manifestations of weaving a step further in his series of spoke-and-axle forms. In this body of work from the late 1980s and 1990s, the artist turned his focus to sculptural structure, transforming his earlier armatures into exoskeletons. No longer weaving his own fabric, Seelig worked with purchased industrial fabric and bent it over visible stainless steel spokes, first attached to the wall and then free hanging in space. *Iris 1996*, in green nylon mesh and stainless steel, resembles an industrial loom, an early flying machine, or a prehistoric bird. Like the rest of the series, this sculpture is completely collapsible and needs fabric to maintain its form. As in earlier works, Seelig’s craftsmanship is impeccable, both in welding and fiber applications, reinforcing his commitment to process as structure.

WARREN SEELIG *Shadowfield/Colored Light* Detail. Stainless steel, fluorescent Plexiglas, 48" x 48" x 6", 2007. Photo: Jack Ramsdale. Collection: Reading Public Museum.



From this point, Seelig moved back to the wall and shifted his focus to the woven structure, without using any actual fabric in his *Shadowfield* series. Filling an entire gallery, these geometric clusters of metal couple a cool, modernist, mechanical aesthetic with contrasting organic and plastic materials. An uneasy balance is achieved by the combination of materials, such as in *Shadowfield/ Clear 2004*, a tangle of stainless steel and clear polycarbonate. Utilizing an all composition with no main focal point, the *Shadowfields* can be read like an abstract expressionist painting or a minimalist screen. The viewer must simultaneously look at and through the piece, animated by sudden directional change and rich interior shadows that create depth and drama. Vaguely biological or microbial, this series of works belies the artist’s interest in the material world and illuminates the structural thinking of the weaver.

Warren Seelig: *Textile per se* includes several of Seelig’s industrial-sized sculptures, loan from the Philadelphia Airport, as well as a floating collaborative “drawing” that Seelig made with a group of MICA students in a Process Drawing Class. On display in MICA’s angular glass-and-steel Brown Center, the monumental sculptures that comprise *Floating* appear in their optimal element. Rather than contrasting with the dynamic building or attempting to attach to its walls, Seelig’s *Skylights* and *Drawing Writ Large* collaborations enhance the unique qualities of the building and the building reciprocates exponentially. This particular segment of the exhibition is the only “non-traditional” gallery setting for Seelig’s work and it allows the viewer to comprehend a whole other, richer application for it.

With power intrinsic to immaculate craftsmanship, as well as a mature commitment to fiber art as a process, rather than literal media, this retrospective is a view of a life centered upon the serious contemplation of the idea of textile. Even in *The Preparatory*, a small table arrangement of “scraps” and sketches from the artist’s studio, culled from closets and boxes, one senses the depth and breadth of Seelig’s investigation. He is a completely obsessive maker, besotted with the application of his materials, and, for this reason, *Textile per se* is a unique, intelligent, and zigzagging journey through an authentic creative process.

—Cara Ober is a painter, writer, and professor living in Baltimore, Maryland. She is commercially represented in Brooklyn, New York; Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., and writes reviews for ARTnews and her own local art blog BmoreArt.