

MILLICENT YOUNG'S POETIC RHYTHM OF HAIR

Hair as a carrier of movement, light and meaning

'In many cultures, hair is considered a sacred aspect of our being; cutting, covering or revealing it is ceremonial.'

The American artist Millicent Young (1958) creates installations from long strands of horsehair and wood. In her work, she explores the relationships between colour, texture and movement, and the ever-changing dynamics between them. From her hometown of Stone Ridge, New York, she collects locally found materials and combines them with self-developed handicraft techniques to create shapes that transform light and space in a poetic way.

For more than twenty years, Millicent Young has been working with hair and has developed techniques in which the horsehair is strung through small holes in a wooden structure, resulting in floaty and flowing organic textile works that respond to their environment. 'A passing viewer or a breath of wind through an open window can gently move the hair, creating a lively presence, almost as if it were breathing.' Each work is the result of careful observation, assembly and experimentation, with the materials finding their own expression.

Strand by strand

The horsehair that Millicent Young uses consists of both extended and regular, non-extended strands. 'I make each extended strand by tying small bundles of hair along a sewing thread, with each knot secured with a dot of glue.' When creating and placing the strands, Millicent takes careful account of color gradients and density, both within the strand and bundle and within the entire work. Not a single hair is dyed or chemically treated, the color transitions are created purely by combining different natural hair colors.

Constructed wooden structures

The hair is threaded through small holes in homemade wooden constructions, made up of simple linear shapes and wood joints. 'I collect the vines of the country where I live. Sometimes I combine other tree species with the vine. The shape becomes a three-dimensional line drawing. As soon as I know how the work will be placed in the space, I carefully determine the position of the holes.' Drilling the holes forms the template for how dense the hair is and how it falls, influenced by their direction, size, and spread.

Basting and refining

Each strand is individually threaded through the drilled hole. Millicent determines the length by how far she pulls the strand through the hole, after which she secures it with a toothpick. 'Later, I refine the length of the strands, the intervals between the bundles and the colour gradients by

splicing the sewing thread where necessary.' Finally, she removes the excess end of the toothpicks and bundles and sands the studs smooth, giving each work its refined and fluid finish.

Hair as old kinships

Hair is for Millicent a proof of our old kinship with beings greater than man. "In many cultures, hair is considered a sacred aspect of our being; cutting, covering or revealing it is ceremonial. Hair contains a library of genetic code that persists long after the rest of the body has decayed.' In Millicent's work, the hair forms a transgressive substance that can be both sharp and mysterious and escapes categorization.

Millicent's work explores the interconnectedness of the things we have split, the wholeness we have reduced to fragments. 'The feeling of belonging to a relationship between place and others, a sense of existence arising from need and desire. The loss of this sense of belonging runs through every dimension of extinction that we face, and of which we as humans are the face.' This theme has been central to her work for more than three decades.

Thematic layers

Young's sculptures go beyond mere aesthetics. They explore the connection between man and nature, the fragile balance and the traces we leave behind. Fragmentation, reintegration and memory keep recurring, with each strand of hair or fibre carrying a symbolic meaning. The result is a poetic commentary on transience, beauty and resilience.

www.millicentyoung.com

www.instagram.com/@millicent.young

Text: Karmen Samson

Credits



Garment, (2013), 247 x 112 x 30 cm, grapevine, horsehair, construction, photograph: Michael Bailey.



Unfurl, (2013), 216 x 208 x 127 cm, grapevine, horsehair, construction, photographer: Michael Bailey.



When There Were Birds (i), (2019), installation, grapevine, horsehair, construction, photographer: Pete Mauney.