

ARTS

“Have you ever been struck by a sudden desire for - soup?”
THE FROGS ARISTOPHANES

REVIEW

In ‘Soft Landing,’ contemporary artists engage with textile history

BY ELLIE KOO
STAFF CRITIC

Textiles and fabric are never just materials. “Soft Landing” renews this idea with refreshing introspection. In this group exhibition at the 63 Audubon gallery on view from March 30 to May 6, artists assert their visions for the world through textiles and fabric, which operate simultaneously as nods to the past, mechanisms for the present and portals to future possibilities.

The exhibition, organized by Moshopefoluwa Olagunju ART ’27, moves through a range of cultures and histories, materials and media. What remains consistent, however, is the artists’ recognition that what they create is never wholly their own but instead emerges against the backdrop of everything that has come before them. That reflection — visible across several works — is both grounding and invigorating.

Alexzandria Robin’s “Bubblegum Western” features a doll-sized figurine wearing a pink, quilt-patterned dress that is accompanied by a second dress hanging above it, evoking elements of costume, dress-up and play.

Yet something more complex unfolds here. The doll is far more dynamic than a typical play figure: its spidery fingers stretch eerily outwards while its feet angle awkwardly inward. The dress, made of simple cloth patterned with polka dots, plaids and florals, feels traditional and modest, but it exposes the figure’s bust in a way that seems almost accidental, producing a quiet sense of discomfort. The face is even more striking — pouting, with yellow and red eye makeup, its expression feels surreal and chiseled, more aggressive and hardened than the smooth serene expression normally plastered upon a play doll.

Through this unsettling transformation of familiar materials and symbols, Robin seizes the history of textiles and consumer culture and pushes against its boundaries, revealing what these forms mean to her.

A pair of digital prints nods to history with contemporary vivacity. Nadine Nelson’s “Caribbean Black Queens 1” and “Caribbean Black Queens 2” present portrait-style photographs of Caribbean women dressed in traditional textiles. Taken alone, the grainy black-and-white images evoke the aura of historical documentation or archival artifacts.

Nelson surrounds these figures

with colorful backgrounds and beadwork, reframing them in a new visual context. The patterns and beading still reference longstanding traditions of textile and craft, but the engagement with various materials infuses the portraits with tactile dynamism and presence. By imbuing them with this renewed vitality, Nelson simultaneously honors the cultural histories these women embody while shortening their temporal distance from us.

Other works approach the human presence more obliquely. Reggie Woolery’s “Tronie #4” and “Tronie #5” evoke ghostly traces of humans — suggestions of who or what was once there. Displayed in glass cases reminiscent of natural history museums rather than art galleries, the works consist of tattered embroidery hoops. Holes puncture the fabric, while dark hues of violet and navy deepen the sense of decay.

The ragged material creates an eerie sensation that complicates how the viewer might approach the object: as an artifact, artwork or something in between. The title introduces another layer of meaning. A “tronie” refers to a genre of 16th- and 17th-century Dutch painting centered on exaggerated expressions or exoticized faces, with Johannes Vermeer’s “Girl with a Pearl Earring” among the most famous examples. In an ironic reversal, Woolery’s “tronies” depict no identifiable figure at all. Instead, they shift attention away from the individual maker toward the collective cultural history and memory carried within the fabric and object themselves.

Turning directly to the right of Woolery’s work, another pair of abstract pieces continue this exploration of material history. Inkpa Mani’s “Muki: Guadalupe” and “Muki: Rosalia” incorporate a variety of materials, including soil, earth pigment, stone and fabric. The textured earth materials contrast with domestic calico quilting patterns, while a heavy basalt stone weighs upon the composition.

The materials stack vertically, guiding the viewer’s eye to work up and down in a rhythmic motion that prompts questions about what lies above and below — and why. Mani’s uniquely ephemeral compositions challenge the linearity of space and time, connecting the present moment with the long histories of humanity and the planet itself.

Not every work carries equal impact. Madeline Eldridge’s “Pillowpet” offers intriguing



ELLIE KOO / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The exhibition, on view through May 5 at 63 Audubon, features textiles and fabrics in works that combine artistic vision with historical awareness.



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tactile possibilities through its polyfill stuffing and bright colors, but it does not quite pack the same punch as other pieces in the exhibition. Its placement in the corner of the already small gallery space limits its effect; the slight claustrophobia of the setting prevents the tactile sensations from fully emerging. Given the exhibition’s emphasis on texture and material presence, a larger space might have allowed viewers to engage with the works from multiple distances and

indulge more fully in how viewing experiences shift with proximity.

The exhibition draws loose inspiration from the quilts of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. These quilts, made by women from that rural Alabama community in the Black Belt, function both as sites of tradition and history and as spaces for individual artistic experimentation, a way for quiltmakers to follow their creativity with pattern, shape and color.

“Soft Landing” successfully

channels this spirit, presenting works that combine artistic vision with historical awareness. In our contemporary moment, where art often leans towards technological novelty and mechanized production, the exhibition offers a firm reminder of the enduring power of craftsmanship and how even the most familiar materials can be continually reimagined.

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Beinecke exhibit looks at patriotism throughout American history

BY GEMARD GUERY
STAFF REPORTER

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library’s spring exhibit, “Unfurling the Flag: Reflections on American

Patriotism,” is now on display.

The exhibit is in commemoration of America’s semiquincentennial and explores how patriotism has changed in American history through the lens of Yale’s special collections.

“We really wanted to activate the Beinecke and Yale’s special collections materials to provide a reflective space for people to come in and think about the origins and applications of patriotism over the last 250 years,” Joshua Cochran, the

Beinecke’s curator for American history and diplomacy, said.

“Patriotism has evolved over time through conversations, through bloodshed, through protest, through dissent, and we wanted to highlight those moments,” he added.

According to a brochure available in the Beinecke, the exhibit reflects on how patriotism functions as a belief in American society and how different forms of media shape a collective national identity.

History professors David Blight and Beverly Gage ’94 — two of the three professors who taught the popular “America at 250: A History” DeVane lecture course in the fall — offered consultation for the exhibition’s script and made suggestions about sources available in Yale’s archives that the exhibit could use.

“I hope people get a sense that patriotism is never a static thing,” Blight said. “It’s always changing, and it can cause great triumph and great darkness.”

The exhibition uses various documents to explore patriotism’s place in various social movements throughout American history.

Topics in the exhibit include “Declaring Independence,” “Print Culture and the Rise of American Patriotism,” “Inclusion and Exclusion,” “Patriotism and the Military” and “Patriotism, Dissent and Justice.”

Among the pieces in the exhibition is one of 26 original copies of the Declaration of Independence printed on July 4, 1776. The typescript version of Frederick Douglass’ speech “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” is also in the exhibition.

Cochran said one of his favorite pieces is a drawing of a partially completed American flag by Saul Steinberg from the January 1976 issue of The New Yorker.

Cochran said he enjoyed getting to see the vast depth of the Beinecke’s collections.

“It really was an amazing way to look at the collections and work with a diverse set of perspectives on patriotism,” Cochran said.

David Jon Walker — the exhibition’s graphic designer, who designed how the cases would be laid out — echoed many of Cochran’s sentiments.

He said the exhibit presents a unique opportunity to reframe and rethink patriotism in the United States.

“I hope what visitors get from the documents in the show is that the past repeats itself,” Walker said. “We are having many of those same conversations about voting rights, civil rights and freedoms. I think people have lots to take away and draw parallels to.”

The exhibit will be on display at the library until Sept. 27.

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GEMARD GUERY / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The new exhibit, “Unfurling the Flag: Reflections on American Patriotism,” includes significant documents from Yale’s collections, including an original copy of the Declaration of Independence.