

Heather Watkins: *Waiting Room* at PDX CONTEMPORARY ART

by Sam Hopple

In *Waiting Room*, Heather Watkins presents a series of thirty-two, hand-stitched embroideries that line the walls of PDX CONTEMPORARY ART. Winding in a rhythmic, even pace around the gallery, these compositions comprise a body of textile works on linen that Watkins has been creating in various waiting rooms since 2015. With this knowledge, the gallery itself begins to feel both intimate and a bit uneasy. Yet, while the familiarity of anxiety-ridden medical environments comes to the surface, Watkins' embroideries are strangely soothing, poetically beautiful, and complex. They speak to how we experience the passage of time in moments of uncertainty through the tranquil and meditative act of mark making.



Heather Watkins, *Waiting Room (installation view)*, 2018. Courtesy PDX CONTEMPORARY ART.
Photo: Mario Gallucci.

Though diverse in both complexity and arrangement, each embroidery contains a single organic form in its center. The linen is reminiscent of gauze, and its edges are frayed and raw. Merriam Webster's second definition of "fray" is "to show signs of strain." The act of waiting, especially for a test result or procedure, is incredibly strenuous both mentally and physically, and the frayed edges add conceptual depth and empathy to the work. The works' vulnerability is taken further by the impression of the embroidery hoop left on each surface. Not

only does this trace make the pieces more sculptural, it also acts as a frame for the stitches, as if protecting and holding them in a safe space of their own—away from the fray.

In thinking about time-based work, video and performance come to mind, and Watkins' quiet labor reflects the passage of time in a similar way. The thread acts as a visual recording device that permanently captures a duration of time. In *Recording, March (no.1)*, 2018, for example, one can imagine Watkins' hand in circular motion mimicking the hands of a clock as the minutes slowly propel forward. Square compositions like *Recording, January (no. 1)*, 2016, shift in their gradient and emulate ticking through small tally-like marks. The build up of texture, the

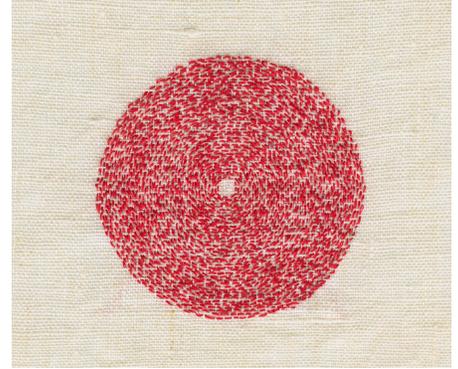
variation in distance between stitches, and the changes in color relay back to the apprehensiveness we experience in places notorious for boredom.

The works in *Waiting Room* also humbly pay homage to influential textile and fiber artists, speaking to the medium as a whole. The softness of Agnes Martin, the geometry of Anni Albers, and the playfulness of Sheila Hicks all come through. Other works such as *Recording, March (no. 1)* 2016 nod to Tantric painting, and possess forms that resemble germs, reminiscent of Los Angeles artist Yassi Mazandi's *Germ Sheets*.

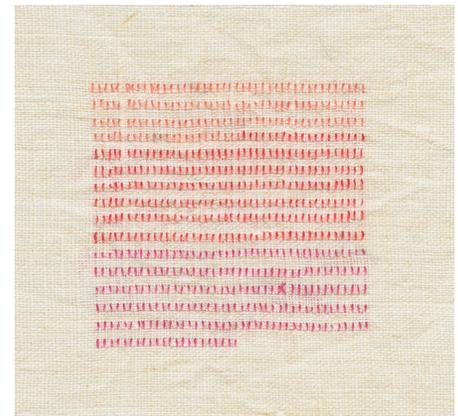
In *Waiting Room*, Watkins remains active in environments that are meant to be stationary. Her embroideries relate to the quiet patience of being a patient, and provide a certain comfort to those familiar with these spaces. With or without this context, the exhibition is full of contemplation and subtle breadth.

Sam Hopple is an independent curator, arts writer, and preparator currently based in Portland, Oregon. She is the co-founder of 60 Inch Center, a digital platform covering art happenings in the Portland area through thoughtful and critical writing. She also co-founded S/PLI/T Projects, a series of two-person exhibitions of emerging artists in established and alternative art venues and vacant spaces in Oregon. Hopple received her BFA in Art, Design and Media from Richmond University in London in 2012. Her interests lie in contemporary visual culture and investigating the relationship between space and object.

This essay was edited by Stephanie Snyder, and is among a series of writing commissioned by The Ford Family Foundation's Critics and Curators Program, with founding Editors Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College; and Sue Taylor, Associate Dean, College of the Arts and Professor of Art History, Portland State University. The commissioning institutions and their partners share a goal to strengthen the visual arts ecology in Oregon, and a key interest in increasing the volume of critical writing on art in our region.



Heather Watkins, Recording, March (no. 1), 2018 (detail), Thread, linen, 13.5 x 16.75 in. (image area 3 x 3 in.) Courtesy PDX CONTEMPORARY ART. Photo: Evan La Londe.



Heather Watkins, Recording, January (no. 1), 2016 (detail), Thread, linen, 14.5 x 16.25 in. (image area 2.75 x 2.625 in.) Courtesy PDX CONTEMPORARY ART. Photo: Evan La Londe.



Heather Watkins, Recording, March (no. 1), 2016, Thread, linen, 14 x 16 in. (image area 4.25 x 2.75 in.) Courtesy PDX CONTEMPORARY ART. Photo: Evan La Londe.