

PUNK CHENILLE

I was intrigued to learn that *chenille* means caterpillar in French: The plush pile of the fabric apparently resembles the fuzziness of a caterpillar. Prior to discovering this ento/etymological fact, I had few references for the material, including my grandparents' twin bedspreads in Puerto Rico and my other grandmother's bedcover in North Carolina. I now imagined trains of caterpillars inching along these long-lost, floral-patterned coverlets.

Aside from my fantasies of cute bugs on bedspreads, I would not have ever purchased chenille fabric for my own home. Apparently Elana Herzog's mother shared my antipathy to this material. While on antiquing trips in upstate New York with her family as a girl, Herzog recalls her mom being flummoxed by the draw these textiles had for her daughter.¹ In Herzog's work as an artist she has consistently returned to ubiquitous but sometimes passé fabrics such as chenille to explore the relationships between technological representations of nature, and the destruction of nature by human technologies.

Why did Herzog's mother dismiss these fabrics, and why did I? Herzog has speculated that the organicism of their motifs, their indifference to modernist geometries, and their association with traditionalist interior design might have been factors in her family's disregard for them.² This last complaint—the result of chenille's rather stodgy reputation—was likely at the root of my own aversion to—or, to use a less forceful word, *disinterest* in—chenille. Yet in Herzog's work the conservative associations this type of cloth possess are destabilized by her rather punk procedures of fraying, shredding, stapling, and tearing the fabrics, as well as by her sometimes wild juxtapositions of various prints within one work. Herzog's recent series of mural-size, wall-bound hangings feature chenille prominently, yet she winnows the material away to ghostly fragments. In *Dyptique #1* (2023), for example, she removed much of a rose-patterned chenille curtain, revealing sequins and incongruous fragments of fabrics such as chintz, geometric upholstery, tiki prints, and Kente cloth she had sewn behind the curtain's pale pink ground, while keeping the flowers' placements in the original pattern. As the viewer visually excavates each layer, the multifarious cultural associations of these textiles emerge as a map of Herzog's travels, with fabrics acquired at her various residencies and exhibitions in Miami, New Orleans, North Carolina, Norway, and Russia, among other sites. In other works, Herzog wraps logs with fabric, using a staple gun to trace the outlines of the patterns and then tearing away the outlines so that only shreds remain around the silver staples. At times she uses the same stapling technique to attach textiles to the walls, with the resulting works becoming hybridized objects, both mossy and metallic, inorganic and decomposed, the traces of the patterns showing both the persistence and the degradation of the floral patterns. In recent small-scale works she employs quilting as a kind of mad layering, using up to ten fabrics in designs such as concentric squares or slightly wobbly lozenges.

In her choice of chenille, Herzog's work points to a fascinating conjunction between the handmade and the industrially produced. Most of today's fabrics are machine made, as is chenille. But in 1920s and 1930s the bedspread-manufacturing industry pieced out patterned sheets to homes and small farms in northeastern Georgia, where they were then tufted by hand. The products were returned to be finished in factories, though small batches were sold along newly created interstate roads, creating a successful cottage industry even during the worst moments of the Depression.³ Though the appearance of chenille fabrics varies, during their heyday they were associated with a Colonial Revival style popular after the Civil War that had connotations of a romanticized Old South.⁴ Originally consisting of floral and Greek

Untitled (Peacock) (detail), 2006
Vintage chenille bedspread and
metal staples in painted drywall
Approximately 108 x 84 inches

Revival patterns in monochromatic white or ivory, the bedspread designs eventually became more bold and colorful in order to attract attention when strung up along roadsides. Bright bird patterns in chartreuse, fuchsia, and turquoise came to characterize the chenille look; the main street of Dalton, Georgia, the epicenter of the bedspread trade, came to be known as Peacock Alley.

Herzog's chenille works most often retain only their tufted portions, the "background" sheets those small-scale producers of northern Georgia would have originally received having been removed by the artist. An art like Herzog's is a form of neo-artisanal handicraft, giving fresh creative charge to earlier labor practices and design techniques that were frequently uncredited or undervalued.⁵ The association of fabric with craft, and the manner in which its production and use was and continues to be feminized, has relegated the majority of textiles to a sort of netherworld beyond the privilege of careful visual consideration that art is traditionally granted. Yet as Herzog has noted, much of the history of painting, examples of which often utilize cloths such as canvas or linen as their supports, has occupied itself with imaging fabrics.⁶ Think, to cite an exemplary case, of the lavish vines and floral details in the cashmere shawl of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Portrait of Madame Jacques-Louis Leblanc* (1823), which stand in contrast to the transparent silk tulle of the subject's delicate black

sleeves. Each brushstroke bears a dab of colored pigment, layered to lovingly replicate Madame's expensive clothing. In Herzog's case the process is initially reductive rather than accretive: the chenille roses are painstakingly eroded to their edges. Then a new form of accretion takes place, moving from back to front instead of from front to back in the manner of traditional painting, as layers are sewn in behind the chenille to create a new, patchworked terrain. While chenille is an appliqué added to a patterned sheet, Herzog remixes the already bold floral patterns with strata of supporting players, the flowers no longer acting as figures set off against plain backgrounds but joining a chorus of competing prints.

In contrast to delicate floral patterns such as calico, the chenille designs that have found their way into



Untitled (detail), 2023
Vintage chenille drape,
mixed textiles, and thread
91½ x 36 inches



so many of Herzog's works are at times wildly stylized—the roses are blown up many times larger than in real life, and the simplified outlines of the flowers are boldly reductive when repeated throughout large surfaces. The relationship between the natural and the artificial or human-designed is troubled. Chenille production in the United States coincided with Art Deco and machine-styled modernism, just as in Herzog's youth the rise of hippie culture was both a return to and idealization of nature that was synchronous with the post-World War II fascination with technological efficiency, cybernetics, and space travel. The production of chenilles started with machined sheets that were then tufted by hand, a process that Herzog inverts, instead manipulating materials by hand only to affix them via sewing machines and staple guns. Her work captures the contradictions of a fraught moment: nature is reproduced to decorate our most intimate spaces at the moment when technologies such as geoengineering have come to the fore, presuming that humans can author artificial ecologies to counter Earth's vulnerability in a time of climate destruction.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Conversation with the artist, May 5, 2023.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ashley Callahan, "Peacock Alley: Highway 41 and the Growth of the Chenille Bedspread Industry," in *Silk Roads, Other Roads: Proceedings of the 8th Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America*, Sept. 26–28, 2002, 376, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/376>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 For more on the feminization of craft and its exclusion from the considerations given to "art," see Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
- 6 Conversation with the artist, May 5, 2023.

Untitled (SC 2018-2), 2018
Cut log, metal staples, and textile
5 x 8 x 31 inches