

To all the girls that worked with me

...also to Ms King, Ms Yap, Ben, Michael,
Lee, Mark and Rickman

CAROLINA MAZZOLARI
EMOTIONAL FIELDS

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Contents

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MARINA WARNER Preface	9
CAROLINA MAZZOLARI Notes on Diary	25
HENRY MARTIN Human Trace: The Art of Carolina Mazzolari	77
ORTENSIA VISCONTI Interview with Carolina Mazzolari	99
ORTENSIA VISCONTI In the Studio	100





Preface

MARINA WARNER

During the siege of Troy, in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, Iris the messenger is sent by the gods to Helen of Troy and she finds her in her rooms:

... weaving a growing web, a dark red folding robe,
Working into the weft the endless bloody struggles
Stallion-breaking Trojans and Argives armed in bronze
Had suffered all for her at the god of battle's hands.¹

Iris calls Helen away, to come up to the ramparts of the city, and watch the fighting between her husband whom she left in Sparta and her lover Paris, who brought her to Troy and thereby caused the long war – which will end, we readers know, in the destruction of Troy. The tapestry Helen is making tells her own story, which is the same story that Homer is relating and the one we are reading: the text on our pages echoes the images on her loom. A *mise-en-abyme* of correspondences rise from Homer's lines, which depend on the root of the words for "text" and weaving – *textere* in Latin. Tapestry and embroidery are among the most ancient media – the loom and the kind of frames Carolina Mazzolari is using are the oldest technological instruments alongside the stone axe and the knapped flint knife. Alluding to the interconnectedness of text and textile, the Moroccan poet Abdel Khatibi notes that the word *bissat*, an alternative term for a carpet or rug in Arabic, also describes a poetic metre, and he emphasizes the role geometry plays in a range of media, especially the rhythmic geometry and repetition of curved forms and loops, stitches and knots, as found in Mazzolari's textile art works.² Women are the weavers in many cultures, though not exclusively so; they are also keepers of family and local memories, storytellers, singers, balladeers, conduits and repositories of a people's memories and dreams. Weaving, spinning, fulling cloth to separate and fluff the strands, are intertwined with exchanging experiences, making up songs and rhymes; the work is domestic, and women have always been responsible for such tasks – and excelled at them. Helen has

1. Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 3, lines 151-4, trans. Robert Fagles (New York, Penguin, 2003), p. 132.

2. Khatibi, Abdelkebir, "O tapete no imaginario do oriente", in Brahim Alaoui et al., *Espelhos do Paraíso Tapetes do mundo islâmico, séc. XV-XX* (Portugal: Fundacao Calouste Gulbenkian, 2005): 40-49: 40, 46.

her counterpart in the *Odyssey*: Penelope's fate is also bound up with the fabric she is making but in a different way from Helen's. She is weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, and famously unravels it every night to start again the next day in order to postpone deciding, after her husband Odysseus's ten-year absence, which of her suitors she will accept. The goddesses are likewise mistresses of woven texts, too: Aphrodite winds love charms into her magic belt and lends it to her sister goddesses when they feel they need to exert more power. Minerva, the Roman counterpart of Athena, challenges Arachne to a weaving context after Arachne, who is a mere mortal from Lydia has boasted that her skills at the loom surpass the goddess's. Arachne proves as good as her boast and outdoes Minerva: her pictures of the gods' "celestia crimina" (heavenly crimes) are more vivid and powerful than the goddess's attempts.³ But Arachne is punished for her hubris and turned into a spider. This is the creature that Louise Bourgeois took as the symbol of her own mother, who was a tapestry restorer, and she called her colossal sculptures of spiders, "Maman"; Bourgeois also identified with the animal very powerfully.

The female gendering of the practice continues down the centuries: whatever class they were born into, girls needed to know how to stitch, sew, and mend. Some of the only traces extant of little girls' writing are found in samplers, the exercises which taught children how to write and how to behave; these often poignant testaments to past lives repeat lessons in morality and proper feminine behaviour (not the same thing). For example, Jane Bailey in 1830 embroidered these words:

Seek to be good but aim not to be great,
A woman's noble station is retreat,
Her fairest virtues fly from public sight
Domestic worth still shuns too strong a light.⁴

In relation to these arts of scissors and needle, and the outlier history of women who, until recently, worked in the field, it is significant that when Richard Serra in 1967-8 compiled his "Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself",⁵ he came up with a truly exhilarating series of over a hundred movements and actions "...to open to mix to splash to knot to spill to droop... etc etc."; he does include "to cut to weave to knot to wrap to bind to weave", but does not broaden the spectrum further and think of verbs such as "to stitch to splice to spin to snip to ravel to tuck to

snip to pleat to braid..." These are words which Louise Bourgeois invoked in her art, and are central to the practice of Carolina Mazzolari, for whom Bourgeois is a profound model and inspiration.

Mazzolari has taken up this long, and often female, tradition in a spirit of sympathy – and struggle. She is creating an ambitious sequence of icono-texts, moving between abstraction and symbolic figuration; in these subtly layered, textured, dyed, knotted, and stitched artefacts, the artist is exploring deep inside herself, giving us moving insights into the shifting states of mind of a woman who is a daughter and a sister, who is now living a contemporary life in her home, in a different country from the one where she was born, married to another artist and mother of three young children. She wants to make art from the ramifications of this experience, to claim the conditions of a female life as the proper material for aesthetic ambition, not only in the textile works but in the paintings/objects composed, for example, from formula milk cartons and bread boards.

The language of emotions she is developing in the work connects with foremothers who were pioneers in declaring the materiality of the body and its processes: Carolee Schneemann (who as I write I learn has just died, at the age of 79), and Mary Kelly. However, while the tapestries and the mixed media works belong in this feminist story, the textile pieces also continue a different strand of the avant garde, engaging in the struggle to find a way of visualising inner states. Mazzolari's Emotional Field artefacts, such as "Love", "Hesitation" and "Matrix", are the materialisation of elusive states of mind; the figures of "Isis" and "Pan" and "The Great Mother" are textured apparitions – portraits – in this world of otherworldly beings.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, several path-breaking artists searched for ways to express such imponderable ideas in abstract forms and rhythm: Vassily Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910) proposed a symbolic language of stroke, shape and colour. He was influenced, as many in the avant garde were at the time, by the theosophy of C. W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant, and the "Thought Forms" which Leadbeater devised for his later book *Man Visible and Invisible* (1925), picturing "A Sudden Rush of Affection", "Intense Anger", or "Deep Depression".⁶ Arnold Schoenberg also attempted to convey states of mind and painted a series of hallucinatory self-portraits which represented his features, but transformed them with vivid, even lurid, oranges and greens to capture his despair or his exultation.⁷

6. C. W. Leadbeater, *Man Visible and Invisible* (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1971), Plates 11,13,18.

7. See for example, Schoenberg's "Red Gaze" in Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, & Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Plate 5, p. 132.

3. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), Book VI, lines 1-145:131.

4. See <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O355537/sampler-bailey-jane/> Accessed March 7 2019.

5. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/152793> Accessed March 7 2019.

Carolina Mazzolari's images take their place in this compelling quest for a visual expression of psychology, but they don't rely on a formal code or project a fixed formal lexicon. They communicate at a powerful, visceral level. Her invented symbolic forms work on us in ways that lie closer to music than to language in their power to convey feelings that lie beyond words, beyond stories.









"Medicine intake reaction", (study)
screen print onto shantung silk
20 x 25 cm