

AL MINER 21st Annual Critics' Residency Program



Maria
Karametou

MARIA KARAMETOU'S MATERNAL grandmother fled Turkey for Greece after her village was burned during World War I. She arrived at a Greek refugee camp with nothing but the skill of spinning and weaving silk that her village in Asia Minor was known for.

As a young girl in Athens, Karametou spent countless hours embroidering silk at her grandmother's knee. She has since traded in her embroiderer's needle for other materials, but it is with this kind of labor intensive process, informed by her personal history, that she observes the beauty myth and its rituals.

Like Janine Antoni, whose feminist works use exaggeration to expose the grotesque underbelly of what women do to make themselves beautiful, Karametou takes a close look at the weight of beautification. Although she eschews feminist content in her work, it is clearly informed by and deals with women's experience.

Her two bodies of work, woven wall hangings and multi-part sculptures, utilize one of the most universal signifiers of beauty and its accoutrements (hair and bobby pins) to address this singular issue. The real clues to understanding Karametou's work can be found in these materials themselves. They speak to the way we scrutinize our looks, performing intricate rituals in an attempt to attain an unrealistic standard of beauty.

The artist's richly patterned wall pieces are woven out of thousands of bobby pins. Their abstract designs and gold color strongly reference Byzantium's richly patterned textiles (specifically a type of precious-metal embroidery called "chrysokentema") while commenting on beauty.

For example, *ifanto*, (Greek for "weaving") employs bobby pins to obsessively 'draw' a pattern around a stripe of brown hair. She has chosen to work with dark, straight, shiny hair reminiscent of the individual strands of silk her grandmother wove. Upon closer inspection the viewer discovers that the hair is bound by a hairnet into its perfectly rectilinear form. This certainly serves a formal purpose from the point of abstract aesthetics but there is also something unnatural about how perfect it is. The hair in Karametou's work, as it turns out, is fake and thus a commentary on the artifice of beauty.

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Maria Karametou
(left)
Ifanto, 2006
bobby pins, hair
72" x 24"



(right)
Kallopismos (Beautification), 2004
hair, mirror, steel, pine cones, other
84" x 15" x 20"

Her sculptural works examine ritual, forming altars with the collected artifacts of beautification. In *Magic*, a small pedestal supports a gathering of objects: a ball of hair with bobby pins sticking out of it, a printed block of wax, and a mirror—all sized to fit in the palm of your hand. The hairball seems almost dangerous. It represents the burden and pain created by unrealistic beauty standards that all people, but women especially, must carry. The block is imprinted with the image of a figure and more hair is stuck into it referencing the painful process of waxing body hair. The mirror refers to the constant self-consciousness of people who fear they are not measuring up.

In *Kallopismos (Beautification)*, a basin and mirror rest on a small table. In front of the table a pair of hollow plaster feet hold pinecones and above the table is hung a long ponytail of dark hair. The ritualistic nature and importance of icons in Karametou's Greek Orthodox heritage serves as an undercurrent in this piece, which examines the universality of such rituals. The pinecones in the feet represent the passage of time, reiterating that for generations people have stood before mirrors as we do today. Not only did the artist grow up with her grandmother's heritage, she did so in Athens amidst sculptures that immortalize ancient beauty. Hairless Adonis figures served as a constant reminder that beauty standards and the ways we attempt to achieve them are nothing new. With the hair at the top and feet at the bottom, all in human scale, the components of this piece read as a singular figure, not unlike the human scale of the palm sized objects of *Magic*. The fact that the feet are pointed towards us, and not towards the wall, makes this piece especially confrontational. We are being confronted with the fact that human beings cannot escape the drive towards physical perfection.

The irony is that all of these works, the bobby pin weavings especially, are intentionally beautiful. Karametou reminds us that the women of the past, like her grandmother, were also held hostage by the beauty standards of their time. While they were relegated to crafts instead of careers the results are, as we are always striving to be, stunning. They still work aesthetically as Maria Karametou's works do now.

Repetition is Not a Sign of Stupidity

DING REN

Women artists have a history of using repetition in their work to investigate the outcome of combining tedious gestures with an obsessive array of materials. For example, Anne Hamilton's performances incorporate repetitive mark-making, Janine Antoni ritualistically licks and gnaws at slabs of chocolate, and photographer Sandy Skoglund creates fanatically detailed environments by gluing snack food to her subjects. These artists, along with their younger contemporary counterparts, create intricate sculptures and paintings that directly address feminist history, personal identity, and cultural backgrounds to examine the conditions and expectations evident in society.

A recurring gesture can be as simple as twisting a piece of newspaper over and over again. For Maren Hassinger, this twisting motion is a predominant part of her installation works and is innate to her life as well. After giving birth, she became aware of such twisted formations as the bends in her umbilical cord, and began associating her simple twisting gestures with that of a maternal figure worrying about her child. The twisting of newspapers thus became foremost a rhythmic gesture that could calm her when she was distraught. Another reason for her focus on repeated knotting is her racial background. The hair of an African American woman is historically shown braided, dread-locked, or wrapped as a means of control. Keeping one's hair tame and regimented harkens back to Hassinger's restricted childhood, when she was not allowed to dance or truly express herself as she is now able to through her art. The act of hair braiding is mimicked when Hassinger twists countless newspaper shreds. Her large newspaper installations confront race and class status as they relate to stereotyped images of women's hair. Twisting newspaper repetitively is also a means for Hassinger to use a subtle gesture to transform literal written culture, in this case the *New York Times*, into an ephemeral, poetic form.

Unlike Hassinger, who focuses on gesture in her artwork, Maria Karametou concentrates on making sculptures that incorporate repeated synthetic objects—bobby pins and hair. By creating these obsessive sculptures,

Karametou is referring directly to her Greek background, where flawless images of gods and goddesses populate historic beauty ideals. Her bobby pin pieces align multiple rows of pins, all in the same color, to form a large grid, evocative of textiles created in the Byzantine era. Karametou deals exclusively with Caucasian hair accessories—using only brunette colored pins and hair. This is a means to mirror media's portrayal of Westernized beauty as the predominant social and cultural influence. These material objects that only enhance beauty bring up the ever-shifting image women have of their bodies as it relates to a pre-conceived Westernized model. Every bobby pin she tediously glues down and every strand of hair she carefully places become a ritualistic metaphor for every woman who repeatedly brushes or pins her hair on a daily basis. Thus, not only does her use of hair materials relate to beauty rituals that are passed down from older generations and the media, her use of repeated materials is a means to reveal the very controlled and idealized vision of beauty that is evident in many constructs of society.

Mary Walker and Breon Gilleran both have a background in sculpting with solid 3D materials, but incorporate textiles as supplementary materials into their work. Walker applies paint to wallpaper and upholstery, then stamps the wet paint onto her canvases. She combines these stamped layers of paint with grids, flower stencils, block letters, and squares, forming final compositions that resemble rich textural fabrics inspired by nature. Gilleran embroiders silk thread on linen in the shape of shadows from her steel sculptures. The final pieces resemble handkerchiefs, infused with a delicate DNA-helix-like pattern. Both women turn to small repeated gestures, Walker stamping and Gilleran stitching, because of their accessibility. The daily-ness of handling textiles and embroidery needles relates to a historical image of women performing household tasks. Instead of falling prey to feminine stereotypes, however, Walker uses repeated stamping to infuse her paintings with patterns that mimic the natural environment while Gilleran's repeated stitching projects are another medium for documenting

the organic shadows of her sculptures. Thus, although Walker and Gilleran both retain ritualistic domestic qualities while working with textiles, they also both consider the slow process of stamping and embroidering a calming alternative to arranging heavy building materials and forging steel rods.

All four artists have different approaches to using repetition in their work, but the unifying point in all their pieces lies in the consideration of social commentary and personal identities, especially in connection to contemporary female experience. Hassinger repeats the gesture of twisting a strip of newspaper, alluding to her maternal anxieties. Karametou repeatedly uses bobby pins and fake hair strands to create labor intensive sculptures commenting on stereotypical notions of beauty. Walker and Gilleran turn to working with textiles as a peaceful transition from handling 3D objects. By starting out small and using simple, repeated gestures, Hassinger, Karametou, Walker and Gilleran are able to twist, glue, stamp, and stitch objects in a way that produces cultural significance on a larger scale.

21st Annual Critics in Residence



Eleanor Heartney is a Contributing Editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress* and received the College Art Association's *Frank Jewett Mather Award* for distinction in art criticism in 1992. Her books include: *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads* (1997), *Postmodernism* (2001), *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2004), and *Defending Complexity: Art, Politics and the New World Order* (2006). Heartney is currently working on a

survey of contemporary art from the 1980s to the present, which will be published by Phaidon this year. Since 2003, she has been President of AICA-USA, the American section of the International Art Critics Association.



Irving Sandler has been called the premiere art critic of our time, having maintained a fervent engagement with contemporary artists and a keen understanding of the inner workings of the art world for more than fifty years.

Sandler began taking notes in 1954 of conversations with artists during informal gatherings at 'the Club,' the Cedar Street Tavern, and in artists' studios in New York. Soon after, he became the Director of the Tanager Gallery, the

Program Chair for the Artists' Club, and a reviewer for *Art News* and *Art International*, establishing two roles that he would continue for the rest of his career: supporter of emergent artist groups, and advocate-critic. A third role, that of professor, emerged in the 1960s.

In 1972 Sandler organized Artist's Space, one of the first alternative exhibition spaces for young artists in New York. Among those that got their start there were Laurie Anderson, Cindy Sherman, Nan Goldin, and Chuck Close.

A selection of Sandler's books include: *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (1970); *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties* (1978); *American Art of the 1960s* (1988); and *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (1996). His most recent book, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir*, was published in 2004. In addition, Sandler has written monographs on individual artists, including Alex Katz and Mark Di Suvero.

Sandler lives in New York with his wife, Lucy Freeman.