

# Surface Design

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**pushing the edge**





## in review

Edinburgh, Scotland

### Nick Sargent Firth Gallery

#### Tucked away in Old City Edinburgh is the

Firth Gallery. In this cozy two-room space I had the occasion to see the new work of Nick Sargent and was struck by its simplicity and elegant intelligence. The pieces are at once painted embroideries and embroidered paintings. They possess the minimalism and sensitivity of Agnes Martin coupled with a poetic understanding of the relationship between paint, canvas, and textile techniques. While in the company of Louise Bourgeois' mixograph *Crochet Series* in their attention to line quality and reference to textile structures, they are distinct in their subtlety of color and devotion to materiality.

More often than not, the titles use the language of tapestry as synecdoche: *Selvedge*, *Slit*, *Curve*. In each of these pieces Sargent uses broad satin stitches to recreate diagrams of tapestry processes across a diptych. In *Selvedge*, careful attention to depicting the structure of a selvedge yields warp threads that wrap around the edge of the stretched canvas and the weft threads that possess a continuity of line akin to Celtic knots.

*Selvedges* give cloth a sense of boundary, edginess, perhaps even wholeness. The idea of wholeness is asserted through the two stretched canvases that have been sutured together to form one. They are evocative in their minimalism. Do they make reference to mitosis, one being split into two? Or synthesis, two that become unified as one? In either case, Sargent's close study of cloth reveals something about the human condition just as material culture has taught us that in the cloth of a culture one finds the culture.

Sargent's process of combining oil, embroidery, canvas and sizing reveals a distinct sensitivity to surface and substance. We are all familiar with the vocabulary of sized and primed canvas. This work subverts that familiarity. It slips a layer of stitching between the naked cotton canvas and its protective prime coat. Sargent gives texture to the canvas with deftly executed embroidery stitches before giving it a skin of primer and gesso and

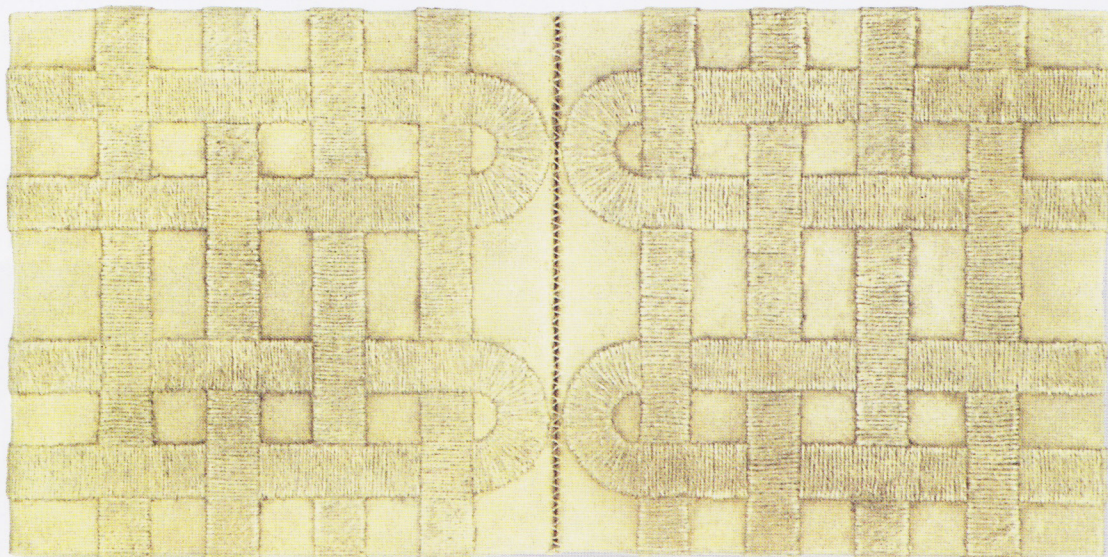
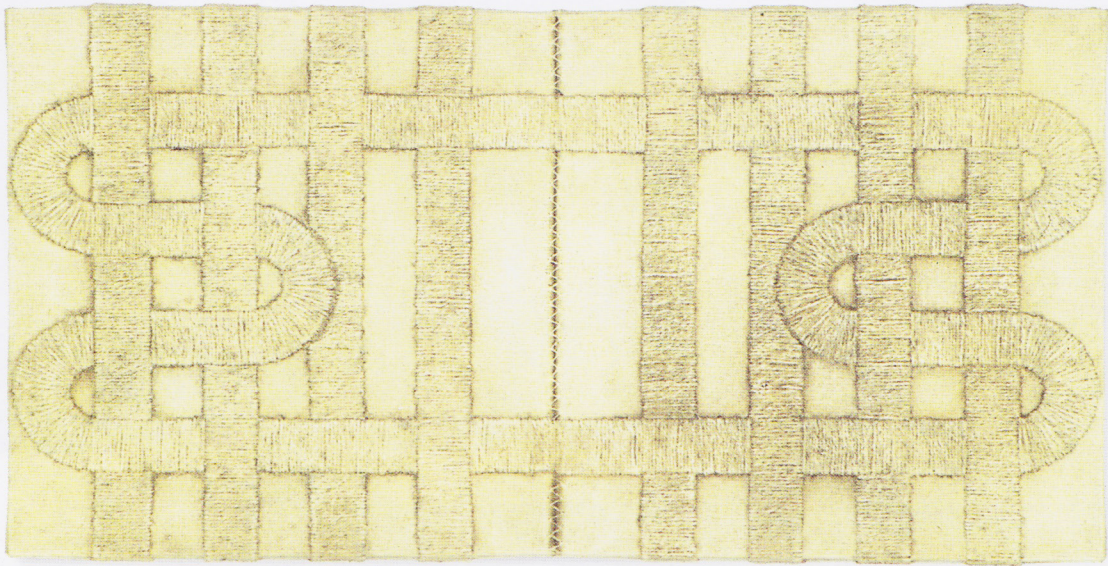
massaging it with oil paint. The canvas is acknowledged as cloth before it is prepared for painting. Sargent's attention to materiality is rare among most painters.

This simple act is made poignant when one considers the ongoing debate on the definitions of fiber art, fine art, and textile art that so often graces the pages of magazines in the field. What defines an artwork done on cloth as painting, versus a textile? Is it the stretcher bars? Certainly, Sam Gilliam debunked this notion in the 1960s when he freed his canvases from the stretcher bars. Is it simply in the materials? If gesso is included, then does that make it a painting? If embroidery is included, then is the work defined as fiber art? We know it cannot be that simple. The questions are endless but one answer is clear: some artwork resides in a gray area that keeps the debate lively. Sargent's work blurs the lines of distinction—a welcome relief to those of us who enjoy conversations about process and content that allow for inclusive definitions.

How does Sargent's work come to bridge the painting and fiber art arenas so easily? The artist has functioned in many artistic worlds. His experiences have siphoned through him to create a naturally symbiotic body of work. Sargent has a Masters of Fine Arts degree in Painting from the University of Dundee. He also worked for almost fifteen years as a theater designer and has taught courses in theater costume at the university level. His ingenuity is a result of deconstructing the processes of making cloth and making a painting and shuffling the deck to arrive at a new place.

I encountered the artist at a small rug shop filled with dazzling kilims, Persians, and the like. The air was heavy with wool. This was not a chance meeting, since Sargent is especially fond of Turkoman rugs and has been a collector of Afghan textiles. Wool is the material of choice for Sargent's embroidery, in part, the artist reveals, because "I am very taken with 17th century crewel work. I like the





NICK SARGENT *Selvedge* Cloth, oil, embroidery, 255 x 515 x 50cm.

BOTTOM: Nick Sargent *Slit* Cloth, oil, embroidery, 255 x 515 x 50cm.

three-dimensional relief afforded by its employment." Using wool also tethers the artist to a legacy of British craft in which he takes pride. His research as a costume designer reveals more insights about his process. Inspiration for his technique derives from early armor made from wool drenched in sizing. His primed canvas and wool stitching are like the armor. Notions of the soft femininity of embroidery are toughened with sizing. Sargent refers to his experiments inspired by the hardened cloth armor as so tough they could "repel an arrow and

probably take the fun out of an axe." When the artist arrived at his process he says, "The distinction between art and design was at once becoming more defined and more blurred: I had entered into a dialogue with my own history and my previous field of practice."

—Reviewer Sonya Clark is an artist and Associate Professor of Textile Design at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.