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Embracing Process
A weaver collaborates with
the urban fabric
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Sculptures out in Space

SLOW, REPETITIVE AND PHYSICALLY DEMANDING ARE ALL TERMS TO DESCRIBE THE PRODUCTION OF A HAND-MADE TEXTILE. FOR CANADIAN ARTIST JOLIE BIRD, THESE ASPECTS OF PROCESS ARE AS IMPORTANT TO HER WORK AS THE THREADS SHE WEAVES WITH.

Rather than simply enduring repetition and labour, the artist elevates both in her textile-based praxis. Incorporating a diverse range of textile-based techniques, Bird weaves, wraps and coils pieces that speak to time and the process of their construction. Contemplation, care and a refined sense of material are foregrounded in this work. In her 2020 exhibition *The Discipline of Constructing* Bird displayed the tools of weaving alongside hand woven hangings and carefully balanced sculptures made from piled lengths of handmade cord and rope. The artist wove in the exhibit space and offered workshops in rope making. This active engagement with process within the exhibition allowed participants to consider how material and form come together. Bird's refined sense of craft and material tectonics reveal her fluency in cloth and its potential to hold meaning.

Recently, the artist has been challenged to apply this tactile literacy in a unique public art collaboration in Mohkinstsis (Calgary), Alberta, Canada. Designer Gordon Skilling approached Bird in 2021 with an idea for a public artwork based on a metaphor for the "urban fabric" and the resilience of communities and social life as the city emerged from the global pandemic. *Novus Textura* (literally "new fabric") was designed to interact with existing structures in the city's downtown core, specifically a series of tree-like metal sculptures and an elevated pedestrian walkway. The walkways are a common architectural fixture, weaving back and forth across city streets and providing warm connections between buildings in the winter months. It is significant for both the weaver and designer that the sculpture interacts with these existing components of the urban landscape. In this way the work references historic innovations and local resil-

ience while also inspiring "... the weaving of a vibrant and prosperous urban fabric of the future." Perhaps most exciting for Jolie Bird was the fact that the massive scale of the weaving presented an array of conceptual and technical challenges – along with a good deal of physically demanding labour to produce. Together, Skilling and Bird devised an arrangement of two oversized pop-art sculptures – a weaving shuttle and spool of thread – to be placed at either end of a pedestrian street between high-rise buildings. The two familiar weaving objects are connected by "threads" – actually very strong and colourful polypropylene strapping – that pass from the massive cone of yarn upwards into the existing tree-like sculptures. (These will remind a weaver of the reed in their loom or even a warping paddle.) The strands then travel beneath the elevated pedestrian walkway where they are woven into an undulating twill patterned cloth in colours inspired by city signage and crossing lights. The criss-crossing, multidirectional arrows embedded in the twill evoke the flow of pedestrian traffic both beneath and within the walkway. Threads emerge from the other side of the cloth where they again ascend to the canopy before winding onto a boat shuttle the size of a canoe.

While the shuttle and cone of yarn were fabricated industrially by local firm Carvel Creative, the massive 5.5 x 11 metre cloth mounted beneath the walkway was woven in three panels by Jolie in her home studio. Owing to the scale of this project, a large, nearly three-metre beam was built and suspended in the living room of the artist's 100 year-old home near the University where she works as a textile studio technician. Strapping for the warp was suspended from the beam and weaving proceeded downwards as it would on

a bronze-age vertical loom. The colourful coils of material spread out along the floor providing an interesting landscape for Jolie's dog Jet – all too pleased to have his person weaving at home. The design of the weaving was inspired by traditional drafts from Marguerite Porter Davison's *A Handweavers Pattern Book*. Scaling up and recontextualizing these patterns intended for domestic linens, the weaver personalizes the broader urbanist concept for the work. The intimacy of hand weaving embeds an intangible quality of care to the work. Following her twill draft carefully, Bird wove each row of strapping into the warp before securing it with firm hand-stitching at every intersection. This was necessary to prevent sagging of the suspended cloth when it is mounted horizontally beneath the walkway. After weaving, the cloth was lashed by hand over a large mesh framework before securing it to the underside of the pedestrian walkway.

Novus textura is located in the centre of Mohkinstsis, a city facing unprecedented economic changes, not only due to the global pandemic but also the seismic shifts affecting a local economy historically centered on oil and gas extraction. Increasingly, the city is looking to the tech industry, universities and even the arts to diversify and enliven its downtown core. At such a time, the presence of *Novus textura* in the urban landscape offers generative metaphors for connection, growth and care for community that are so often enmeshed with cloth itself. The public artwork will be installed for two years as a piece of literal urban fabric reminding folks of their connections to one another and our capacity for community building and resilience in a time of great change.

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