

The New York Times

A Textile Artist Weaves Her Way

Venues across the U.S. and beyond are giving Liz Collins, who first found fame as a fashion designer, the art-world recognition that had eluded her.

Laura van Straaten

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During an art residency last year in a former castle in the Umbrian countryside, the textile artist Liz Collins sat in her temporary studio stitching a needlepoint. She was surrounded by long bulletin boards, on which she had tacked dozens of her gem-colored watercolor works and ink drawings, along with images of shapes that inspire her. On her worktable lay swatches of the silk and Lurex she would soon use to render her paintings and drawings into textiles.

Though American, Collins, 55, has made Italy a habit for more than a decade. Her time in the residency program at Civitella Ranieri came amid weeks of traveling among the various high-end textile mills around Lake Como, where she routinely commissions small runs of intricate weaving made to her specifications. She later transforms those textiles in her Brooklyn studio, scissoring and pulling artfully at loose threads to shape a new creation.

“She deconstructs it, and ends up with something yet more complex and amazing,” explained Lynne Cooke, a senior curator for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., who organized the group exhibition “Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction” that opened last month (through July 28) at the museum whose lawn was a teenage



Liz Collins at her Brooklyn studio. “The successes that are happening now are replacing some of the frustrations I felt,” she said. Credit: Amir Hamja/The New York Times



Collins's “Rainbow Mountains Moon,” on display in the central pavilion of the Giardini at the Venice Biennale. Credit: The artist and CANDICE MADEY, New York; Photo by Patty van den Elshout

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hangout for Collins while growing up in suburban Virginia.

Cooke's description helps explain how Collins made "Heartbeat" (2019) — the most recent of six creations that span her career and will be among the 160 works by more than 50 artists at the exhibition.

"It's one of the many goals of this show to bring to visibility certain artists who I think have been overlooked," Cooke said. And she counts Collins among them. Indeed, "Woven Histories" positions the artist alongside Anni Albers, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Rosemarie Trockel, Sheila Hicks, Sonia Delaunay — all known for their textiles — as well as stars of abstraction in other media like Kandinsky, Klee and Yayoi Kusama.

This month Collins is back in Italy to debut new work at the Venice Biennale (through Nov. 24). It is a milestone for anyone but especially for Collins, a queer, feminist artist who has felt frustrated at times by finding closed doors in the art world after quickly finding success designing fashion at the turn of our century.

In Venice, Collins has two works on view in the main exhibition, curated by Adriano Pedrosa, the first biennale curator to identify openly as queer. His chosen theme for the biennale, "Foreigners Everywhere," focuses on artists from groups historically marginalized by the art world or persecuted by society, and includes Collins among many queer artists.

In the central pavilion of the Giardini, Collins's "Rainbow Mountains Moon" and "Rainbow Mountains Weather" depict an abstract cosmic landscape. At more than 10 by 16 feet apiece, they nod to a kind of intricate and labor-intensive tapestry that for centuries could only be made "thread by thread," Collins said. She created the



"Slanted" (2023). Collins signed last month with CANDICE MADEY on the Lower East Side of Manhattan; that gallery will soon stage a solo show of her work, opening June 20. Credit: Liz Collins, via CANDICE MADEY; Photo by Amir Hamja/The New York Times

two loosely layered jacquard wall-works at the TextielLab in Tilburg, the Netherlands, on a van-size mechanized loom.

The biennale follows a presentation at Galleria Rossana Orlandi during Milan Design Week of Collins's most recent collaboration with Sunbrella that upcycles the American textile company's industrial selvage: an immersive art installation alongside a line of totes, pillows and throws. She

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keeps a foot in such commercial work; steps from her Brooklyn studio, umbrellas she designed with Sunbrella adorn cafe tables in a public space below the Manhattan Bridge.

At the National Gallery, a standout of “Woven Histories” is “Pride Dress” (2003). Alarmed by the fervent patriotism around the American invasion of Iraq, Collins created the gown with the celebrated fashion designer Gary Graham as part of a never-completed series on the seven deadly sins. The gown of worn-out American flags sutured together takes on new meaning 20 years later, centered as it is in the gallery devoted to “Community and the Politics of Identity.”

“What interested me was how it could be reread in terms of the gender wars, which are roiling in this country,” Cooke said. It “speaks very forcefully and eloquently to the rending of the social fabric,” she added, and yet, because of the way the flags are knit-grafted together, “I see it as an act of reparation.”

The museum has welcomed Collins as a hometown hero with a short film about her on its website. “Woven Histories” travels next April to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where Collins has lived for more than a decade, after its run starting in November at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (The show debuted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art last fall. A book based on “Woven Histories” was named one of the best art books of last year by Holland Cotter of The New York Times.)

The MoMA presentation of “Woven Histories” will run concurrent with a solo midcareer retrospective in yet another formative place for the artist, at the museum of the Rhode Island School of Design. Collins was a faculty member at RISD after earning both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in textiles. She said that



“Pride Dress” (2003). Collins created the gown with the celebrated fashion designer Gary Graham as part of a never-completed series on the seven deadly sins. Credit: Liz Collins & Gary Graham; photo by Joe Kramm

exhibition will open in July 2025 and is expected to travel. She anticipates RISD will showcase garments that earned her ink in the fashion trades and glossies of the late 1990s and have become collectors’ items. It may also feature textiles she is making as the first artist-in-residence at LongHouse Reserve, the arts center established in East Hampton, N.Y., by the renowned textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen, who died in 2020.

“The successes that are happening now are replacing some of the frustrations I felt,” Collins acknowledged. Her work has been singled out many times in art reviews of group shows, including for her installation in the 2017 exhibition “Trigger” at New York’s New Museum. But the

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artist had been working without gallery representation and selling work through one-off shows and at fairs like the Spring/Break Art Show that don't require it, until she signed last month with the Candice Madey gallery on New York's Lower East Side. That gallery will stage a solo show of work by Collins opening June 20 (though Aug. 2), which will include smaller versions of her biennale tapestries.

The artist is outspoken about how hard it is for those who are past the age of prodigy and too impatient for the cliché narrative of 80-and-still-at-it. Frankly, she said, when it comes to being middle-aged, for women especially, "there is a bias." She does not want to wait until she is "decrepit" and has to "to be carried around by my assistant" — or worse, for the posthumous discovery.

Until the dissolution of borders between craft and fine art in recent years, there have not been "many people that really understand what I do," she said. But, she said, "I've been working for 30 years so I have a lot to say!"

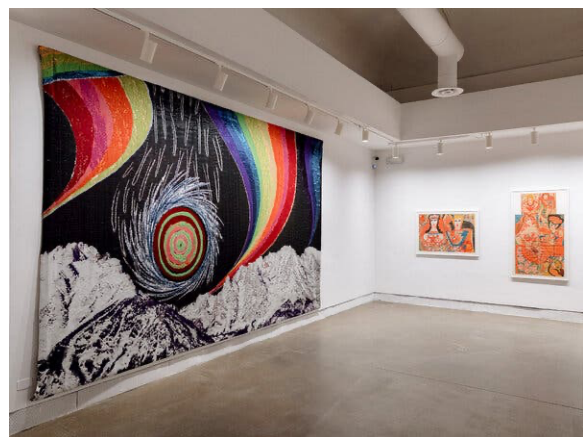
What she has to say includes personal insight on craft as a means to heal trauma.

"Very early on, things really exploded and fell apart in my world," she said, recalling emotional experiences that "make my work what it is." From 4 years old, she was raised as the youngest of three children by a single mother when her parents divorced. Her father, a Navy captain, moved away from the family. The suicide of a teenage brother destabilized the family anew.

Back in her makeshift studio in Italy, overlooking the verdant courtyard of a castle turned creative paradise, she pointed to the bulletin board above her. On it she had pinned a recent aerial photo of



"Heartbeat" (2019) and "Walking Wounded" (2011), two of Collins's pieces that are now on display at the National Gallery of Art. Credit: Liz Collins and RISD Museum, Providence; Photo by Joe Kramm



Collins's "Rainbow Mountains Weather," left, on view at the Venice Biennale. Credit: La Biennale di Venezia

one of the massive sinkholes that — thanks to the climate crisis — now pockmark our planet.

That swirl of a sinkhole, which can look happily cartoonish in the bright hues in which she renders its shape, is a motif that appears often in her work. "As a child, the bottom dropped out," she said. Subsequently, she is obsessed with rupture: "The voids, the black holes, the sinkhole."

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Her work is not just personal; it's political, a response to "obliteration, horror, suffering," as she put it, caused by war or other human-made crises.

It is that duality that appeals to Collins.

"Alongside the sorrow and horror and terror and all of the upset is total exquisite elation and joy," she said. "I'm interested in those states of mind and having visual language that conveys those states."

"Even though things can be awful," she said, looking at the riot of color all around her, she doesn't ever forget "the euphoria of being alive."

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