

IN REVIEW

Providence, Rhode Island

Reviewed by Natalie Coletta

Mo Kelman Chazan Gallery

The body of work by Mo Kelman shown with drawings by Luis Alonso at Chazan Gallery (April 2010) was an *oeuvre* exploring that which is tentative, stretched, and just about at the breaking point, yet arriving at the full reaches of beautiful. Kelman's "skins" of black shibori-dyed silk are stretched and pulled between wire armatures or bent bamboo structures. These works were small, ordered worlds, assimilating what we witness in nature and man-made housings. The nine pieces mounted on the wall or placed on pedestals were like webbed, stilled animations of things familiar or parts of something known, but firmly abstracted; their shapes were beautiful and empty, flayed and longing.

Kelman is a professor of textile design and 3-D media at the Community College of Rhode Island. Her work is a refined study in conceptual design, is bound to her long history in fiber arts. Kelman's "sewn constructions" persistently exhibit the notion of form defined by elements of structural support. What makes up the building parts of form—e.g., the bones of a mammal—are exposed as

spines and joints, ribs and appendages that are measured and repeated in calculated rhythms. These are based on extended mathematical study, which is Kelman's first step in creating a piece. Kelman first works on paper, designing shapes from formulas and numeric equations. For example, in *Bestia*, she wrote out the math required for repetition of the ring armature in order to fit and form the stitched tube shape of the fabric. Adjustments such as tightening the armature occur during process. Talking back and forth among the materials, the math, and the conceptual base stems from Kelman's observations of architecture and engineering.

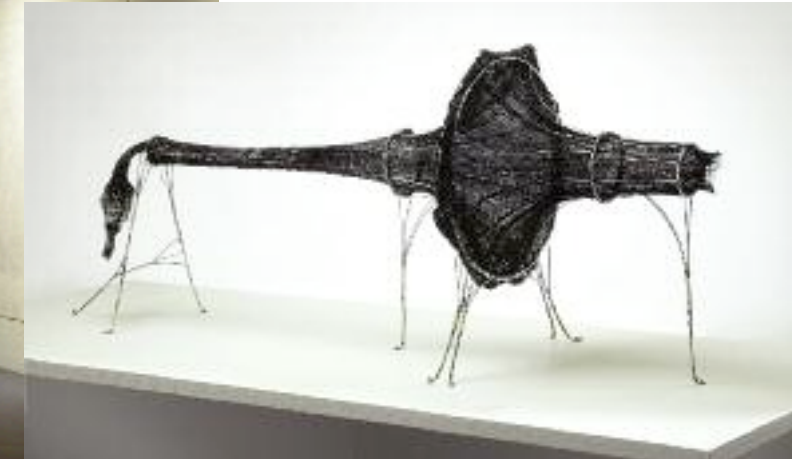
The building process—how parts result in forms or define space—impressed Kelman as a child who often visited job sites with her father, a general contractor in Cleveland, Ohio. This led to her interest in the principles inherent in modern architecture, particularly that of designers such as Frei Otto and Vladimir Shukhov. The definition of architecture as space wrapped in a stretched membrane (resulting in curved natural forms) is a primary influence on Kelman's work.

The silk that acts as screen, barrier, window, or shadow is pulled over or into the armature, stretched at the side, folded in on itself, or occasionally draped, depending on the piece; rippling like water, it is sensuous, steely, translucent. Kelman's labor-intensive shibori stitches, which force the fabric into a tight vertical cord resistant to dye, are evident in pin holes that track the process. When the white silk is dyed black, the stitched resist produces the white and gray streaks that swim across each

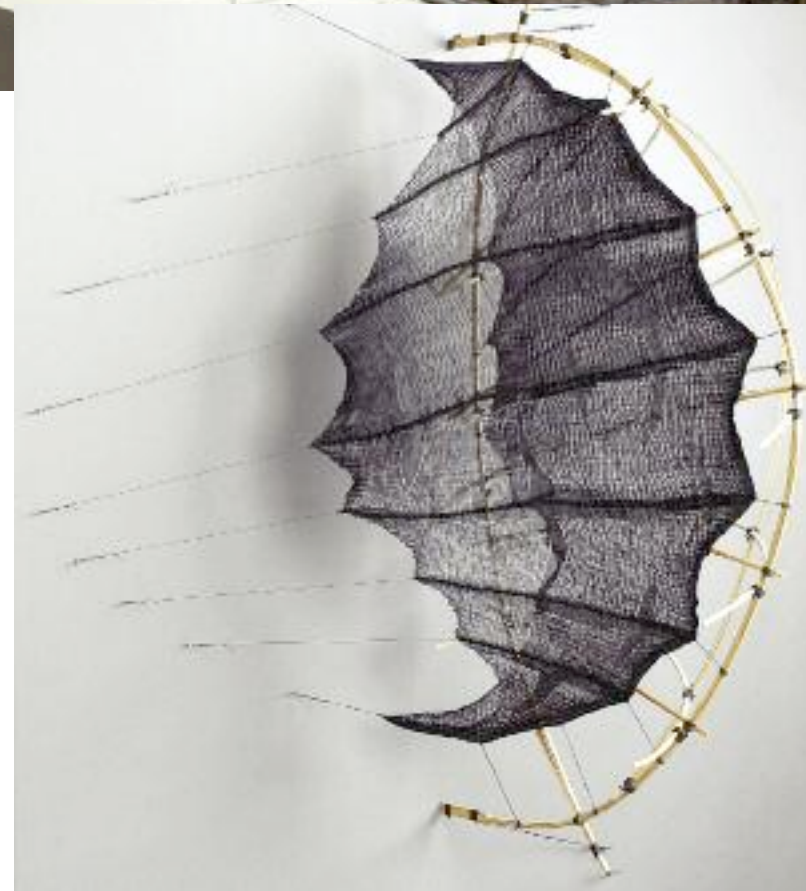


piece like tiny rivulets. Through a thermoplastic heat-setting dyeing process, the thin silk, once a slippery white, is transformed into a filmy elastic fabric. Silk conjures up notions of the sensuous, but the post-shibori plasticity of Kelman's fabric emulates the warmth and give of skin. Seen through streams of dye, the lashed joints of bamboo suggest hushed truths of how things come together and work.

The elegantly pulled corners and edges of the membrane are tense to the point of nearly tearing. The skin's function of covering is reversed; it serves as a separate splayed part pinned up with exaggerated lengths of carefully calculated thread. As Kelman stated in an interview: "The place of stasis and intention in and of itself exudes vulnerability. The whole form collapses if a single point is



LEFT: Installation, Chazan Gallery
ABOVE: Mo KELMAN *Bestia* Sewn construction, shibori resist-dyed and shaped silk, wire construction, cotton cord, screws, 36" X 11" X 14"; 2010.
LEFT BOTTOM: Mo KELMAN *Penumbra* Sewn construction, shibori resist-dyed and shaped silk, bamboo construction, cotton cord, nails, 35" x 29" x 17"; 2008.



broken. It's what life is all about, we're all at an equilibrium, but vulnerable."

Mo Kelman notices lines of shift in life—e.g., the edge of a snow melt inspired *Selfsame*. Pausing to see the change in form and flux as it happens in something unnoticed is anarchistic at this point in history when brevity and productivity are rewarded. Kelman herself has observed that in the tedium of stitching shibori, figuring math, and tying joints, the act of taking the time to craft artwork "feels like a rebellious process."

Kelman's exhibition consisted of small rebellions expressed in grandiose miniature structures, plasticized silks, recorded flashes of moonlight, images of lashed and strapped-down living organisms. We the viewers are made to sit on edge with breath held, trusting a pin will not dislodge, breaking the equilibrium so carefully placed.

—Natalie Coletta is Professor of Art History at the Community College of Rhode Island (Warwick Campus).