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# Mark Van Proyen on Julia Couzens

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Textile Tag # 60 2020, paper, advertisement, textile, thread, 9.25 x 10.75"

This exhibition of 103 collage works by Julia Couzens is wickedly hilarious and deviously smart.

Collectively titled *Textile Tags* (dating from 2017 to 2021), this series starts with an assortment of full-page ads

from glossy art magazines, auction catalogs (and in one instance, The New York Times), some of which are several decades old. To these culturally coded pre constructions, Couzens adds “tags” — an array of irreverent fabric amendments that operate in a similar way to how street artists often tag a billboard advert to contest or reclaim symbolic territory. At some junctures, these are quite subtle, as in *Textile Tag #122* (2021), where a tightly stitched zig-zag pattern of yellow thread crests the upper edge of a Richard Serra Arc sculpture. In other cases, they aggressively reface most of the original image as seen in *Textile Tag #19*, which obliterates the image of an Ellsworth Kelly painting with a swath of red fabric. In every case, the double entendre of tagging is in the forefront—at once marking imaginary territory in public space and also affixing a tag to a garment indicating (white) washing instructions and the allegedly value-added proposition of a designer’s or manufacturer’s provenance.

Couzens is keenly sensitive to the layered meanings inherent in the original adverts, which even today, look like overproduced exercises in a bygone nostalgia. All hark to that sad moment when the artworld was first being transformed from a discursive space into a subfunction of the financial services industry, which has henceforth led to such things as NFTs and the kind of technologically enhanced “immersive” experiences celebrated ad nauseam by the Bloomberg Network’s *Art + Technology* television program. That earlier moment bespoke a time in the history of art magazine publishing when the need for advertising revenue began to overshadow and displace editorial content, confirming the pay-to-play ethos of the artworld hootenanny as we now know it.



**Textile Tag # 81, 2018, paper, advertisement, textile, thread**

In keeping with Women's History Month, all but two of these ads point to an exhibition of works by one or more prominent male artists held at the kind of gallery that could afford to pony up for such a pricy notice, almost all of which were or are operated by male art dealers. One of the two exceptions is *Textile Tag # 81*, which takes an ads for a group exhibition and covers the name of the 11 male artists indicated with fabric strips, leaving visible only the names of the three female artists who contributed to the show. Like the overproduced adverts that one sees on a Superbowl broadcast, these take on a cultural significance that far exceeds the things they shill for, creating an

"importance effect" that substantiates inflated price points comparable to the cost of real estate. Up until a few years ago, female artists were systematically excluded from the high-stakes poker game heralded by these notices, and they are still underrepresented in it. Thus, we witness the feminist subtext for these works: a provisional "mending" of the skewed and unravelling fabric of a hegemonic art history that brings the "achievements" of heroic male artists down from their overwrought pedestals.

The single most satisfying aspect of this series is the impressive amount of distinct and oftentimes surprising variation that Couzens extracts from her provocative premise, which is to say that the works do not lapse into rote repetition. On the contrary, their many variations abound with

surprises that keep us delightfully off balance. Although all of the works are exhibited in frames, nine of those frames do not have glass, allowing for the



**Textile Tag #67, paper, advertisement, textile, thread**

dimensional aspects of the fabric forms to jump from and beyond the surface of the adverts. For example, in *Textile Tag # 130* we see another ad for Richard Serra's work amended with a colorful, fully stocked pin cushion.

In *Textile Tag #67*, Couzens applies a homemade potholder with a torn-out center to an ad for a Carl Andre exhibition. Some works make use of materials that hint at a shopping trip to a down-market fabric emporium; others seem to have come from flea markets or thrift stores. Quite a few use crochet forms to either mock or mirror either the design of the ads or the design of the works of art featured in them. The ensemble effect is that of a post-minimalist Exquisite Corpse party having taken place at an Etsy rehabilitation center. In other words, they provide good clean Surrealist fun at a time when the pomposity of the artworld has overtaxed the attention span of the larger world around it.

At their best, the works in the Textile Tags series achieve an uncanny balance between the receding thereness of the advertisements and the tangible hereness of the oftentimes colorful fabric. All are as irreverent as they are sophisticated, reminding the art historically inclined viewer of some of the premises of the Vienna School of art history, particularly that school's founder, Alois Riegl (1858-1905), who wrote at length about the kind of deep cultural information that could be smuggled into the visible world by way of seemingly innocent displays of ornamentation.<sup>1</sup>

# # #

*Julia Couzens: "Stitch 'n Bitch" @ [Patricia Sweetow Gallery](#) through May 22, 2021.*

1. Alois Riegl, *The Problem of Style: Foundation for a History of Ornament*, (1893) translated by Evelyn Kain, Princeton University Press, 1993.

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