



TRADITION IN TECHNIQUE AWARD

Yekaterina Mokeyeva
Randolph, Vermont, US

During the pre-technological era, only the most necessary resources were taken from the earth. It is from this earth humans built their homes, made their clothing, grew their food, and produced crafts. The concept of some plant being a weed simply did not exist. Textile pioneers utilized nettles, hemp, flax, hops, and even plants like willow tea, burdock, orach, and pine needles were of value to textile craftspeople. To this day, much of Eastern Europe, Russia and Ukraine are overgrown with nettles, wild hemp, and many other plants. These "weeds" grow without any pesticides or fertilizer, through rain or drought, and under every fence. Perhaps they were made to be so hardy to serve as an indispensable medium for the ever-present demand for textile creation.

My love for nettles goes back to my childhood, when I would spend my summers outside of the city. I quickly discovered

this plant was different from the rest. At a glance an ordinary weed, but it piercingly stung my hands at the slightest touch. However, as my grandmother explained, the stinging nettle possessed medicinal properties, fed people in times of hunger, and produced soft yet durable fiber for clothing. The nettle had come back to me, or I returned to it much later in life, during my studies at **California College of the Arts**, in my experiments and projects. At the time, I did not know I would be working primarily with raw fibers, nettle, and wool.

The description "natural" suits the stinging nettle. The harvesting and processing of a plant like flax by hand, for example, requires a multitude of necessary manipulations, however, nettles are a different story—a four-season climate does most of the processing job. One only needs to gather the stems in the late winter to have ready-made plant fiber.

After the rain, wind and frost prepare the plants, they can be harvested. Nettle stems are hollow and soft, broken with a simple tool, frayed, combed—first with a wooden comb, then with a bristle brush.

As a medium, it is also interesting that nettles can be felted together with wool. Usually, no additional technical aids are necessary for creating a nonwoven plant fiber-wool fabric. Wool can make up most of the combination and be the primary fiber, or it can serve as a connecting material—a thin foundation upon which the nettle fiber is applied, akin to paint on canvas. In sculptural work, or work that involves creating a three-dimensional textured surface, plant fiber produces unique qualities. It is impossible to sculpt without the aid of some connecting material, but it wonderfully secures and “glazes” a surface, creating a tough and textured cover.

These series of works were created for an exposition in Italy in 2017. In collaboration with Canadian artist **Fiona Duthie**, we collected our works under one exhibition called *Sea States*. The show took place in Prato, the ancient capital of textiles, in a gallery founded on the base of a small textile manufacturer. The fibers produced at this historical site include Himalayan stinging nettles, nettles, rose, bamboo and hemp. Several years ago, some of those names were not associated with textiles, but we can revive an art that was once almost lost. I created my large works from already prepared nettle fiber, but my thoughts were with the ample bunches of stinging nettles I spotted growing in my Vermont backyard last year.

I believe that old traditions still exist. They aren't present in our lives in an unaffected form, but they are imprinted in our subconscious, our genetic memory. They sometimes arise in the vision of silhouettes or wondrous patterns. In my work, patterns occur in the form of multiple repetitive elements. Growing smaller and larger, these patterns codependently grow out of one another, like many creatures and forms from nature. It is interesting how we come across these patterns everywhere—in seed pods, blossom clusters, reptile skins, fish scales and much more. Their rhythm is mesmerizing, and they seem to “sound” differently from one another. If you look deeper on a cellular level, you will see how everything exists in the form of multiple structures and repeating elements.

In nature, elements are repetitive in structures but not identical to one another, although they look similar. It is the distinction between organic and artificial, and it is a natural harmony, as is seen in traditional embroidery and weaves. In fiber structures, handcrafted elements could also contain these repetitions, but at the same time are always somewhat individually distinct.



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Yekaterina Mokeyeva *White Noise* 2017, fiber derived from nettles, merino wool, wet sculptural felting, seamless wearable sculpture, 70" x 35" x 12". Photo: Sergey Mokeyev. Model: Anne Goodling. Left page: detail.



The form of a wearable sculpture shows the multifaceted structure of the surface from all sides, with the scale of the motifs changing with the proportions and curves of the body. I created large pieces to amplify this visual effect; when this “marriage” of elements is in motion, all parts appear to come to life, existing in their structure. The attachment to the human body in this format is also a metaphor. It is our melding back into our surrounding system from which we initially sprang, maybe to correct the trajectory of our future and find our place there. These nettle cocoon dresses or giant shells are a place of cover or safety, where we find ourselves and our awareness of modern reality, where we can hopefully determine a better direction.

—Yekaterina Mokeyeva graduated from Moscow State University of Arts and Industry, studied textiles and fashion at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, has been exhibiting and teaching internationally throughout the US, Australia, Europe, Canada since 2012. feuer-und-wasser.com

Left: **Yekaterina Mokeyeva One's Shell** (back) 2017, fiber derived from nettles, merino wool, wet sculptural felting, 60" x 30" x 12". Photo: Sergey Mokeyev. Model: Anne Goodling. Top: in-progress.

Right page: **Yekaterina Mokeyeva Stinging Waves** 2017, fiber derived from nettles, merino wool, wet sculptural felting, 50" x 25" x 10". Photo: Sergey Mokeyev. Model: Anne Goodling. Left: detail.

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