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Rosemary Mayer: *Ways of Attaching*

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## Rosemary Mayer's Fabric Sculptures Hover Between Form and Formlessness

At Swiss institute, New York, a well-earned survey of the late artist charts her early experimental works and textile sculptures of the 1970s



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Since her passing in 2014, Rosemary Mayer's formally exacting, diverse and conceptually rigorous body of work has remained largely under-recognized. Yet, there's no lack of venerable historical context for her practice: site-specific installations that presaged the modulation of performance art from public intervention to semi-private relational aesthetics; the phenomenological separation of painting from its stretcher bars; and a scholarly engagement with Western art. Then there are the well-established reputations of her contemporaries, such as Adrian Piper, Vito Acconci – an ex-husband who encouraged her off an academic pathway in classics towards visual art – and fellow writers like her own sister, poet Bernadette Mayer, with whom she grew up in the working-class, Catholic milieu of Ridgewood, New York.

A compact show last summer at Gordon Robichaux, New York, focused on her ephemeral installations and performances – inspired by renaissance and baroque pageantry and stage sets – and served as something of a follow up to curator Maika Pollack's 2016 exhibition, 'Rosemary Mayer: Conceptual Works & Early Fabric Sculptures, 1969–73', at her former Brooklyn gallery, Southfirst. Now, finally, Mayer is the subject of an in-depth survey at the Swiss Institute in New York, 'Ways of Attaching', which presents across two floors her impressive output from the 1960s to '80s.



Rosemary Mayer, *Hypsipyle*, 1973, satin, rayon, nylon, cheesecloth, nylon netting, ribbon, dyes, wood, acrylic paint, 122 × 274 × 15 cm.  
Courtesy: Lenbachhaus, Munich

One draped, sewn and tied piece (*Balancing*, 1972) appears here in a slightly different arrangement than archival photographs orient it, perhaps implying that her work allowed for mutability to co-exist with intent. Though this work does have the bearing of sculpture, it simultaneously shares concerns with process-based painting and the classical genre of drapery studies. Then there's the fantastically blooming *Galla Placidia* (1973), wherein two swoops of cold lavender, ochre, lime, and soft blue-green dyed gauzes and satins are gathered into a centre parting via a suspended wooden ring, from which the fabric cascades to the floor. With these controlled furls – descendants of the puffed garments of her beloved Florentine renaissance painter Jacopo da Pontormo – Mayer reined in gravity to her own assured command, conveying a shade of the steely presence and power her subject, a fifth-century Roman empress, must have possessed. This is the first time the work has been displayed in New York since Mayer's 1973 solo show at A.I.R. – the women's cooperative gallery of which she was a founding member. Nearby, *Hypsipyle* (1973), her last scaffolded fabric piece – a ruddy orange, dark lilac and sand-hued fabric draping on bent wooden rods – hovers between form and formlessness, positing irresolution as a burning ambition.



Rosemary Mayer, *Untitled (8.26.71)*, 1971, coloured pencil and coloured marker on paper, 35 × 28 cm. Courtesy: the estate of Rosemary Mayer

It is difficult to claim that such works are the main act of Mayer's multifarious and experimental practice, since relatively few of this type were made, and all is complicated by the fact that some haven't survived over time and are represented instead by small, fabulously handsome coloured pencil and graphite drawings. *Hypatia* (1972), for instance, corresponds to a lost, four-metre, four-tiered curtain of cream-coloured satin, cheesecloth, rope and wire. For all its thrilling revelations, then, the exhibition retains a soupçon of mystery. Another drawing, *Abracadabra Sailboat* (1972), seems to riff on the schematics of *Balancing*. Was one a preamble to the other or is this the redrafting of an ideal?

A few months before Mayer died, I interviewed Judy Chicago – another feminist artist of 1970s – for *Artforum*. 'The job of institutions is to transmit culture and pass on the achievements of history so they can be built upon,' she said. 'When they don't, it's an institutional failure and it could be and should be part of institutional critique.' This show is a significant step in the process of rectifying but one such case. As for the other institutions in this town? Their story rewrites are long overdue.