

Brent Wadden

Two Scores

Jan 12 — Mar 25, 2018 | Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver

Two Scores is a solo exhibition of ambitious new work by Vancouver-based artist Brent Wadden, his first in a public institution. Presented across both spaces, *Two Scores* is dominated by singular woven statements upon the floor and walls. In their dramatic scale and graphic simplicity, they mark a point of departure for the artist, but might also be said to reveal both an unseen structure and a complex set of tensions that quietly anchor Wadden's ongoing practice as a whole.

Wadden began his artistic training as a painter, but over the past seven years has established an extensive body of abstract woven work that he continues, very intentionally, to describe as paintings. At once material and conceptual, improvisational and procedural, these textile assemblages simultaneously rely upon and antagonize the highly gendered histories of both painting and textiles, contributing to the new discussion brought to craft-based practices in contemporary art since the end of the 1990s.

With their economy of form and intense colour, stretched over rectangular armatures and hung on the wall, Wadden's paintings at first glance resemble the modernist hard-edge and post-painterly canvases from the middle of the last century, celebrated by certain art critics for dispensing with everything but the "material facts" of painting. Wadden's works are indeed "post-painterly": because they are woven on a loom, composition and surface are one and the same. It is perhaps unsurprising that one of Wadden's principal instructors at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design was the late conceptualist painter Gerald Ferguson. Ferguson's "task-oriented" canvases, rooted firmly in the phenomenal world, offered a direct challenge to the heady formalism of modernist painting and its self-inscribed limits.

In their material matter-of-factness, Wadden's woven paintings present a similar conceptual provocation to the conventions of abstract painting. They also issue a categorical challenge to weaving. Weaving is a rule-based art, whose structural logic is determined by the vertical warp threads interlacing, line by line, with the horizontal weft. The design of the loom itself, which developed mainly to increase the speed of the weaver's production, has remained essentially unchanged for millennia.

As a self-taught weaver, Wadden's process is exploratory, laborious and purposefully naïve. His solutions are often inefficient – they would confound a traditionally-trained practitioner – and his technique frequently fails to take advantage of the loom's economy of means. Unlike in painting, where an artist is able to apprehend the entirety of the canvas at once, weaving on a loom involves rolling the textile as it is produced, such that the weaver is only able to see the full panel once it has been cut from the device. In weaving, as Wadden notes, one can only move forward. His textile panels are thus riddled with inconsistencies deliberately left uncorrected. These subtle disruptions create a complex material surface that insistently reveals the presence of the artist's hand (albeit paradoxically) through the mechanical nature of the weaving process itself. Furthermore, as the works in *Two Scores* make clear, Wadden's paintings are very rarely produced from a single panel of cloth, but more often assembled from multiple panels stitched together at the selvages. Thus the pictures themselves are not composed until the near end-point of production and reject, as textile historian T'ai Smith has remarked, "a preconceived masterplan." In this way too, the artist purposefully undermines the optical rigour of his compositions – along the panels' seams, the forms do not always line up, producing visual glitches that force, to quote Smith again, "the threads of that moment to meet head on, to form a clash, a resonating buzz of terms."

Wadden's process also begins long before the labour of the weaving itself, with the collecting of yarn. The artist works almost entirely with pre-used fibers, both organic and synthetic. He purchases unwanted overstock off eBay and Craigslist, garage sales and flea markets. He unravels thrift shop sweaters and repurposes their yarn. By choosing to work with only second-hand materials, Wadden is often short of the amount he needs, and frequently compensates with near-matching filler, an act that further undercuts the "purity" of his geometric forms. This rule of "make do and mend" is one Wadden had long observed in the small communities of his native Nova Scotia, where many folk artists worked with only those things directly at hand.

For *Two Scores*, Wadden extends these rules further, bringing the dimensions of the exhibition space itself into the formula. In the B.C. Binning Gallery, the scale of the monumental, nearly seven-and-a-half metre long painting *Score 1 (Salt Spring)* (2018) is determined both by the length of the wall and the amount of yarn the artist obtained in a single purchase from a Salt Spring Island weaver. Wadden has then woven the excess material into long, narrow panels inserted column-like between the gallery's windows that run like a frieze high up along its south wall. In the Alvin Balkind Gallery, Wadden directs our attention to the floor, where a single, unstretched woven piece is laid out as a rug, further confounding our clear identification of it as either painting or textile. The scale and colour of *Score 2 (16 Afghans)* (2018) is dictated by the yarn unravelled from sixteen knitted blankets Wadden purchased specifically for this project at various Vancouver thrift shops. A series of modestly-scaled images document the original blankets' geometric simplicity and riotous colour, some of them uncannily modernist in design. Demonstrating Wadden's interest in the unintentional visual synergies between the lexicons of high art and craft, they also serve as silent markers of the skill and ingenuity of their unknown (and very likely female) makers, bringing into tension once again the asymmetries between a long history of anonymous, feminized textile production and that of the male dominated theatre of modern art.

Alongside the exhibition we are producing an extensive new publication on Wadden's work with commissioned texts by Maria Fusco and Kimberly Phillips that critically examine the artist's practice. This will be launched at a special event on Saturday, March 17 at 4.30pm. The publication will retail at \$50, and is offered to CAG members at a discounted rate of \$40.

Courtesy Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver