

# Thinkers and Perceivers

By Janet Koplos

Lia Cook has been at the leading edge of textile art for four decades. She studied with the experimental master Ed Rossbach at the University of California, Berkeley, went to Sweden to study fine technique, and started creating weavings with both illusionary and actual relief. In 1979 she began the pressed works that made her famous: after producing patterns with glossy rayon thread on a 20-harness loom, she hammered and painted the cloth surface to avoid “romanticizing” visible handwork, she said. Another celebrated series reproduced the look of textiles in Old Master paintings; she sometimes displayed her fragmentary images with actual draperies around them, again mixing real and depicted.

Cook is admired and honored for both visual innovations and technical mastery, and her options expanded in the '90s, when computerized looms became available outside of industry. It's often said that the first step toward the binary off/on code of computer programming was the punched cards that controlled threads on the Jacquard loom, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century device for manufacturing richly patterned cloth. Representational imagery—tapestries—had been achieved by laborious hand-manipulation of threads. First the camera and now the computer offer new methods for studio artists.

Curiously, about that time weaving was falling out of favor in most art schools, where looser off-loom techniques were often preferred. Yet Cook's continued weaving did not seem retrograde because she engaged photography as it was dominating contemporary culture. She began reproducing childhood photographs at enormously enlarged scale, and then body imagery based on video stills.

But recognizable imagery is only one aspect of the work. Although a picture of childhood innocence is immediately appealing, Cook's photographic weavings also carry deeper meanings. She is questioning the qualities of memory and the compression of time in photographs. She began this body of work with images of her own childhood self, so she is present in the work in two doubled ways, which might be described as past and present, and object and subject.

The works have the formal appeal of texture and pattern, but that, too, implies more: she seems to be investigating the nature of vision and representation. Up close, the threads recall the Benday dots of newspaper pictures, and the works read most clearly from a considerable distance—across the room or even across the street! The threads make systems of plusses and minuses or dots and dashes, further suggesting that Cook is concerned with the nature of communication, or of thought itself. Her titles *Face Map* and *Face Maze* hint at the multiple levels of her constructs, literal and conceptual.

The tactile abstraction of the surfaces of Cook's large-scale works can be overwhelming, so it's useful to also see them in reproduction in a catalog or a leaflet like this. Then you notice her selection and framing of images: most often she opts for tightly cropped faces of little girls entirely without commercial cheer or sentimentality. These children are serious, knowing, doubtful or curious in expression, and the lack of context forces the viewer to focus on them as thinkers and perceivers. Cook's artistry is clear when you notice that she has titled the depiction of an open-mouth child *Voices* (2003). This shadowy image, stippled in color, suddenly seems to reverberate through time.

Perhaps the most complexly evocative work in the show is *Facing Maze* (2010) with its two levels of pattern and representation: a face echoing *Big Tera* is presented in a loose texture-pattern that becomes almost dizzying as you study it, and facing that face is another figure rendered in a finer, more resolved pattern, whose head is covered with a tangle of wires to read brain processes. The viewer is being viewed and analyzed. It's as if Cook is diagramming our experience of her intriguing, attention-consuming works.

Formerly an editor at *Art in America* magazine, Janet Koplos is co-author, with Bruce Metcalf, of *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*, the first comprehensive textbook of the field, published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2010. The American Craft Council named her its 2010 Honorary Fellow, recognition for non-artists who have contributed to the field for at least 25 years.