

BRENT WADDEN



# DREAMWEAVER

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FROM FAR AWAY, Brent Wadden is a painter. His work, made of intersecting panels in stark greys, blacks, and whites, interrupted with patches of colour, appears to be reminiscent of hard-edge painters like Karl Benjamin and Frank Stella. Upon closer inspection, though, Wadden's work begins to blur, the fuzzy lines rising above the edge of the frame, and the illusion starts to unravel. Face-to-face with the piece it reveals itself, not as a canvas swathed in acrylic or oil, but as a stretched textile, the square patches of weaving roughly sewn together.

This confusion is not by chance. Wadden's meticulous constructions revel in the moments of incertitude, teasing uneasy conclusions. His interest in the graphic intersections, the tensions between shape, form, and colour, are especially painterly traits. There is an uneasy acceptance in calling Wadden a weaver, compounded by the fact the works are often referred to as paintings, but it's that very disconnect that is so compelling.

The artist's East Vancouver studio is delicately scattered with his recent work, folded and stacked in preparation for his upcoming exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery in Paris. A humble but well-worn Leclerc loom (one of three) is lightly covered with a few drawings and a local music rag. Wadden is now based in Vancouver after a long stint living in Berlin, where he still is part-time. His spring show at Almine Rech will be his second solo exhibition with the blue-chip gallery, and his first solo show in Paris. With exhibits at the likes of Almine in Brussels, Peres Projects in Berlin, Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York City, and Pace Gallery in London, Wadden is surprisingly somewhat less known in his home country. "I

think being a weaver—it's complicated. Because being a weaver here [in Canada] means something else than in Europe. It's still seen as craft and as a lower form of art in a way," Wadden explains. "It's hard for people to see past that boundary."

Wadden, who was born in Nova Scotia, where he subsequently studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, has more or less split his practice between painting and weaving. Today, he works somewhere in between the two mediums (he is not currently working with paint, but his weaving is presented the way one would normally show a painting). It's an intersection few other artists occupy. "I was thinking a lot about how normal, traditional quilt-making relates to painting," Wadden says of his initial curiosity for weaving. He became interested in the work of Gee's Bend, a collective of quilters from a rural area situated on the Alabama River whose work conjures up associations to minimalist painting. "My mom would often quilt when I was young, but it wasn't until 10 or so years ago that I became aware of the quilts of Gee's Bend," Wadden says. "At the time, I was fascinated with outsider and folk art and saw parallels in the quilts they were producing."

Following his inspiration, Wadden borrowed a loom from then Berlin-based action weaver Travis Joseph Meinolf. "I was living in Berlin at the time, so I reached out to him to learn how to weave, but I had a very small project in mind," he recalls. Wadden's interest was sparked by an unexpected link between the age-old practice and a high-tech habit. He had been downloading a lot of torrent files (shared, online media files, often







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pirated), and saw a connection between the torrent community and the oral traditions of weaving. The method has historically been a verbal lineage of knowledge, passed through the generations: a history Wadden became a part of in his lessons from Meinolf. Since then, however, Wadden's work has taken a more insular approach, riffing off of his past pieces to create circular re-assessments of his combinations of panels, geometrics, and colour. Their position as stretched textiles—using the same technique used to stretch canvas—further expands the constraints of the medium.

By connecting weaving and painting, Wadden is breaking down confines on both fronts. Weaving is a traditionally female-dominated art form in North America and Europe, placing Wadden at an unusually lonely spot for a male artist. It's a consideration not made explicit in his work, but the conversation hovers around the entire medium. "I never considered weaving to be a gendered practice before, but it comes up a lot now—especially in North America," Wadden says. "I was defensive at first, but have accepted that that's how it's perceived because of its history. I was grossed out by painting in the beginning—well, not the act of painting—but I was turned off by how it was all tough guys flexing their muscles in art school. It was a bunch of dudes taking up space, and I couldn't relate to that." Apparitions of paintings are still visible in most of his work, but instead of brush strokes, small glitches within the fabric are noticeable—a result of Wadden's attempt to use as much recycled material as possible. But for the artist, the development overrides the aesthetic. "There hasn't been any time

where I decided not to show a work. Because I'm kind of neutral about it. It's more about the process," he says. "Compositionally, the mistakes in the weaving are important. They're part of it." Working on his weavings nearly every day, Wadden has undoubtedly improved his skills, but those new techniques don't necessarily make it to the loom. Instead, Wadden reduces his form to more simplistic methodologies. "It was never my intention to become a skilled weaver, but the more I work with the medium, the more curious I become with how it all works," he admits. "It's cool to understand the various ways you can work and then step back again to the simplest methods." If he runs out of a certain kind colour of yarn, Wadden will simply pull out another spool. He opens up a two-panel piece to display a spread across the floor, its yellow accents off-kilter. The hand-stitched panels are about a half-centimeter off, but these inconsistencies never disrupt the harmony of the whole.

There is an instinct to attribute Wadden's work to one medium or another. The two methods are so disparate in materiality and application that there are few similarities to be found at face value. Yet Wadden's textiles buzz and reverberate as the soft waves of weaving connect the graphic elements. The disconnected components spread further apart when stretched between the frames, and yet, each woven line can be followed through the spool like an elongated brush. Up close, the painted threads are exposed. —AS

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