

# IN CONVERSATION

## A Place of Overall Softness: Char Schwall's New Fiber Art

by Anne Gatschet

Can the material culture of cloth help us see the body's form in its living fluidity, its unstoppable transformation? Fiber artist

**Char Schwall** explores this question as she expands a patiently crafted visual language with her recent sewn textile pieces. Like many viewers, I often identify life forms in Schwall's artwork: tendrils, seashells, parts of the human body. But her visual spaces are essentially abstract, and in them, what appears familiar is evolving and becoming new. She tells me, "I came to abstraction in order to find a place outside conventions."<sup>1</sup>

In *Sea Lover* (2021), a recent exhibition, Schwall's sewn, abstract pieces continue her lifelong effort to make visible the qualities of softness and mutability. This does not produce objects that are easy to grasp, but it helps me as a viewer to understand my own gaze, to notice how often I halt form's movement or place things I see in conventional categories. The works in *Sea Lover* offer a unique approach for looking at form beyond convention.

Schwall recalls for me how her practice turned to fiber art: "I was curious to find how my years as a painter would inform new works made with fiber. I began to collect fabrics and started learning to sew. As I sewed the pieces, they became meditations



**Char Schwall**, *Sea Lover* (installation), 2021. 18 sewn and appliquéd artworks, 71.5 x 148 inches. Photo courtesy of Bruno David Gallery.



**Char Schwall**, *Undine II*, 2020. Sewn and appliquéd organza and cotton fabric, 18 x 18 inches. Photo courtesy of Bruno David Gallery.

on gender and posed questions to me. Does a two-dimensional surface have a gender? What is a feminine space? Do fabrics have gender?”

A transgender woman, Schwall undoubtedly makes a personal expression with her artwork. Perhaps like all art, hers reflects a specific journey of transformation. But her sewn surfaces are not a mirror, and she declines to display her identity in her work. Through unique finesse with visual abstraction and a refined, artistic language of form and color, she expresses a visual place that she refers to as “overall softness.”

Schwall’s non-figurative forms float in a place before identity, a fluid environment she compares to the sea. In *Sea Lover*, she brings a diverse range of fabrics—organza, anti-slip fabric, chiffon—into junctures of weave, texture, color, line and volume, opening a space of movement that unsettles our eye. “I was moving beyond conventions in my life as well as in my creative work,” Schwall says, recalling the moment when she transitioned her artistic practice from paint to fiber while transitioning her own form and appearance to let her gender emerge and be visible. Schwall’s folding, combining, curving works do not transcend forms we commonly know, but rather,



**Char Schwall**, *Sea Lover* (installation detail), 2021. 18 sewn and appliquéd artworks, 71.5 x 148 inches. Photo courtesy of Bruno David Gallery.



**Char Schwall**, *Undine III*, 2020, Sewn and appliquéd organza and cotton fabric, 18 x 18 inches. Photo courtesy of Bruno David Gallery.

they activate the visible surface to suggest its emergence into something new. The softness and shifting borders of each work's composition encourage the viewer to ask, not merely "What is this?" but more generously, "What might this become?"

Regarding motifs or signs among *Sea Lover's* works, Schwall says, "I would describe them as [unnamable]." In a moment for society when the identities of diverse and changing bodies challenge our ability to name what we see in one another—gender, color, size, ability—Schwall's work encourages us to see without naming. She says, "I work from a variety of sources—life-forms from the ocean, plants or the human body. The pieces I create are evocative of those things, but don't represent any specific thing."

*Sea Lover's* forms draw vision across learned boundaries, such as the belief we often cling to that nature is separate from human design. Viewing them, I look into the emergence of form and consider the visibility of transformation. I ask Schwall how she brings down boundaries to give form and gender more freedom,



**Char Schwall**, *Nymphaea II*, 2020. Sewn and appliquéd organza and cotton fabric, 18 x 18 inches. Photo courtesy of Bruno David Gallery.



**Char Schwall**, *Nympha IV*, 2020. Sewn and appliquéd organza and cotton fabric, 18 x 18 inches. Photo courtesy of Bruno David Gallery.

but she disavows the conventions of the artist-creator. “I don’t make it happen with the materials,” she says. “The boundaries are in people’s minds.”

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<sup>1</sup>Char Schwall, Interview with the author, September 15, 2023. All other quotes from the same source.

—Anne Gatschet (she/her) is an arts writer and arts program consultant living in Kansas City, Missouri. She holds degrees in Latin American Literature (BA, New York University), Comparative Literature (MA, University of California, Berkeley) and NonProfit Management (MA, University of Missouri, Kansas City). She has worked across languages and cultures as an editor, writer

and teacher of English and Spanish. Her writing is informed by her lifelong, daily practice as a poet. Her publications on contemporary art and culture include articles for Studios Inc, Albrecht Kemper Museum of Art, Bruno David Gallery, KC Studio Magazine, and The Kansas City Star. Recently, she served for three years as Museum Educator at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City.

—Char Schwall (she/her) is a fiber artist and a painter. Her artwork explores the aesthetics of surface, gender fluidity, and softness. The Bruno David Gallery represents her work. She holds a BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute, and an MFA from Washington University in St. Louis.

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