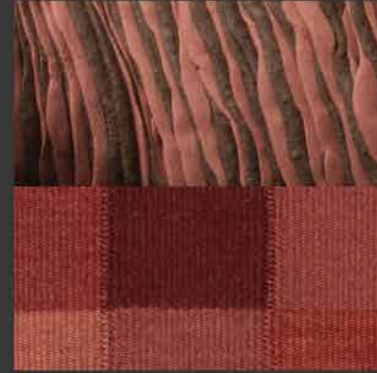


Connected Spaces

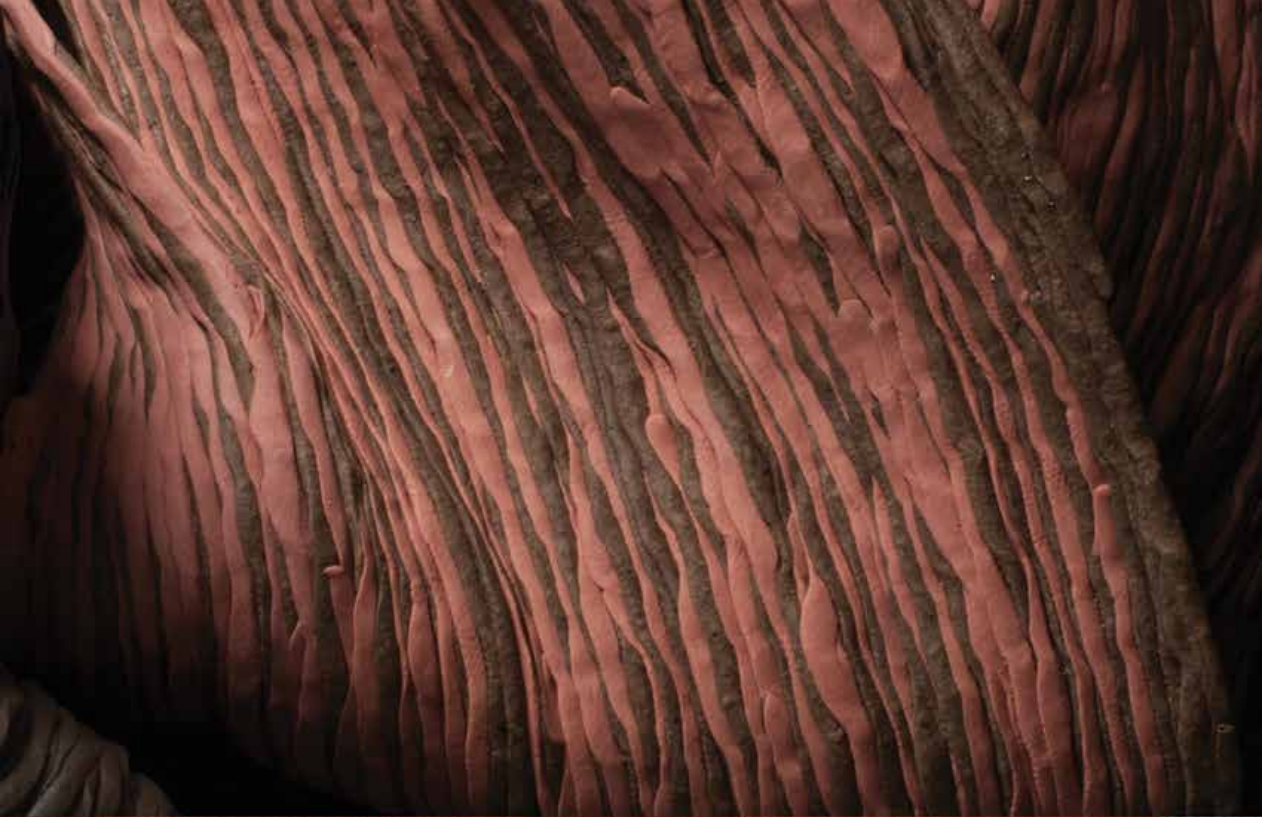
MARCH 12 - AUGUST 21
2022

AMERICAN MUSEUM
OF CERAMIC ART

CONNECTED SPACES | CHERYL ANN THOMAS & MICHAEL F. RÖHDE | AMERICAN MUSEUM OF CERAMIC ART

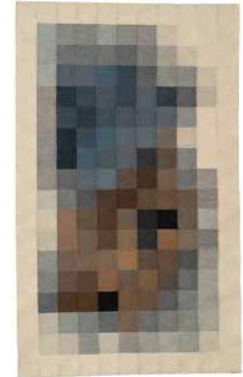


Connected Spaces



CONNECTED SPACES

CHERYL ANN THOMAS  MICHAEL F. ROHDE



American Museum of Ceramic Art
March 12 - August 21, 2022





Jo Lauria, the curator of *Connected Spaces*, encouraged a dialogue between longtime friends Michael Rohde, a weaver, and Cheryl Ann Thomas, a ceramist. Thomas and Rohde used this opportunity to expand their artistic language and to explore new ways of thinking about interconnectedness. Similarly, AMOCA believes the exhibition extends its boundaries by opening dialogues with artists working in other visual media in conversation with ceramics.

I gratefully acknowledge the vision of Jo Lauria, AMOCA's Adjunct Curator, whose incredible insight has nurtured this project and exhibition. I would also like to thank Helen Lee, Associate Professor and Head of Glass in the Art Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for the piercing critical viewpoints expressed within the pages of this catalog. Special thanks to Regina Vorgang, graphic designer,

for designing an elegant and beautiful catalog to accompany and document this exhibition.

Special thanks to the AMOCA staff: Pam Aliaga, Kimberly Andrade, Tim Decker, Aida, Lugo, Paul Roach, Ashley Rowley, Anna Sanchez, and Nathan Stanfield who make magic happen every day. David Armstrong and his amazing team, Israel Alvarez and Oscar Martinez, who build and install our exhibitions. I am also grateful to Kat Hopkins and Georgie Papaya for their tireless energy and generosity of spirit. Many thanks to our dedicated team of docents: Judy Jacobs, Sue Malloy, and Lisa Soiseth.

Finally, I would like to thank Cheryl Ann Thomas and Michael Rohde for their time, attention, energy, and generosity during the planning and execution of this exhibition and publication.

Beth Ann Gerstein
Executive Director
American Museum of Ceramic Art

As a curator who surveys the vast territories of craft and design, I try to stay attuned to relationships among artists, movements, and disciplines through active investigation, both virtual and physical. Engaging in this process, sometimes I find that non-linear explorations produce surprising results. The exhibition and accompanying catalog of *Connected Spaces* is a case in point. Long before the project was conceived, visits to the studios of two artists who are longtime friends, Michael Rohde and Cheryl Ann Thomas, led to an unexpected path of discovery. The art practices of the two friends were markedly different: Michael, a weaver, worked with threads and loom; Cheryl, a ceramist, utilized clay and kiln. The artworks created by each were distinctive in their areas, and each artist was acknowledged for advancing their respective fields through their original approaches to materials and techniques. Although working in different disciplines, an underlying kinship in their art practices was newly revealed upon close examination: rooted in collective craft histories and experiences, their work shares commonalities that deserve to be highlighted. Thus began the story of *Connected Spaces*.

The exhibition's genesis developed from the concept of *interchange*: the act of mutually giving and receiving, and the exchange of ideas. To Michael and Cheryl, I proposed a "call and response" to yield an exhibition of woven textiles and ceramic vessels with the unifying concept of direct reaction to each other's artwork. The artists would determine the methodology and devote a year to creating work that actualized the idea.

The artists first identified the common ground in their art practices from this launching site and asked critical questions about their motivations and commitments. Cheryl produced the following statement:

"Friendships enhance individuals through an interchange of ideas. Something new



emerges that might not have been imagined. In looking at Michael's work, I consider colors and patterns that I might not have thought of – his approach is unique and considered. The materials we use have commonalities. Color comes from natural materials; his forms are built up slowly, as are mine. Both works have a similar continuous line. Since my coils are not smoothed out, people often mistake my pieces for woven objects. Our methods of constructing a form, line by line, are slow and contemplative.

What would happen if we agreed to create a new body of work based on a consideration of how fiber and clay could speak to each other? How would collaboration lead us to a new direction in our separate disciplines? We have agreed to commit ourselves to this investigation."

Michael contributed a corresponding declaration:

"There are so many commonalities between how Cheryl and I approach our own art-making, as Cheryl has cited. To these, I would add the vector of time: each process is slow in execution with long hours working in isolation, hence the meditative aspect of our processes.

Beyond that, we both use our medium with a contrarian approach. What ceramist would over-fire her carefully built forms? Why would a weaver depart from centuries of trying to turn representational paintings into woven images?

We both chose to break the rules of our craft and make something new. Taking the approach further, we decided to embark on this joint project, breaking out of our isolated practices and entering into an interchange of ideas, forms, and the expression of both."

repetition of the horizontal line to loosely allude to the structure of language, echoing the lines of printed text. Based on Michael's weaving *Polarity*, *Blue Cipher* was the first coiled vessel Cheryl completed (p. xx). She intended to freely interpret Michael's palette by mixing oxides and stains into the

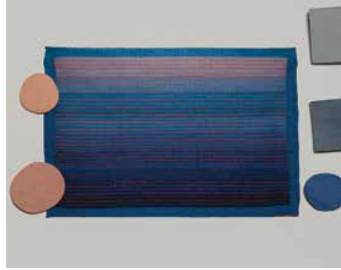


Figure 1

white porcelain clay to approximate his yarn colors. [Fig. 1] This allowed her to vary the pigmentation of each row of coils. [Fig. 2, 3] Constructing her vessels coil by coil, she contrasted horizontal lines of one color against an alternate color background, sometimes graduating the intensity of the hues as she built up the vessel walls. Cheryl continued her ceramic explorations with *Gray Cipher* and *Gold Cipher*, directly responding to Michael's tapestries *Traces* and *Heart* (pgs. xx-xx). Cheryl assigned the title "cipher" to these ceramic pieces as she felt the term reflected Michael's objective of using the woven structure of weaving to emulate an indecipherable, abstracted language. Ultimately, Cheryl thought that the construct of language in her executed work was "lost in translation" and replaced with the ideas of chance and collapse," as her finished sculptures are always the result of their collapse during the kiln firing.

In response to Michael's weavings, Cheryl's final study is *Grid*, a collection of ten small vessels organized on a base in a grid formation (p. xx). Each vessel is composed of colored clay that mirrors the shades of dyed yarn Michael used to weave the grid of abstracted houses in *Sustainability* (p. xx).

From this point forward, Cheryl abandoned the correlation of works. She continued to make coiled vessels for the exhibition, and in these additional

freer approach" to materials and experimentation. For Michael, the interchange triggered a new development in his series of pixelated images and added original iconography to his image archive. In a previous group of pixelated portraits, Michael used photographs of faces, some recognizable, some not, and reduced the image to 20 pixels wide. Reducing the number of pixels to a width of twenty pixels in a face image resulted in a highly pixelated portrait. Michael would then use a print of the pixelated image as the guide to hand-weaving the tapestry. The weaving plan would determine the yarn colors for each pixel and weave, creating a set of squares by



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

row to generate an abstracted face. [Fig. 4: *Reality*, portrait of Frida Kahlo]

Michael decided to employ the technique of pixelation to photographs of Cheryl's ceramics, thereby creating a weaving plan, or "Sketch" to estimate yarn colors and produce a graph of squares to be woven on the loom. [Figs. 5,6, &7] Although extensively abstracted in the finished tapestries, Michael's woven images captured the silhouettes and colorations of Cheryl's coiled vessels as represented in the



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

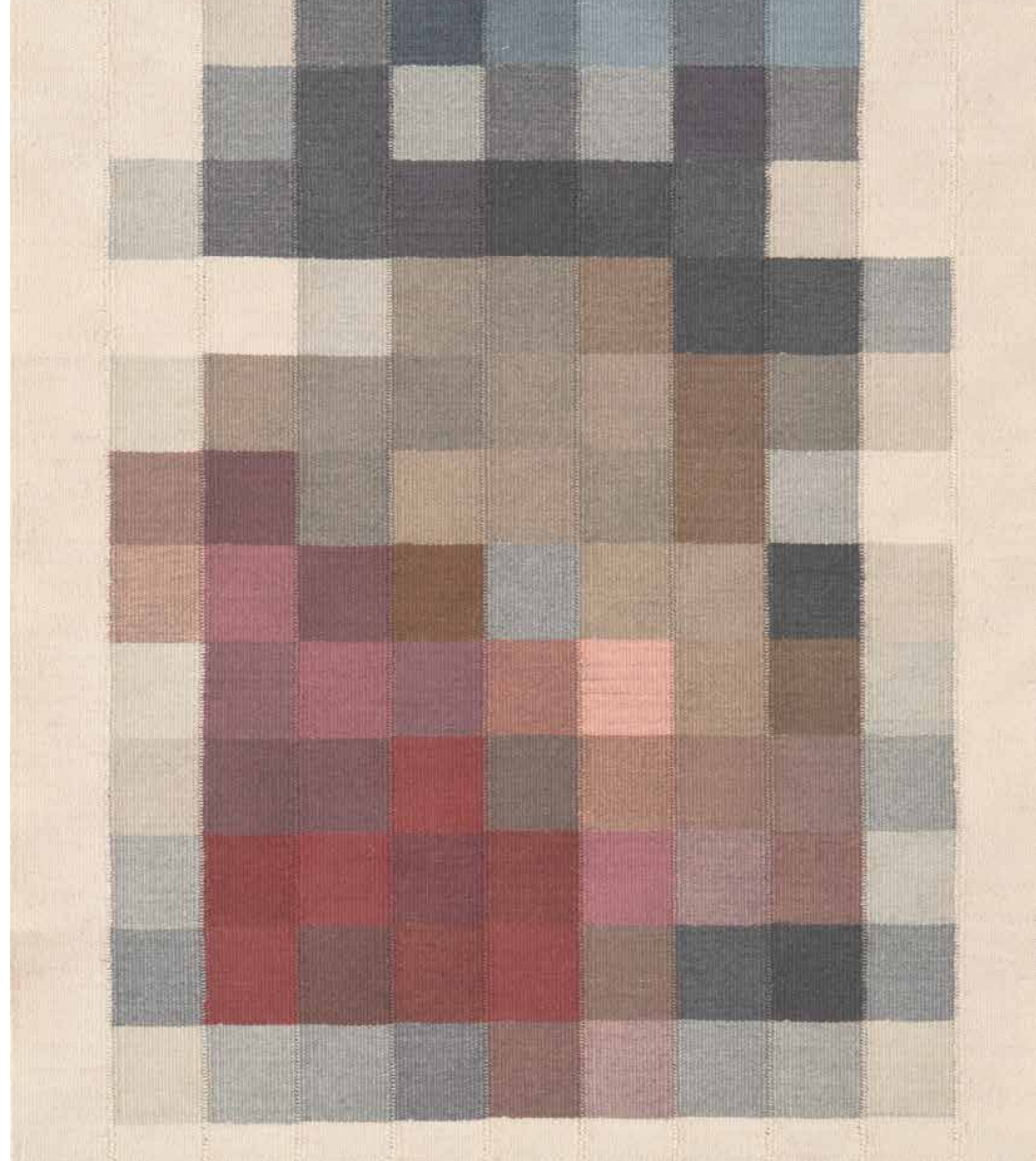


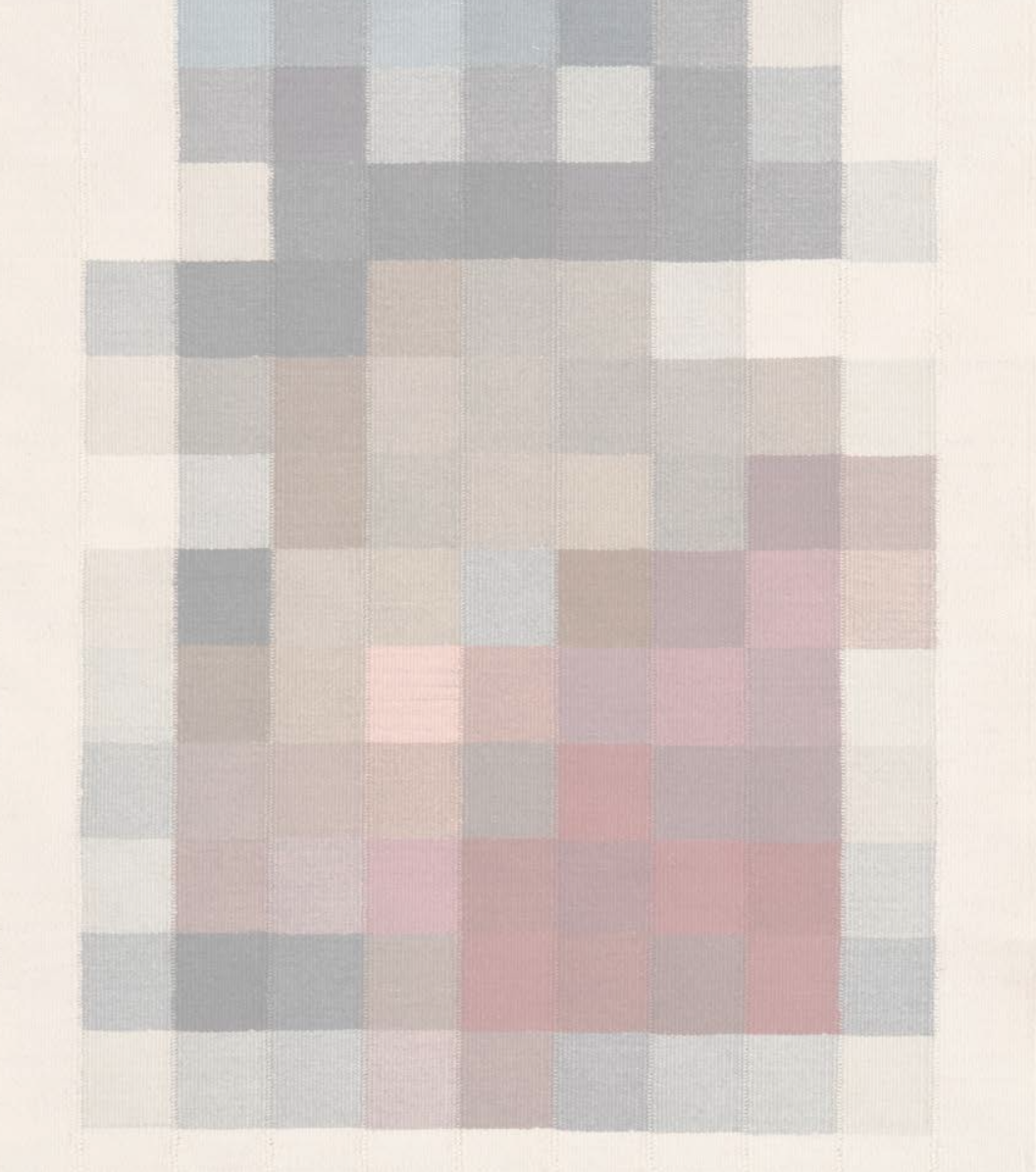
Figure 11

photographs. [Fig. 8,9]

During the exchange period, Cheryl changed to a different clay body for a distinctive series of vessels, shifting from her studio porcelain that produced an opaque finish to one formulated to produce translucency when fired. This grouping of luminous porcelain vessels glowed in the light [Fig. 10]. Michael reacted to this shift by varying the materials and scale of the tapestries that represent this distinct series. Responding to the reflective qualities of the new pieces, Michael selected silk yarns to weave the vessel profiles, as silk is a more lustrous material than the wool he had been using to execute the previous tapestries. [Fig.11] Further, since the vessels in this series were of a smaller scale, Michael reduced the size of the weavings to better correspond to the more diminutive proportions. In the design of the exhibition, the plan is to separate this group of translucent vessels and silk weavings to amplify their connection – just one of several revelations to be savored in *Connected Spaces*.

Jo Lauria is the Adjunct Curator of the American Museum of Ceramic Art and a design historian based in Los Angeles, California.





As I scroll through the title list of works, the correspondence between these two artists unfolds: “Birth” / “re: Birth”; “Blue Cipher” / “re: Blue Cipher”; “Enigma” / “re: Enigma”. Two letters and one punctuation mark narrate the logic at play in this exhibition: “re:”. In contemporary culture, “re:” is understood to be an abbreviation for “regarding,” or “in reference to”—the colon serves as a spotlight for what follows. But in its Latin origins, “re” is not an abbreviation. “Re” stands alone to connote “in the matter of” or “referring to.”¹ I think of this realization as one of many linguistic evolutions that have arisen out of digital culture. What has been understood as an abbreviation has actually been a full and complete expression for centuries.

“re” signifies the spatial and temporal relationships by which these works were realized. In the privileged space of an email subject line, “re:” strings together dialogues that collapse and expand in an accordion fold we refer to as a “thread.” Cheryl Ann Thomas and Michael Rohde pull this thread out of the digital space and shuttle it between their respective studio practices. Rohde is a renowned weaver; Thomas a ceramist whose work bafflingly imitates fabric. In their correspondence, their works communicate through palette, line, and form.

I’ll be honest, at first glance I thought, “These must be placeholder titles. Surely, this aspect of digital communication wouldn’t make it through the final edit.” Under what conditions could it be important enough to include this “re:”? Under pandemic conditions. The world lurched even deeper into the digital era as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Work, school, and even socializing—all of it is online. It’s certain that Thomas and Rohde would have relied on email to communicate about their works even if a pandemic hadn’t emerged, but the artists’ reliance on this technology resonates more deeply in this era.

In contextualizing the work of Thomas and Rohde, I find myself triangulating their work to various data points in contemporary digital practices. I question how much of this triangulation is a result of the work and structure of the exchange itself, the impact of the pandemic, or the fact that I am a full generation younger than these artists. Starting with Rohde’s work: some of the tapestries in this series

are pixelated interpretations of Thomas’s forms. A digital-native is likely to assume the following order of operations: Rohde uses software to coarsely pixelate a JPG he receives from Thomas, adjusts the resolution parameters to suit his taste, and at a certain point, commits to the composition on-screen and “outputs” the resulting image in fiber. A craft-native grimaces at the word “output” and carries the privileged knowledge that Rohde translates the digital swatch palette into skeins of hand-dyed yarn, anywhere from 50-200 colors per piece. The dying process involves water, heat, and powdered plant dyes whose ingredients include: cochineal, madder, weld, black oak bark, Osage Orange, fustic, indigo, walnut, chestnut, and cutch, amongst others. With this palette, Rohde’s body performs the rhythmic act of weaving on a massive loom.

Today the reality is that the binary of digital-native and craft-native is a false dichotomy. These modalities of making happen concurrently in one body, code-switching between digital and physical as needed. In the case of this exhibition, the degree of digital literacy needed to read this work is quite common, while the skill-based craft knowledge remains somewhat privileged.



There is no shortage of artists working with pixelated imagery. Of note might be Shawn Smith,² who invokes “re” in titling his pixelated sculptures “Re-Things.” Faig Ahmed³ is also noteworthy in that his work is tapestry-based. Toshiya Masuda, Han Hsu-Tung, Aldo Sergio, and Adam Lister—these artists, amongst countless other artists, pixelate the familiar into the unfamiliar. What distinguishes Rohde’s work from these artists is his restraint. Rohde’s pixelated



when their parameters allow the designers set the viewer up for this degradation. A subtle, inventive interpretation of an ink trap is seamlessly integrated into the standard typeface and serves as the building block upon which the successive optical sizes build their degradation. It is this intentional and invisible basis upon which degradation is built that resonates with Rohde's work. The standard optical size of Redaction does not call out its impending pixelation. Similarly, Rohde's use of the gridded structure of weaving conceals his use of pixelation; the compositions may be simply read as gridded color fields. This seamless integration of Rohde's acts of degradation into the native, structural language of weaving render a generous space in which it is a possibility, but not a requisite to resolve the imagery within.

This rectilinear, perpendicular structure of weaving in Rohde's work contrasts with Thomas's radial process of handbuilding. In her work, Thomas incorporates a palette from natural oxides—cobalt, manganese, nickel, copper—wedged into her clay. She rolls out impossibly thin lines of clay and coils them, one layer at a time. The viewer's pace of perception slows down with the artist's hand, as she builds the work at a rate of one inch per hour. Unlike Rohde's methodically designed-and-then-fabricated approach, Thomas's work ultimately surrenders to the forces of heat and gravity as her forms are fired. In this space, positioned outside of her control, the forms attain a fabric-like quality, luminous in their thinness, voluptuous in their crumpling. Thomas's work similarly challenges our visual perception by elongating the moment when one hesitates before identifying the material. The visual precarity of her work is matched by a physical precarity—some of her forms are so fragile, they can't be removed from the kiln shelf upon which they are fired. There is some emotional element of tragedy in the work as well, as the pieces capture the beauty of collapse and imminent failure.

While the relationship of Rohde's responses to Thomas's work is evident, the return trajectory is more subtle. Thomas draws from Rohde's work fundamental elements like a line or color and incorporates them in her sculptures. The exchange between their work is wordless, and the power of this exchange lies in the simplicity of this material transference. Many might be quick to describe Thomas's process in shorthand as a manual version of 3D printing. (A

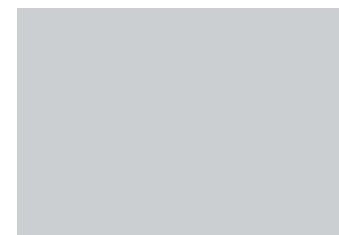
tapestries do not rely on immediate recognition of the referent. His works hinge on the suspension of perception through the use of extremely low resolution. These compositions inherently slow down our visual apparatus as we grasp to perceive. During the act of viewing, one is reminded of awkward artifacts of digital culture. Coarsely pixelated images arrive while we wait for information to buffer. Bandwidth constraints morph a live face into an approximation of another's presence at the other end of a Zoom call. Only in these moments of plunging resolution is our immersive experience disrupted—these handcrafted tapestries dwell in these disruptions.

I'm more inclined to liken a work like *Redacted*⁴ (which sits outside the "re:" oeuvre) to Titus Kaphar's and Reginald Dwayne Betts's *Redaction*.⁵ Rohde's muse for *Redacted* was the Mueller Report, released to the public in early 2019. This timing fell right in the middle of Kaphar and Betts's run of *The Redaction* at MoMA PS1. In this exhaustively researched project,⁶ Kaphar and Betts employed a custom-designed typeface in writings and artworks that addressed the rampant abuses perpetuated by the criminal justice system. It is this typeface, *Redaction*, that I am particularly drawn to in thinking about Rohde's work.



Designed by Jeremy Mickel⁷ with creative direction from Forest Young, *Redaction* comes in seven optical sizes. The standard typeface is a clean

Stefanie Pender resonate, as precarity is embraced in their explorations of 3D printed ceramics and glass, respectively.



The project `<input type = "color">`, by artist-designer Andrea Oleniczak, serves as a compelling foil for Thomas's responses to Rohde's work. In `<input type = "color">`, Oleniczak created wearable sensor-displays, intended to be worn by two people at a distance from one another. Each device would communicate to the other the color in the ambient environment. Rather than glancing at our wrist to read the time or some compacted information from a smart watch, `<input type = "color">` suggests that we might connect to another person in another space by receiving the color of their environs. The specificity of these two devices as end points of a communication loop compels me to think about Thomas's work in this exchange. In both projects, color is the currency of communication. While Rohde's response to Thomas's work is an exercise in signal processing (the process of transforming raw signal input into readable data) Thomas's work is a corporeal osmosis of color from Rohde's palette. It is an embodiment of color as a shared language whose communicative powers exceed what can be captured in written language.

The extreme distillation of information from one's ambient environment into a single wavelength of color in Oleniczak's sensors raises another point:

Interestingly, this is an apt metaphor for Thomas' methodology in responding to Rohde's work. The glaring caveat is that Thomas' process happens through an intuitive process of making. We are reminded that much of technology is an attempt to find a shortcut to our humanity.

In his portraiture work, (as seen on page 10, figure 4) Rohde has reported that many viewers only resolve the pixelated imagery upon taking a picture of it with their cell phones. The added layer of mediation shifts the scale of information to nudge the viewer's brains closer to completing the act of perception. There is a tidy closed loop in that viewers might rely on a device to fully receive an exhibition that was contingent on a device to conceive and realize.

At the time of this writing, I have not seen the work of Thomas or Rohde in person. The artists themselves have never seen their works together in one space. Neither has the curator. It is the viewers of the exhibition that will pick up the thread of the conversation begun between Rohde and Thomas. How viewers might read the relationships between these two works in the same space remains, literally, to be seen. It is a postposition that is not ascertainable from the present moment. The thread stands to unravel into an infinite number of outcomes and interpretations as these works become physically proximate to one another. What I believe will persist through these experiences returns us to the "re:" logic of this exhibition: these works are not abbreviations. They are exquisitely crafted, long-form expressions of humanity.

Helen Lee
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University of Wisconsin–Madison
Director, Glass Education Exchange (GEEX)

- 1 <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/view/Entry/158792?rsk=ewm0zg&result=9&isAdvanced=false#eid>
- 2 https://www.gamescenes.org/2010/06/game-art-shawn-smiths-pixelated-sculptures-.html?utm_source=pocket_mylist
- 3 <https://faigahmed.com/>
- 4 <https://www.michaelrohde.com/redacted> (also seen on page 74 of this catalogue)
- 5 <https://www.redaction.us/>
- 6 <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/jeremy-mickel-mckel-forest-young-redaction-typeface-graphic-design-030519>
- 7 <https://mckeltype.com/redaction/>





Michael F. Rohde

HEART

2016

handwoven tapestry:
wood, silk, natural dyes

36" x 32"



Cheryl Ann Thomas

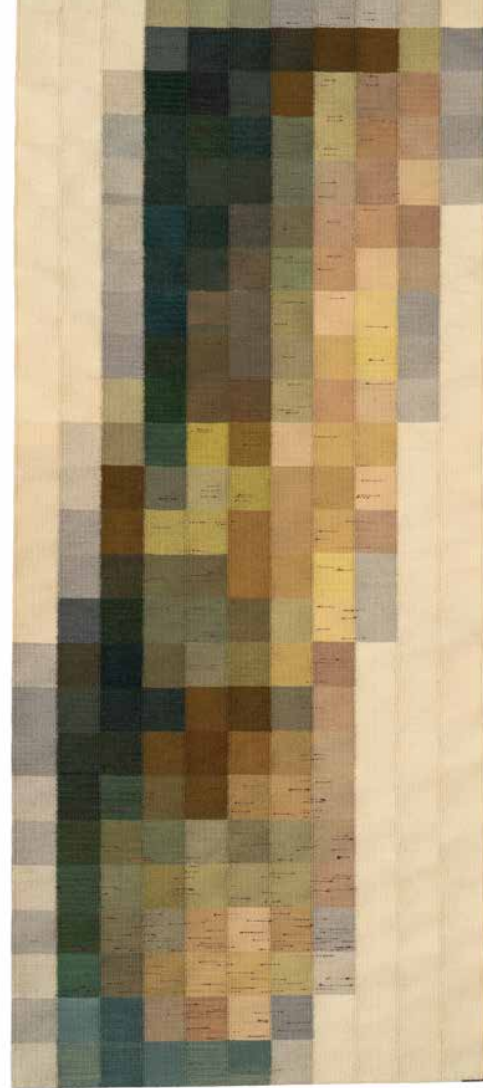
GOLD CIPHER

2020

porcelain

34.5" x 17" x 15"

after Heart



Michael F. Rohde

re: GOLD CIPHER

2021

handwoven tapestry:
wool, silk, natural dyes

76" x 32.5"



TRACES

2011

handwoven tapestry;
wool, natural dyes

51" x 35.5"

Cheryl Ann Thomas

GRAY CIPHER

2020

porcelain

15" x 25" x 16"

after Traces



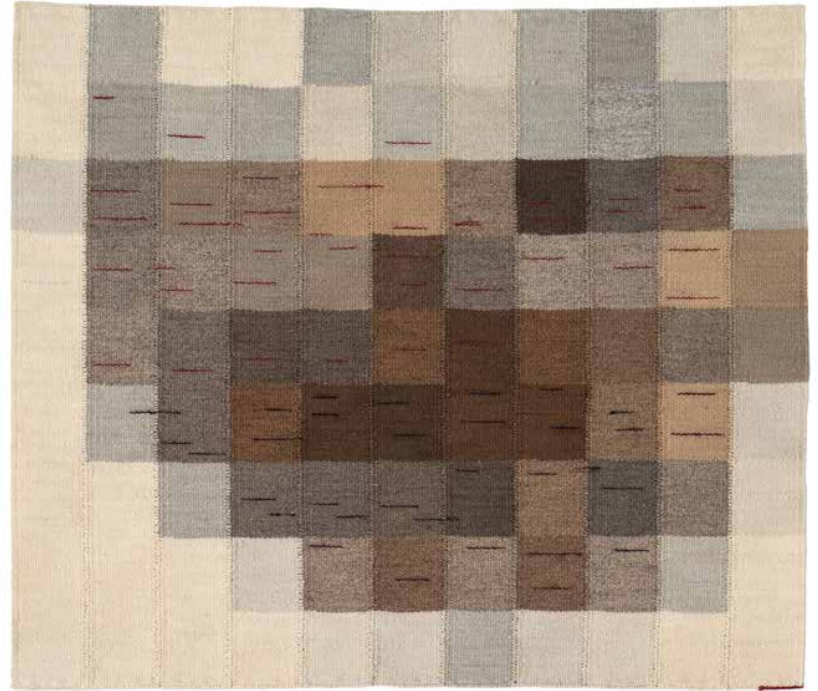
Michael F. Rohde

re: GRAY CIPHER

2021

handwoven tapestry;
wool, natural dyes

27.5" x 32.25"



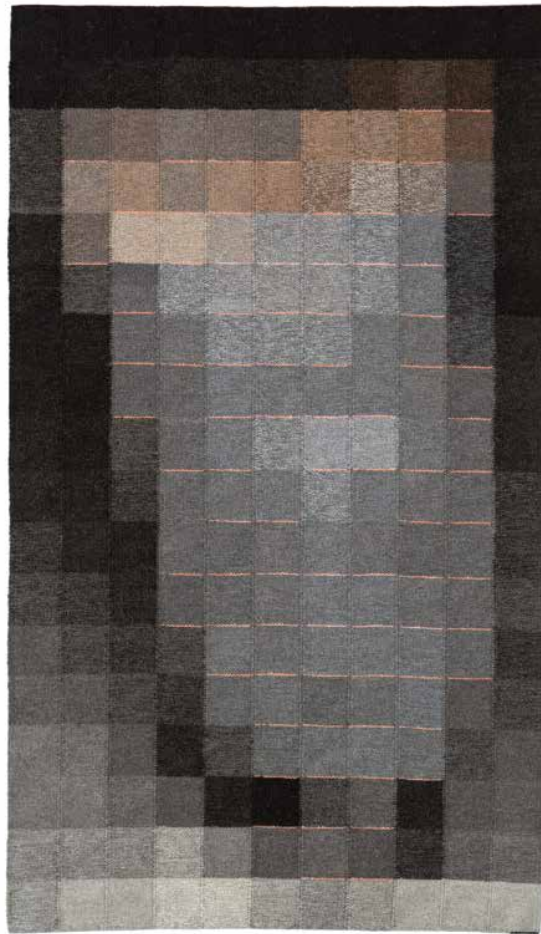
2016

handwoven tapestry:
wool, silk, natural dyes

21.5" x 32"



Cheryl Ann Thomas
BLUE CIPHER
2020
porcelain
30" x 18" x 16"
after Polarity



Michael F. Rohde
re: BLUE CIPHER
2021
handwoven tapestry:
alpaca, natural dyes
55" x 32"



2020

porcelain

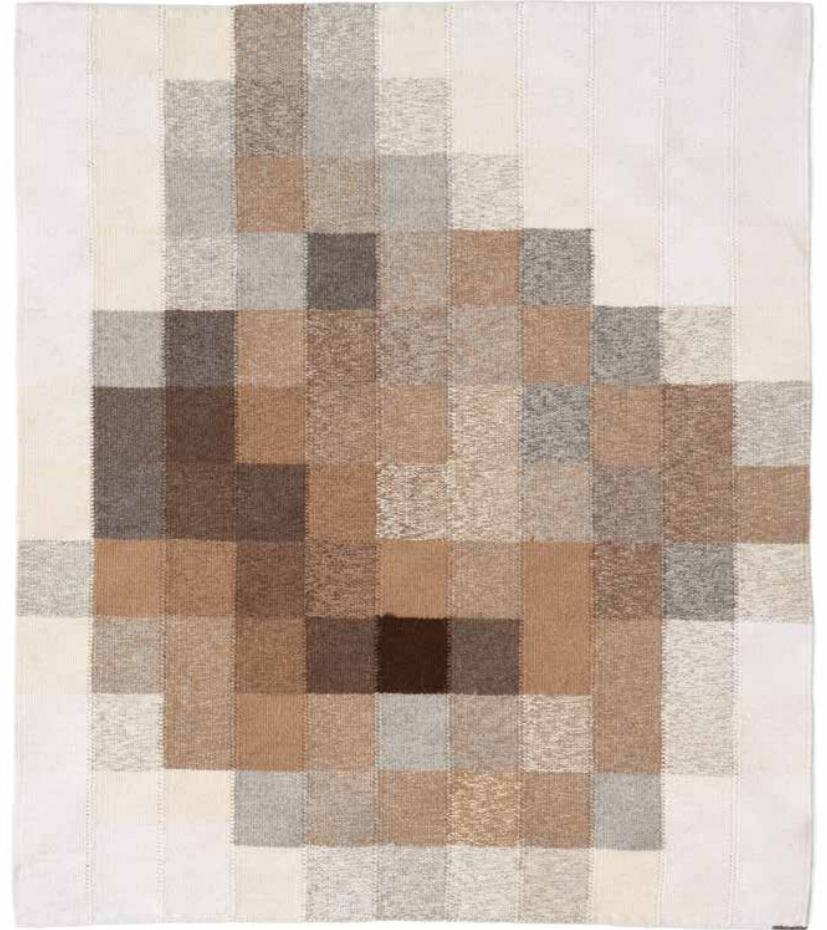
20" x 20" x 23"



2021

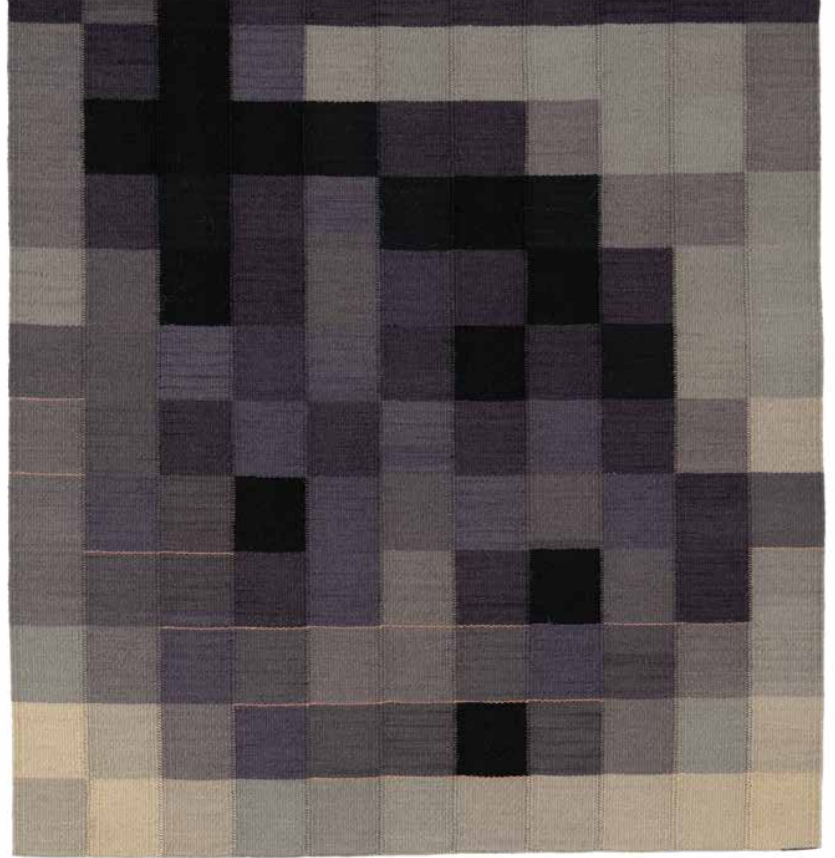
handwoven tapestry: un-dyed alpaca

36.5" x 32"

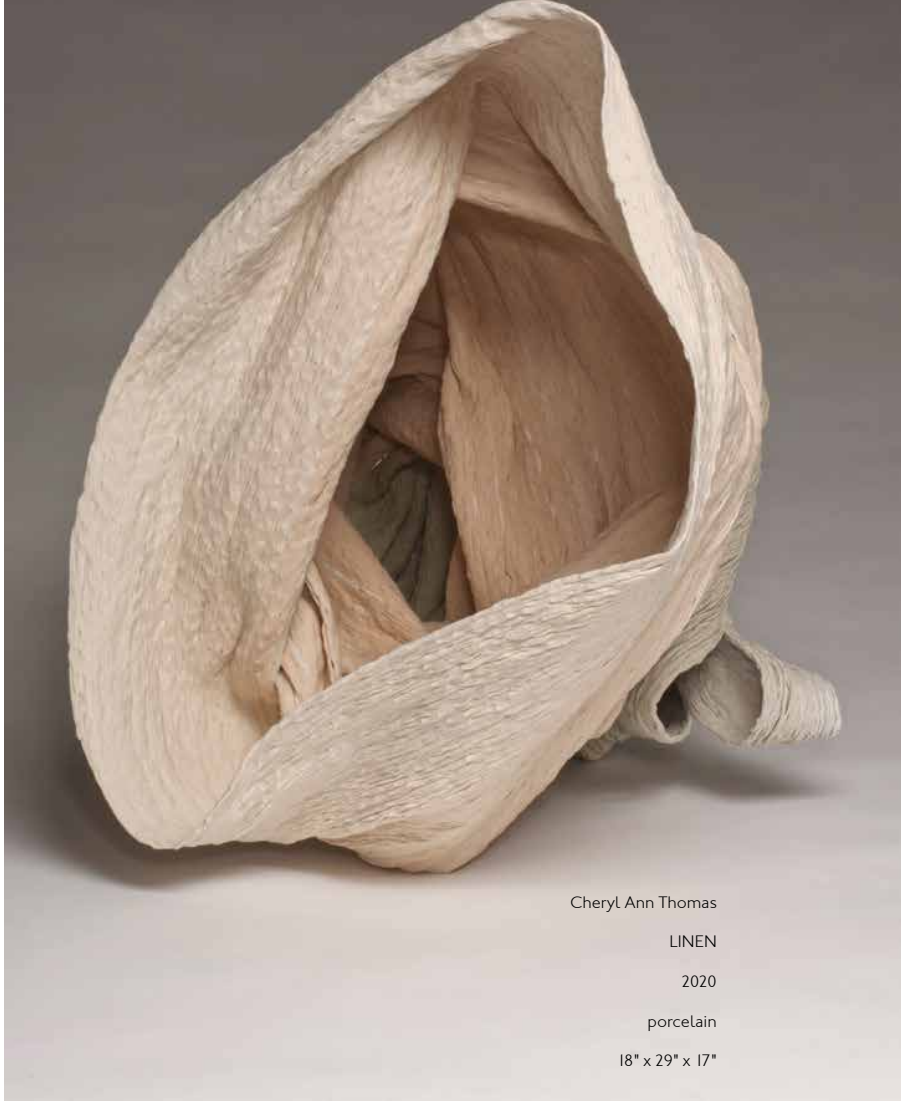




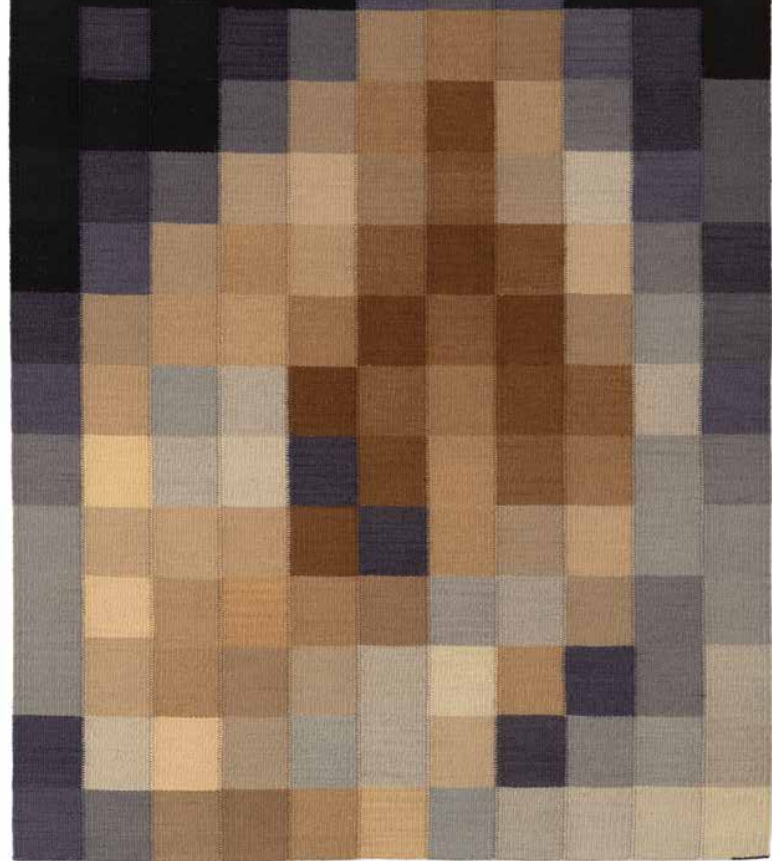
Cheryl Ann Thomas
CHIC
2020
porcelain
21" x 21" x 21"



Michael F. Rohde
re: CHIC
2020
handwoven tapestry:
wool, natural dyes
35.5" x 32"



Cheryl Ann Thomas
LINEN
2020
porcelain
18" x 29" x 17"



Michael F. Rohde
re: LINEN
2020
handwoven tapestry:
wool, natural dyes
39" x 32"