



# Paula Kovarik

# HERD

## GALLERY GUIDE

with exhibition essay by:  
Dr. Dixie Webb



The New Gallery acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, and un-ceded territory of the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Cherokee First Nations on which we organize, exhibit, listen and learn.

## **Taking a Walk Stitch by Stitch with Paula Kovarik**

By Dr. Dixie Webb

Orbs floating in space, cloth undulating against the wall, a herd of quadrupeds marching forward: these things are not what come to mind at the mention of quilts, but quilts and quilting are the tradition and technique from which Paula Kovarik's engaging art springs. By stitching through a layering of fabrics, as well as piecing together sections of old quilts, Kovarik takes a long tradition of women's work on a new journey. Historically most quilts were made by women and served a utilitarian yet decorative purpose: to provide warmth. Kovarik's textiles explore alternatives to the practical uses of quilting by emphasizing the line of the quilting thread. Kovarik creates drawings by sewing thread on textiles. Her use of the quilt language pulls from the 1970s Pattern and Decoration Movement but stopping with the decorative and formal elements in her work would be inadequate. A careful exploration of these surfaces reveals ideas that fluctuate between playful and solemn.

The wide variety of shapes and objects in ***Paula Kovarik: Herd*** reveals the playful spirit in Kovarik's work. You are invited into the gallery by a series of what seem to be stuffed animals. These unidentifiable quadrupeds, made of vintage quilts, march into a space ringed by two-dimensional works. The walls in turn surround dangling volumes, some with orifices, others with buttons and embroidery, and one that even hints at a functional lamp shade. In some works, fabric protrudes outside the expected rectangle of a quilt or traditional painting. Mask-like shapes sprout out of flat quilts, and globules breed. As menacing as this description feels the objects are not threatening but accessible; they encourage curiosity and close viewing. What is inside that opening? Why do some objects heave off the wall? Where does this drawing taking us?

As one comes close to any one of the works, it is possible for the surface design to consume your interest. Bits of existing quilts are pieced together, and a few works reveal traditional quilt patterns. The origins of these quilted fragments are not identified but one senses the history of what was possibly someone's cherished possession. Thread creates surface designs, with tangled ends escaping from the surface. Frayed edges of the batting of the reused quilts offer a softer experience than the taut thread holding the layers of fabric together. While textures abound, the focus of the work is the surface of sewn lines. These are essentially non-objective drawings which undermine our attempt to read a narrative. Instead, the meandering line seems to take us on an unknown journey as the artist moves the sewing machine needle across the work.

Compared to traditional practice, Kovarik's quilting is unexpectedly dense. Traditional quilting – the puncturing of the needle and thread through two layers of fabric sandwiching a layer of batting – is seldom so complex. Described as a meditation by critics Kovarik's rambling line is not arbitrary. Any artist knows the feeling of being 'lost' in their medium; Kovarik takes the viewer along on that excursion through landscapes and urban skylines, passing cell towers and concentrated circuitry diagrams. Think of Kovarik's drawing as a map, a trail she forges through the world allowing us to tag along especially in the over 14-foot-long drawing unfurled over time in ***I watch too much tv news***.

Kovarik's practice delves into and contradicts the history of women's work. Textiles have not been considered high art in the European/American tradition until recently. Depression-era patchwork quilts from the 1930s, for example, were often created by women making do with what was at hand – the scraps of cloth left over from other sewing projects or the unworn parts of everyday clothing. Those quilts spring from necessity rather than privilege, are made from refuse rather than luxury materials, and are driven by intuition and domestic example rather than academic instruction. Although quilting's history can be documented back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century through Medieval gambesons (the quilted cloth that cushioned mail or plate armor), and as far back as 3400 BCE in Egypt, these textiles have always been considered functional craft, the work of women.

Painting and sculpture have unquestionable status as fine art; they are also disciplines few women could learn or practice until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kovarik forcefully asserts traditional women's work *as art*, advocating with her life's work for the plurality of viable materials and techniques we are familiar with today. She intentionally employs materials that were not valued by Modernism. In this she allies herself with the Pattern and Decoration artists of the 1970s, among others. As one of the art movements that rebelled against Modernism's dead end, the Pattern and Decoration movement allows us to place Kovarik's art historically and to understand it as part of a decades-old upheaval. She participates in and expands on the ideas and works of artists like Miriam Shapiro, Joyce Kozloff, and Faith Ringgold, artists who rejected the impasse created by Modernism.

As the Abstract Expressionist movement of Pollock and Rothko evolved into the hard-edged Color Field painting of Ellsworth Kelly, the viable possibilities of what was considered 'serious' art narrowed and narrowed. Beginning in the mid-1940s the Abstract Expressionist premise of eliminating subject matter to explore the limits of painting as a distinct practice, continuing with the reduction of the visible hand of the artist in Minimalism, to Conceptualism's death of the object, avant-garde artists (and especially art critics) had confined art to the cerebral; they vanquished the lush visual aspects of art to the basement labeled *Decoration*.

Enter the Pattern and Decoration Movement, described by *Artforum* as the "last of the strategically organized art movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." Driven primarily by female artists, the movement "prioritized surface over subject matter ... primarily as a vehicle for sensuous effects." Rather than the cold intellectualism of Conceptualism and Minimalism, these works, too, are at odds with the austerity and reductionism of male-driven Conceptualism and Minimalism. In a spectacular rejection of Modernism, her drawings are neither severe nor rigid. Additionally, the P&D movement granted permission for artists to weave and sew without a second thought to a hierarchy of materials. In doing so, the New York Times critic Roberta Smith asserts the movement broke with Minimalism's bereft starkness and the visual hostility of Conceptualism and freed visual art from Modernism.

Kovarik's surfaces amplify the idea that "more is more" advanced by the Pattern and Design movement. Not only are the surfaces filled with decorations of dots, ovals, parallels, and flourishes but she also satisfies the age-old human hunger to find representational forms in non-objective imagery. It requires little effort (and considerable enjoyment) to find human figures and faces that have been exaggerated and abstracted, plants that seem to have evolved from Venus flytraps with quirky mouths, simplified trees, playful birds, gesturing hands, inventive landscapes, globes with button ears, and . . . are those planets? These images fill the surface of Kovarik's quilted objects. The creation

of the delicate and eccentric figures in ***The Usual Suspects*** alternate between pieces of fabric and stitched lines. Legs that begin at the hip as a swatch of fabric end in a stitched outline of tiny feet. Choosing between an outline of thread or a collage of fabric shapes to create a figure would not follow the notion of “more is more”. A recognizable necktie of dark cloth placed on a differently patterned cloth, all topped with a drawing of a disproportional head. The thoughtful interchanging modes creating the figures involves a careful balance of abundance.

Societal and environmental issues peek through in many of Kovarik’s works. Traveling passed cell towers and being stopped in our tracks by dense intricate rectilinear diagrams Kovarik reminds one that not all in the world is amusement. Quilts have been used as statements of protest from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* conceived in 1985 may be the most well-known example of the use of quilts to address controversy. Temperance quilts of the 1870s gave voice to women concerned with disorder, abuse, and good health in their fight for the prohibition of alcohol. The defiantly raised hand in ***Pundit*** demands our attention but Kovarik leaves the specifics of that problem for the viewer to decide. Never overly strident in her message Kovarik encourages the viewer to think.

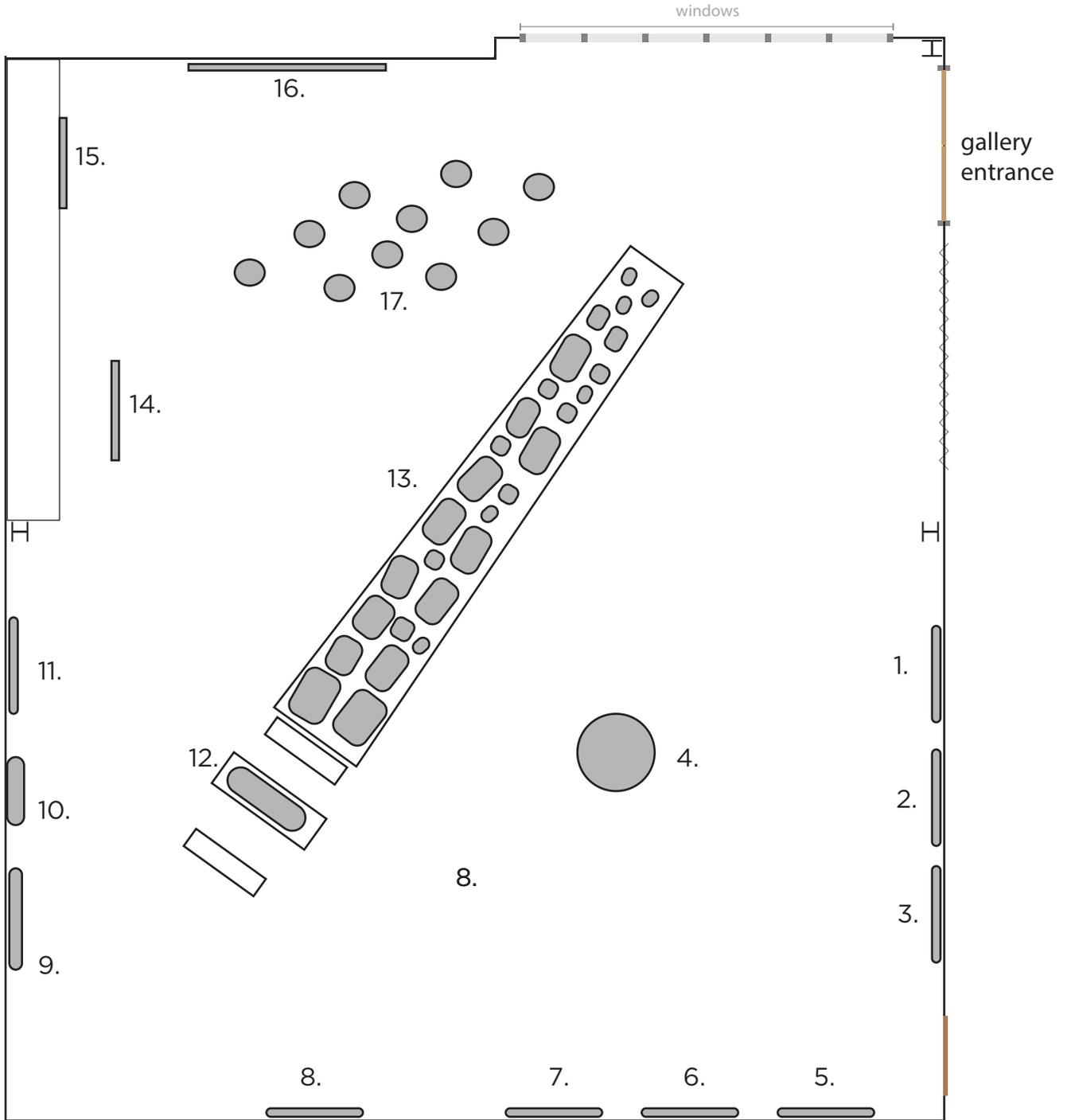
Credited with describing drawing as “taking a line for a walk” early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Swiss artist Paul Klee’s statement easily describes Kovarik’s quilted artwork. Like the delight in Paul Klee’s statement, it is a visual and tactile joy to take a walk in Paula Kovarik’s world.

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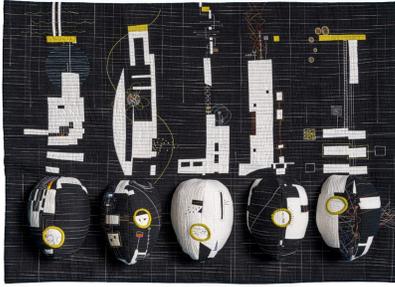
**Dr. Dixie Webb**  
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PhD University of Kansas

# Gallery Layout / Artwork Information



Special Thanks to: Tobias Layman, *Herd* platform and bench construction

1.



### Silos

30" x 41"

2020

Cotton

fabric, thread and batting

2.



### The Usual Suspects: Presto-Chango, Empty Rhetoric, Caught Red-Handed, and Sideshow.

40" x 54"

2019

Found linen fabric, quilted scraps, cotton thread and batting

3.



### Thugs

35" x 39"

2017

Wool and cotton fabric, thread and batting

4.



### Isolation Chamber

30" x 24" x 24"

2021

Quilted scraps, cotton canvas, cotton thread, wool batting, embroidery hoop, waxed linen thread

**You're invited to sit with your head inside - Please be gentle**

5.



### Jabberwock

40 x 46

2022

Quilted scraps assembled with cotton thread, wool batting

6.



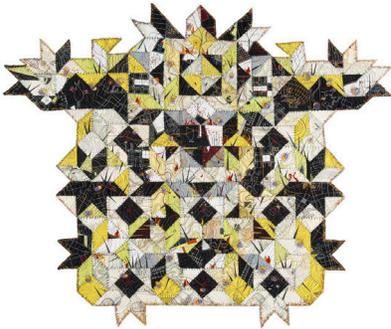
### Layered Chaos

65" x 43"

2022

Scraps of cut up quilts, cotton thread, cotton and wool batting

7.



### Dark Heart

46" x 55"

2019

Cotton fabric, thread and batting, buckrum interfacing

8.



### Assemble

50" x 50"

2021

Quilted scraps, wool army blanket, cross-stitched tablecloth, cotton fabric, thread, found lace, ribbons, wool batting

9.



### Melee

45" x 59" x 9"

2021

Quilted scraps collaged to cotton canvas, cotton thread, wool and cotton batting

10.



### **Porthole**

25" x 25" x 7"

2021

Paper globe struts wrapped in cotton quilt.  
Separate mask inside.

11.



### **Morph**

46" x 45"

2021

Quilted scraps collaged and overstitched with cotton thread

12.



### **I watch too much tv news**

33" x 31" x 12"

two sided with one control knob

14.5 foot x 12" scroll made of quilted found fabric.  
Cotton thread and fabric. Cotton batting.

13.



### **The Herd**

variable sizes

There are 31 members of the herd ranging from 2 foot tall to 6 inches tall.

All are made with the artist's repurposed art quilts.

14.



**Many Moons**

73" x 34"

Double sided

Quilted scraps collaged to drapery blackout fabric with cotton thread.

15.



**Pundit**

39" x 39"

2015

Cotton fabric, thread and batting

16.



**You Are Here**

35" x 99"

2022

Cotton canvas, india ink, fabric dye, cotton thread, wool batting

17.



**Yesman**

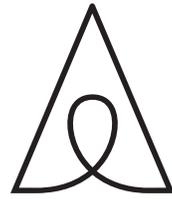
2020

variable sizes

There are 10 Yesmen - Each with a pullstring.

**You're invited to gently tug the string to make them nod their heads - Please be gentle**

Wall Coverings  
generously provided by:



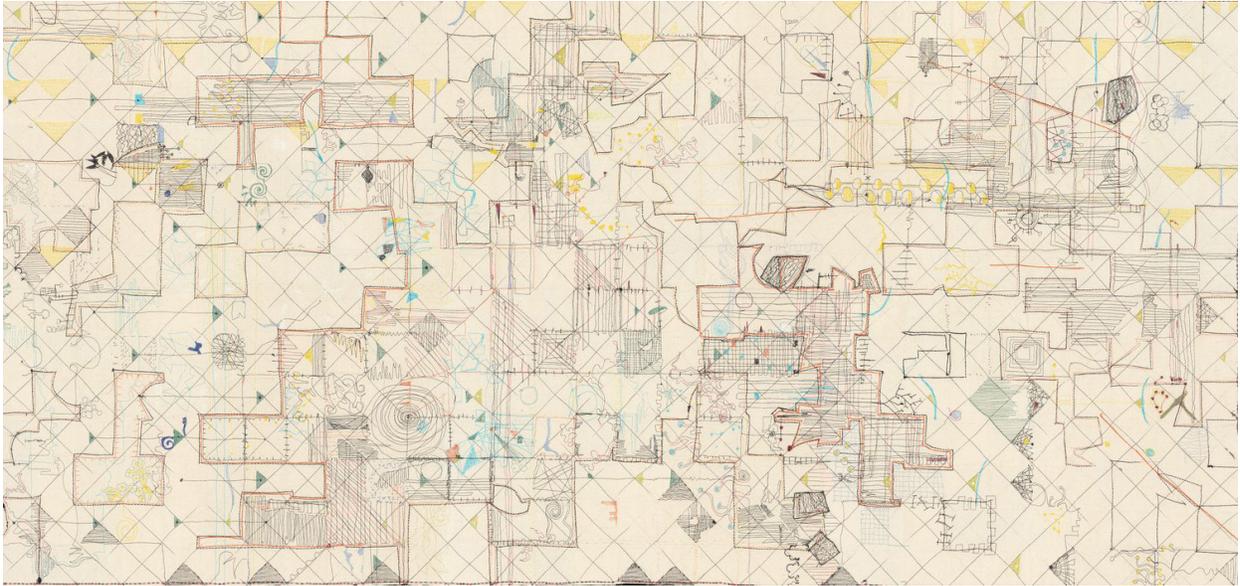
AREA

ENVIRONMENTS

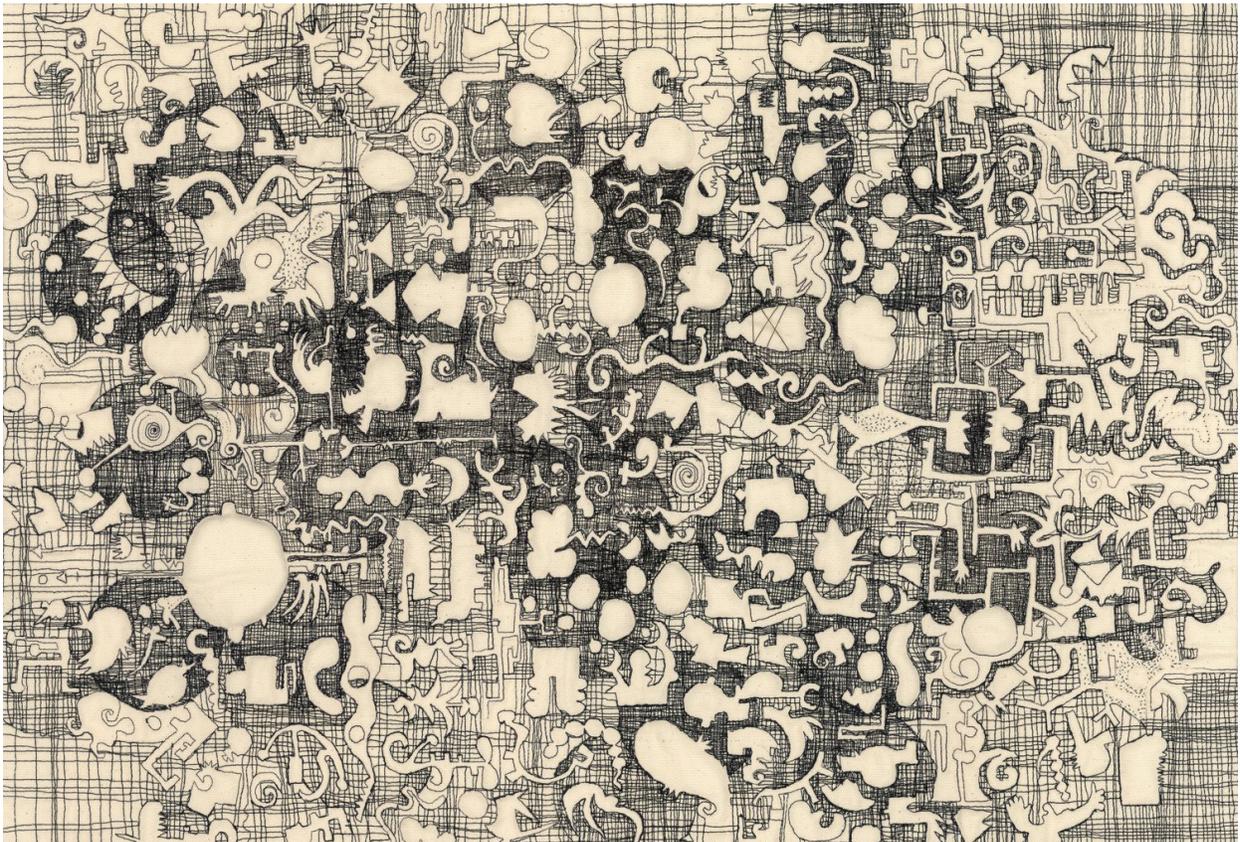
*artist-driven wallcoverings*



Many Moons



Dark Matter



## artist statement

# Herd

“But the tame do naturally line in flocks and herds” (Golding 1587)

My art has an undercurrent of peculiarities and humor. I look for things that are uncanny—those elements in life that don't quite make sense. They're on the edge. Darkness seeps in with the cares of the day and moods of the moment. Scratchy, murky textures appear. Grids dissolve. Patterns stop repeating. There is often a dissolution in the narrative. The lines I stitch with thread are both active and reactive. I process my thoughts by letting the thread tell me where it wants to go.

Characters and patterns emerge through stitching. A sidewalk crack can become a tree branch, a potato shaped circle, a pool of spirals. Through it all, I am sensitive to surprises, allowing the line and images to tell me more than I think I know. The slow and considered act of stitching animates my thoughts. The medium of fabric and thread makes the pieces approachable, tactile and reminiscent of comfort. The malleable cloth is incised with meaning. I like that contrast, soft but pointed, a strong line against a giving surface. It resists yet adapts.

Moving from two-dimensional surfaces to three-dimensional forms, I built a herd this year. The members have no heads. They are diverse and a little disturbing. Where are they going? What has the herd heard to draw them here? Let loose upon my studio floor and tables, they wander aimlessly. They could be me and you. They could be them. They stay together, they move as one, letting someone else or something else dictate their actions.

## artist bio



After thirty years as a graphic designer Paula Kovarik has time now to pursue her art. Kovarik received her Bachelor of Arts in graphic design from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. As the creative director and owner of Shades of Gray, Inc., a graphic design studio, she specialized in communications. And now she is a full-time artist and fiber art workshop teacher.

Expressing herself through the medium of fabric and thread Kovarik explores what cannot be seen. Her intuitive line work travels the surface of her work as if a meditation has become solid. Inspired by everything from cracks in sidewalks to electronic circuitry and microscopic life she layers meaning and emotion into each piece. The tactile nature of the cloth and thread makes the work approachable and mysterious at the same time. It's about layered, ripped, cut, and sandwiched together pieces—producing a composition held together by the narrative of the thread. Inward thoughts become outwardly apparent through slow and studied attention to detail.

Kovarik's award-winning fiber art has been recognized by several national venues including Quilt National, Quilts=Art=Quilts, ArtQuilt Elements, World of Threads, FiberArt Now Excellence in Fibers and the Visions Art Museum. Her work has been collected by the International Quilt Museum in Lincoln NE and the International Airport in Memphis, TN as well as several private collections. She has been profiled in American Craft, FiberArt Now and Art Quilting Studio magazines. Her work is featured in Art Quilts Unfolding - 50 Years of Innovation by Sandra Sider, Nancy Bavor, Lisa Ellis and Martha Sielman and Art Quilts International Abstract & Geometric by Martha Sielman. Paula lives and works in Memphis, TN.

Paulakovarik.com

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