

# Marin Independent Journal

## Artist Helen Mirra's Marin walks inspire her works

By **VICKI LARSON** | [vlarson@marinij.com](mailto:vlarson@marinij.com) | Marin Independent Journal

PUBLISHED: July 3, 2019 at 12:02 pm | UPDATED: July 5, 2019 at 2:55 pm

---

In 2008, conceptual artist Helen Mirra was in Switzerland for a yearlong art residency that, ironically, had no studio for her to create her work. So she began walking as a way to spark artworks and vice versa, eventually seeking out places simply because she wanted to walk there.

Which is how the Rochester, New York-born Mirra found herself moving to Muir Beach in 2016.

"It was profound to move here; I can walk out the door and I don't need to go somewhere else to walk," says Mirra, 48, who taught at the University of Chicago and Harvard. "This is my place. This is where I needed to be."

Her walks in the foothills of Mount Tamalpais have resulted in her latest works — a series of small-scale woven pieces of linen, wool, cotton and silk that are each named for the month she created them and that are on exhibit at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) through Aug. 25. The exhibit, "No Horizon," also features photographs by Bolinas winemaker Sean Thackrey.

### Inspired by Buddhism

What ties the two Marin artists together is their longtime interest in Buddhism, which informs their artworks that, writes BAMPFA director Lawrence Rinder in the exhibit's brochure, "capture the ephemeral beauty of being and time: their art underscores the balance of presence and absence, form and formlessness, mind and no mind."

Although Mirra has had numerous solo and group exhibits throughout the world, and has participated in the 11th Havana Bienal, the 30th São Paulo Art Biennial and the 50th Venice Biennial, among others, this is only her second solo show in the Bay Area. Her last exhibit here was also at BAMPFA in 2003-'04, residency when she had a semester-long residency at UC Berkeley.

The minimalism and scale of her works makes them hard to categorize, notes Rinder. "Although they have a generally rectangular format and hang on the wall like a painting, their dimensional and object-like nature associates them more with sculpture. But they are neither paintings nor sculptures. Although they are woven, they do not particularly engage with any tradition of weaving, so to call them weavings would be to miss the mark."

What they capture, he says, are her somatic experiences walking in Marin as well as Marin's unique geography, atmosphere and seasons.

It's a balance, she says of how her walking — an unskilled, modest, free and readily available activity, she notes — and weaving work together. "They rely on each other, my studio activity and my walking, but there's also — I'd like a different word — a purity to the activities. I'm just walking for walking and weaving for weaving rather than using one for the other. They're both dumb activities. I'm not gaining skill with them, so they're really more like breathing."

## Accident a 'liberation'

Mirra may not have started walking in earnest if it weren't for an accident in 1998. She was hit by a bus while riding her bicycle, and suffered a brain injury that idled her. Cycling was over for her for a while, but walking did something unexpected — it slowed her down and it changed her art.



Courtesy of BAMPFA Helen Mirra's "August."



Photo by Carl Henrik Tillberg Helen Mirra's "March – April," 2018.

"It created a shift and it wasn't a setback, it was really liberation. I wouldn't wish it on anybody, of course, but I sort of relied on my intellectual capacity before that and then I couldn't and that was really great," she says.

In years past, Mirra made sculptures, films, videos, texts, textiles and music — sometimes with her "domestic friend" of 20 years, sound master Ernst Karel. Many capture her interest in the natural world. The woven pieces in "No Horizon" have all been made since she moved here. She has been weaving her way, so to speak, through her "leftover" fibers to create new pieces that follow the color spectrum.

"I've always been interested in something being a part, rather than a whole thing, even though working in different materials and even my early film and video work, which was really focused on the edit and



the writing, it's a form of editing rather than accumulation," she says. "I couldn't make the work I made 20 years ago today and I couldn't make the work I'm making today 20 years ago, but to me they're comedically the same even through I feel so much has changed.

"Though visually austere, her work is never slick," writes artist Jen Bervin. "It retains beautifully sloppy vestiges of the making. ... She has a deep appreciation for imperfection and variation in nature."

"Her art brings us closer to that which is often overlooked, and in doing so transforms both her source materials and the viewer," writes Julia Bryan-Wilson, an art professor at UC Berkeley.



Helen Mirra's linen and wool weaving "September."



Helen Mirra's weaving, "July."

## Resisting a 'use value'

Self-described as shy, Mirra, in true Buddhist form, tells a story when asked what she hopes people take away from the exhibit.

"There's an anecdote about Shunryu Suzuki, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, which was that he was asked, 'What's the job of a Zen priest?' and he answers, 'To encourage zazen' and I thought that I don't want to be a Zen priest but I want to encourage zazen," she says. "But I wouldn't quite be able to say that's what I want the work to do. It's like, what is the thing in itself and in wanting something to be itself it's really hard to shift into what do I want the effect to be."

She'd rather see her works as having no "use" value.

"I'm into resisting something to 'get' or 'take away.' That's what's interesting to me about making things. It's to actually resist a use value.."





Courtesy of BAMPFA Helen Mirra's "October."



Courtesy of BAMPFA Helen Mirra's "June."

## IF YOU GO

**What:** "No Horizon: Helen Mirra and Sean Thackrey"

**When:** Through Aug. 25, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays

**Where:** BAMPFA, 2155 Center St., Berkeley

**Admission:** \$11 to \$13

**Information:** [bampfa.org](http://bampfa.org), 510-

**More:** Bay Area poets Lyn Hejinian and Frances Richard will respond to Mirra and Thackrey's work with original compositions at noon Aug. 23.