

Luca Frei

Guiding Fabric

February 24 – April 13, 2024

Opening: Friday, February 23, 6–9 pm

Barbara Wien
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PRESS RELEASE

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In anticipation of *Guiding Fabric*, Luca Frei's latest show at Galerie Barbara Wien, we had a conversation with the artist about the exhibition and his work.

In your fourth exhibition at Galerie Barbara Wien, you are showing ten textile works. The exhibition title *Guiding Fabric* also refers to the works' production – how can we imagine this process? What is it about sewing that fascinates you?

Frei: I begin creating my works by employing a sewing machine on simple unbleached cotton fabric. Later, I hand-stitch these machine-sewn elements onto painted canvases. Their rendering evokes landscapes, living systems and hybrid architectural motifs reminiscent of worldly scenes and objects. Each piece has a unique character, influenced by nuanced variations in stitching and the chromatic depth drawn from the backgrounds. The manufacturing process demands careful planning, intuitive insights, and a deep understanding of technical synergies – from selecting fabric and adjusting thread tension to cutting, folding, pressing, machine stitching, hand stitching, knotting, and ironing. To me, the allure of sewing and working with textiles lies in this meticulous process, where every detail contributes to the final creation.

How did you develop the motifs for the images? Which associations are important to you?

Frei: The textile works evolved from preliminary drawings, which went through numerous iterations of refinement to achieve the right tension. I strive for images that are familiar yet strange, recognisable yet diffuse – alluding to a sense of place without necessarily representing specific locations. Each piece is unique but can be seen as part of a story or a score with recurring elements, such as shores, circles, or polygons. Suggesting a continuity between them, these motifs are inspired by recollections and observations of everyday situations, combined with graphic, almost diagrammatic representations of landscape and architecture. Some works are characterised by shifts in perspective, as cross-sections blend with a map view. In others, the

scale remains ambiguous – is it a micro-organism, a city plan, or a blueprint for a more extensive system?

How are drawing and sewing different for you?

Frei: In contrast to drawing, where the hand holds the pencil, sewing reverses the process, because one has to guide the fabric through the needle of the machine. There is a strong connection between the body, the senses, and the creative process, as your entire body moves the material and controls the machine. It is similar to playing an instrument, with fingers, hands, arms, and even body movements contributing to producing sound and rhythm.

What is the role of the differently coloured, passe-partout-like backgrounds? How did you choose the colours?

Frei: The backgrounds have both a structural and an aesthetic function. Hand-painted on raw cotton canvas, they provide easy hanging for the lighter, stitched works while framing them when on display. Each background, in a different colour, provides a protective and ornamental border, eliciting associations linked to the visual narrative of the motifs in harmony or contrast with the images. Even the titles of the respective works mention the colours, prompting various connotations with material states and natural elements.

What interests you about the mediality of textiles, which is said to be capable of being contextualised in many ways?

Frei: One of the reasons behind my fascination with textiles is their double character – both decorative and functional. With inherent tactility and a strong presence, fabrics offer a sensory experience that extends beyond the immediate and the visual, weaving together multiple cultural, historical, and temporal meanings along with personal associations. For instance, the intentional choice of unbleached cotton emphasises a sense of 'basicness,' aligning with the use of an ordinary domestic tool like the sewing machine. Traditionally associated with practical tasks and at-home crafting, the sewing machine

plays a new and expanded role in these works, summoning familiarity and connecting the artwork to the viewer's everyday experiences.

How are these new works linked to previous works in which you utilised textiles in spatial and participatory settings?

Frei: In reflecting upon previous works like the quilts in *Musica Viva Spreads* (2016) and the upholstered furniture elements of *Circular Arrangement* (2019–2020), I recognise a distinctive evolution in my approach to textiles. For example, *Musica Viva Spreads* emphasised visual and political aspects of translation, rooted in a 1939 music journal edited by my grandfather, conductor Hermann Scherchen. Similarly, the upholstered furniture elements of *Circular Arrangement* explore the geometric symbols of the flowchart, a tool for visualising and communicating work processes. While seemingly disparate, both share a common thread – an intrinsic connection to the body, language, and communication. It's about taking a widely available material and crafting it with intentionality

and detail, where each fold, stitch, and texture becomes a language that speaks directly to the viewer.

What kind of atmosphere do you aim to create with your textile works? And how does the steel mobile titled *Polygon Apertures* (2024) contribute to this?

Frei: Through a relationship between the textile works and the weathering steel mobile, I aim to create an immersive, suspended atmosphere where the flat polygonal rings of the mobile echo the shapes found in the textile pieces. Change and connectivity are embedded in *Polygon Apertures* and are evident in the steel links, reminiscent of seams, that suspend the various elements of the mobile and the evolving steel patina. Circular apertures in the rings emphasise the relational aspect of the installation and serve as lenses through which visitors can explore and observe the surrounding space.

Questions by Barbara Buchmaier

Luca Frei (b. 1976 in Lugano, Switzerland) lives and works in Malmö, Sweden. He had solo exhibitions at venues including Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, Belgium (2021); Malmö Konsthall, Sweden (2020); Kunsthhaus Glarus, Switzerland (2013); Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, Germany (2012) and Lunds Konsthall, Sweden (2008).

Luca Frei has participated in group shows at Trondheim kunstmuseum, Norway (2020); Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland (2019); Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany (2019); Malmö Konstmuseum, Sweden (2019); Tensta Konsthall, Spånga, Sweden (2019); BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2019); National Museum of Modern Art Kyoto, Japan (2018); Kunstmuseum Solothurn, Switzerland (2016); the 31st Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia (2015); Museo Cantonale d'Arte, Lugano, Switzerland (2014); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France (2010); Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden (2010); Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (2010); Kadist Art Foundation, Paris, France (2008); Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen, Switzerland (2008) and Kunstverein München, Munich, Germany (2003).