

# MARC STRAUS

NEW YORK

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Fabric has so entered the realm of fine art that [Antonio Santin](#) renders it in paint, at [Marc Straus](#) through October 16. Does that make it merely an illusion?

Maybe not, for his oils have a weave of their own. Santin, a Spaniard who lives and works in Brooklyn, relishes their color—from thin party colored stripes to deep red that will have anyone feeling a blanket's warmth. Light and shadow do not so much break across his surfaces as burst out from them. They are all the more tactile and colorful for appearing at life size.

The recovery of design for art has proceeded far enough that why not just go all out and put on a fashion show? The Whitney does, with [Eckhaus Latta](#)—and I wrap this (no pun intended) into my earlier report on that as a longer review and [my latest upload](#). For that matter, this is now at least my third full-length



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rundown of fabrics in fine art. So why not? For one thing, commercial aspirations can get in the way of irony and vice versa. Yet Antonio Santin and others can still take tapestries and their illusion as painting.

Santin, in short, works in *trompe l'oeil*, to deceive the eye. As often in that tradition, he brings his subject right up to the picture plane to further the deception. The painted surface is a blanket, all the way across and all the way down. He also incorporates deep folds in his compositions, most often several to a frame, and at times the further illusion of paint splatters. They augment and compete with the parallel lines and curves of the patterns themselves. They also add to the illusion, to the point that he might be hanging actual woolens in the gallery.

He should have anyone hanging by a thread, but he is hardly alone. What not so very long ago was a radical assertion of [“women’s work” and craft](#) in the face of fine art has become all but commonplace. It appeared with [Charles LeDray](#) at the Whitney in 2001 and again with [tapestry from Africa](#) in 2015. It colors [El Anatsui](#) and his tying together of caps from liquor bottles—or stuffed fabric [on the High Line](#) and in the galleries from [Sheila Hicks](#). It appeared in just the last months with [Gee’s Bend quilting](#) at the Met and, sure enough, [summer group shows](#). In a scarily efficient art market, [outsider art](#) and [political protest](#) enter the mainstream.

Could that be a good thing? I should hope so, for all my unease, but it may have already become a cliché, and Santin is here to turn it upside-down. If hangings risk becoming a quick way raising prices at the very expense of women and outsiders, he breaks with using fabric as a medium of painterly expression. Indeed, he reverses the formula, with paint as the medium and fabric as the ambiguous message. Two concurrent shows at his gallery break with it as well. Upstairs, Jong Oh works in single threads strung partway or all the way between floor and ceiling, like [Richard Tuttle](#). Rather than seek a plane of color, however, he dares one to spot the work at all—and then to dispel its appearance as a solid.

On the floor between, a group show further maps the possibilities that current practices often overlook. [“Sutures”](#) takes its name from a vertical assembly of large spools by [Louise Bourgeois](#), like an overly elaborate lamppost. It

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includes a near downpour of color in felt and zippers on wire by Lisa Hoke, as *When the Rains Came*, and a large open grid only occasionally woven together by Michele Ciacciofera. It includes, too, beaded ropes snaking out from a box, by Maria Nepomuceno, and an equally threatening cocoon of silk and acrylic by Julia von Eichel. Elaine Reichek uses embroidery to recreate book pages, like a sampler with feminist intent. As the show's title suggests, the work barely holds together—and a good thing, too.

Embroidery may still mean blankets, like quasi-paintings of thicker threads by [Amanda Valdez](#) at [Denny](#), through October 14, and evocations of nineteenth-century industrial looms by [Ellen Lesperance](#) at [Derek Eller](#), through October 7. (Lesperance also appears recently in "[Trigger](#)" at the New Museum for other aspects of art and gender.) Does that relegate Santin to the realm of illusion? Perhaps, but his paint has a physical weave as well—thick, coarse, and difficult to penetrate. He applies his thousands of thin curves of color with anything from a fine brush to a syringe. It, too, is a tapestry, both metaphoric and real. A man may appropriate it for his own ends, but the medium has the last word.