

# PERISKOP

FORUM FOR KUNSTHISTORISK DEBAT

Periskop: Forum for kunsthistorisk debat

Nr. 32, 2024

“Færøsk kunsthistorie i dag”

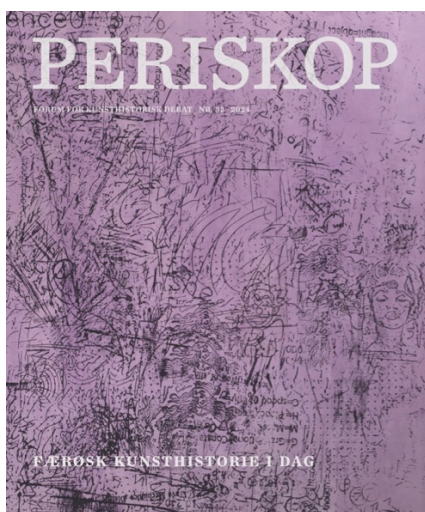
Titel: “Tita Vinther: Weaving the Monochrome”

Forfatter(e): David W. Norman

Sidetal: 85-93

Dato: 31.10.2024

DOI: 10.7146/periskop.v2024i32.150342



# Tita Vinther

## Weaving the Monochrome

Between the early 1990s and 2010s, the Finnish-Faroese fiber artist Tita Vinther (1941-2019) produced a series of textiles following a minimal yet enigmatic formula. In each, after weaving a simple rectangular form from a single color of light wool, Vinther hand-stitched individual strands of dyed or natural horsehair directly into the tapestry's matrix. Their titles often evoke subtle variations in natural environments, as in *Sirm* (*Drizzle*, 1993) [1], one of several in this format in the collection of the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands, its light, natural wool and bleached horsehair suggesting the glow of daylight dampened by haze. Others, such as the all-black *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt* (*The Black Sheep of the Family*, 2011) [2], produced nearly two decades later, evoke affective or relational positions, in this case the stigmatizing experience of being marked as *other*.<sup>1</sup> Unique in this series, the tips of horsehair ornamenting *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt* are coated in copper.

Although Vinther produced these monochrome weavings across a long stretch of her career, they are quite modest compared with the full range of her practice, which radically expanded weaving's traditional formats, materials, and subject matter. Anne-Kari Skarðhamar (2011, 98-99) has noted that Vinther's work sparked debate in the Faroe Islands about the boundaries between "art" and "craft." The sense of constraint these categories imply can be seen in Vinther's choice in 2002 to weave a straitjacket

in connection with an exhibition by the feminist artist collective Dyr (Door), which she co-founded with Guðrið Poulsen and Astrid Andreassen. Her oeuvre includes room-sized installations mimicking sails and nets constructed from human hair (*Pætursnótin/Peter's Net*, 1998, and *Sejl/Sail*, 2006) [3], as well as dense, three-dimensional works that play with sculptural conventions, such as *Koparmorgun*, *Koparsól*, *Kopargleði* (*Copper Morning*, *Copper Sun*, *Copper Joy*, 2009), its coils woven from copper thread piled into glass vitrines. Yet despite what these experimental formats might suggest, Vinther was also deeply committed to preserving weaving's history, as she demonstrated in 1991 by constructing a replica of medieval Faroese sails from homespun wool for the Roskilde Viking Ship Museum (Skarðhamar 2011, 93).

The minimal wool and horsehair compositions may seem to offer much less to interpretation than these large-scale projects, yet by aligning the medium of weaving with a monochrome format, they provide an opportunity to reevaluate a common rhetorical trope in discussions of Faroese contemporary art in Denmark.<sup>2</sup> In an essay contributed to the catalogue for *Kolonialen*, Nordatlantens Brygge's inaugural exhibition, Jens Frederiksen (2004, 75) expressed a fraught yet often-repeated assumption when he claimed that art is a "comparatively recent phenomenon" on the islands. Frederiksen was actually referring to *painting's* (and to a lesser extent *sculpture's*) "com-



**[1]** Tita Vinther: *Sirm* (Drizzle), 1993. Wool and horsehair, 127 x 96 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands.

paratively recent” position in Faroese art history, but this tendency to equate traditional medium categories with art writ large appears fairly regularly. Dagmar Warming (2006, 14), for instance, wrote of Vinther’s experiments involving human hair, “she is not weaving a canvas—a two-dimensional image—but almost a three-dimensional sculpture.” Although this description captures key aspects of Vinther’s site-responsive projects, framing her textile

practice as *either* a question of sculpture *or* painting prevents us from understanding weaving as an artform in its own right—one that, in contrast to Frederiksen’s assessment, has deep roots in this context.

To the extent Vinther’s single-colored textiles engage—yet are unconstrained by—questions particular to painting and sculpture, they provide an opportunity to look beyond an art historical framework centered on those particular medium traditions. Aligned with recent exhibitions organized by the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands, such as *Landslagið í broyting / Changing Landscapes* (2022), that emphasize how artists across generations have simultaneously intervened in global and local arts discourses, I offer an expansive frame of reference for evaluating Vinther’s contributions to Faroese art history. In contrast to the national or regionally-structured survey exhibitions her work was most often shown within during her lifetime, Vinther’s background was highly transnational: born in Finland, she spent much of her childhood in Denmark before settling in the Faroe Islands in 1960, and apprenticed or took courses in weaving in each of these countries between the 1960s and ‘70s. In keeping with the mobility that shaped her life, this essay unfolds as a series of meditations on Vinther’s monochrome weavings that place them in dialogue with an eclectic range of discourses. These minimal textiles, I hope to show, provide opportunities for seeing Faroese art history engaged with global conversations in feminist art circles regarding postminimalism’s revisions of Minimalist seriality, the category of craft and its attachments to questions of artistic labor, as well as the monochrome trope’s more troubling racialized origins.

### **Arts and Crafts**

Solveig Hanusardóttir Olsen (2023, 7) has observed that artists’ use of sheep’s wool often immediately evokes ideas about “connection to the homeland, the natural setting of the Faroe Islands and humankind’s role in it,” associations that reflect the long history of wool production on the islands.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages and

the Early Modern period, sheep herding provided many Faroese people with a foundation for self-sufficiency, and as one of the Faroes' most important export products, a basis for cultural exchange in the wider North Atlantic. During the centuries before the formation of the Denmark-Norway personal union, wool was frequently transported to the port of Bergen in a trade route largely operated by Faroese traders themselves (Øye 2008, 225). In other words, before artists began encoding ideas about the islands' ecological and cultural distinctiveness into landscape painting—a tendency that could be contextualized within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century national consciousness movements (Nauerby 1996)—the materiality of wool traced deep connections between the region, its population, and the environmental and economic conditions that link them.

Yet wool's availability as a material for art reflects dramatic shifts in its cultural status. Following the rise of automated spinning and weaving technologies in the nineteenth century, the Faroese textile industry plummeted, and today much wool is discarded as a waste product. Karina Lykke Grand notes that while sheep were rarely if ever represented in earlier periods of Faroese art when textiles remained central to the Faroese economy, wool's connotations have shifted from "survival" to "surplus" as it becomes increasingly associated with luxury goods and tourists' romanticized attitudes about the Faroese landscape (Karina Lykke Grand quoted in Eriksen, Armand, and Alminde 2019). Between weaving's long history in Faroese vernacular arts, its economic obsolescence, and the heightened value of manual processes in our post-Fordist moment, the thorny question of "craft" arises.

In her monograph on Vinther's practice, Skarðhamar (2011, 90) divides Faroese art history into two streams: one identified with "Faroese folk art, the other [...] German Expressionism"—a seemingly innocuous assessment. Yet histories of art in the North Atlantic have often marginalized "folk art" or craft traditions, as the *Kolonialen* exhibition exemplified (the show's Faroese section included only painting, sculpture, and prints). As T'ai Smith (2016,



[2] Tita Vinther: *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt* (The Black Sheep of the Family), 2011. Wool, horsehair, and copper, 176 x 110 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands.

80) explains, although craft "underpins almost any work of art," modern and contemporary art history has long effaced questions of the handmade, while "craft" is disproportionately used to categorize the products of feminized, racialized, and working-class labor often excluded from the discourses and institutions of art. If "craft" suggests closer attention to the interaction between a maker and the process of fabrication than "art" might allow, it



also poses a risk of essentializing manual processes, portraying artforms like weaving as entirely culturally-determined, or worse, exoticizing them as quaint, outmoded, or out-of-time—qualities Kim Simonsen (2022) notes are entirely general to Danish stereotypes about the Faroe Islands.

Vinther's monochrome weavings rest uneasily between an art-craft binary. Woven on a vertical, warp-weighted loom—an ancient mechanism with a long history in Nordic tapestry production—they demonstrate her deep commitment to the medium in its own right. Yet the addition of horsehair gives the textiles a tinge of animalistic or anthropomorphic strangeness that clearly separates them from ordinary functional objects. The weaving that becomes a landscape by way of horsehair—animal fiber turned into plant fiber through the weaver's

**[3]** Tita Vinther: *Segl (Sail)*, 2006. Human hair, linen, and rusted iron, 135 x 530 x 400 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands. Photo: Ole Wich.

hand—presents a kind of enchantment akin to such paradoxical objects as the BLESS Beauty Hairbrush **[4]**. The locks of lush hair flowing from the brush's base tauntingly proclaim its non-functionality, transforming the designed object into a mirror image of its imagined human counterpart. Just as the brush allegorizes its own situation of use, Vinther's woven landscapes call our attention to weaving's animal origins and the environments that support them.

The monochrome weavings destabilize both "art" and "craft" alike, but working against weaving's exclu-

sion from fine arts contexts likely served much more specific goals. Vinther was likely keenly aware of textile art's gendered connotations, and she exhibited in explicitly feminist spaces fairly regularly. Beyond her projects with Dyr, in 1997 she was included in an exhibition curated by Olivia Petrides at the Chicago-based Artemisia Gallery, named after Artemisia Gentileschi (Cassidy 1997). Understanding the challenge her work poses to a sharp division between art and “folk art” in Faroese art history, then, raises further questions about the gendered nature of this division, one that Vinther's reference to the painted monochrome throws into relief.

### Weaving and Painting

Unlike Warming's assessment of Vinther's large-scale installations, the horsehair-tinged weavings easily call to mind painting's forms and conventions, not least through their engagement with the monochrome trope. Textiles are, after all, intimately entangled with the history, theory, and materiality of painting; in many cases, weaving is painting's literal foundation in the form of woven canvas. Likewise, the grids present in much modern painting—which recursively echo the canvas's flat, rectilinear surface—find their match in weaving's dependence on the loom, which choreographs space into an orderly matrix of warp and weft. Vinther's single-color textiles might initially appear to demonstrate this structuralist affinity that aligns monochrome discourse with weaving practice, especially in their dependence on the wall. Both *Sirm* and *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt* are supported by metal rods concealed behind their upper and lower ends, maintaining their taut, upright hanging and calling to mind what Rosalind Krauss (2008, 133) argues is perhaps painting's core, medium-specific tension: the illusionistic act of lifting a horizontal expanse “into the vertical field of the canvas and thereby onto a geometry that ‘measures’ and ‘controls’ it.”

Yet even in photographs, *Sirm* drips with tactility—the quality Bauhaus textile artist Otti Berger (1930) identified as *weaving's* essential, medium-specific principle.

Like condensation seeping past a window screen, the pale horsehair gently opens the textile's “ground” into a denser, three-dimensional space—into the open air, like the trickling rainfall its title suggests. If, as Krauss proposes, painting's status as a medium stems from the act of forcing a horizontal expanse to conform to the human subject's vertical orientation, measuring and containing the canvas's spatial limits like a stretch of earth fenced in by property lines, then attempting to render elemental conditions in the textural qualities of wool suggests another perspective altogether [5]. Also in contrast to the monochrome trope, and particularly its associations with Minimalism, for all their seriality the single- or bicolored weavings are each highly variable. Whereas *Sirm's* horsehair is distributed unevenly across the tapestry, with the largest concentration pooling in the lower right, in *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt* the material is densely layered. As much as these works engage the thought of the monochrome, their sinuous, physically irregular materials disrupt any assumptions of formal purity.

Susan L. Stoops (1996) has described how feminist artists have developed similarly heterogeneous, material-centered approaches to abstraction that reject the masculinist tenets of Minimalism, which boasted of removing any trace of subjectivity from the art experience. Between the 1970s and 1990s, artists like Eva Hesse, Dorothea



[4] BLESS Beauty Hairbrush, 1999, 2024. © BLESS.



Rockburne, and Lenore Tawney claimed abstraction's conceptual openness as a vehicle for conveying situations of difference. Consider, for instance, Olga de Amaral's *Riscos (Cliffs)* and *Tierra y fibra (Earth and Fiber)* weaving series, which she produced across much of the 1980s [6]. These tapestries' vertical strips, produced by weaving together wool and horsehair, call out to the grid only to shake it loose, identifying the weaving's physical and chromatic mass with the physical irregularity of land itself. These cords and ribbons also, it so happens, invoke a distinctly woven knowledge system much older than the grid: the system of recording numerical information in knotted devices that Inca makers referred to as a *quipu* (Hamilton 2018, 42).

To engage the monochrome format only to unmoor it from painting discourse and Minimalism alike is to

[5] Tita Vinther: *Pætur snótin* (St. Peter's Net), 1998 (detail).  
Collection of the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands.  
Photo: Ole Wich.

reconceive this trope within a more open-ended set of questions, in which female subjectivity, the cultural history of wool, and other "particularities" are central, not marginal. The woven monochrome, tinged with a raw, organic material and the natural variability it produces, advances toward a capacity for difference nascent to yet often disavowed within monochrome discourse. For feminist artist Mary Kelly (1981, 44), color itself, to the extent it resists semiotic capture by "never really acced[ing] to the signifier," introduces a "difference in the field" of signification that challenges modernism's

masculinist valorization of authorship. Yet assigning “difference” to chromatic form has rarely been a neutral gesture in art history, and here Vinther’s engagement with the monochrome trope approaches a much less liberating dynamic.

### **Blackness and Surface**

In addition to stitching single strands of hair into the surface of textiles, in some cases Vinther wove larger sections of horsetail into plaits before adhering them to the wool. This is the case in *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt*, the surface of which appears significantly denser than others in this series. Skarðhamar (2011, 96) states that Vinther began plaiting horsehair for some textiles after she observed a Black woman having her hair braided by a hairdresser. She titled her first weaving involving plaited horsehair *Maria* (2003), after Mahalia Jackson’s rendition of “Ave Maria.”

This instance of racialized observation aligns Vinther’s practice with the anti-Blackness at the heart of the monochrome trope’s history. When Kazimir Malevich inscribed a racist joke onto the frame of his *Black Square*

(1915) [7], Hannah Black (2016, 6) has explained, he conscripted Blackness into modernism’s service through a form of symbolic subjugation that enforces the invisibility of Black subjects: “The painting masquerades as the negation of representation, but in light of the joke about darkness, negation itself becomes representation; what is represented is the nothingness of certain subjects, which indicates a certain nothingness in subjectivity itself.” Although the moment that led to *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt* does not equal the explicitly racist origins of *Black Square*, the racialized dynamics of observation that informed Vinther’s work build on a similarly nonreciprocal structure of representation. The weaving almost reenacts the moment of observation, suggesting the back-turned head of the one observed, who cannot return her gaze to the one looking.

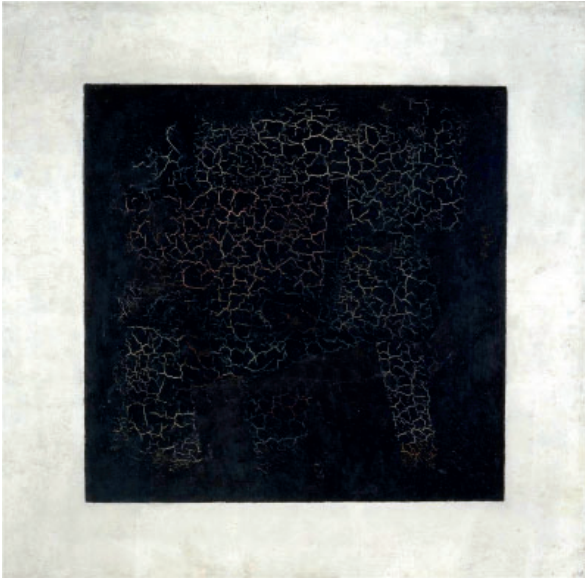
Vinther’s act of observation reflects a much broader pattern of perceiving racial difference as and through surface. Jasmine Nichole Cobb (2023, 132) describes “feeling sensed with the eyes,” the experience of being read as surface, as central to the affective experience of anti-Blackness. Yet for Black artists, the pictorial surface can also be an area of experimentation that “focus[es] our attention on blackness as a contrived surface,” whether by challenging racist representations or highlighting the ways Black subjects assert agency through self-fashioning. Lorna Simpson’s *1978-88* (1990), for instance, a composition of four photographic prints depicting nearly identical braids, grounds the act of hair plaiting in rather different situations of surface observation than *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt*. Overlaying the braids are the year markers 1978, 1982, 1988 and the words “cut, tangle, tie, tug, knot, part, tear, twist, split, weave”—each both a noun and a verb, conveying either stasis or mobility, and a spectrum of associations from the violent to the nur-



[6] Olga de Amaral: *Tierra y fibra 5*, 1988.

Wool and horsehair, 160 x 160 cm. © Olga de Amaral.  
Photo: © Diego Amaral. Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery.





[7] Kazimir Malevich: *Black Square*, 1915. Oil on linen, 79.5 x 79.5 cm. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

turing. Huey Copeland (2013, 92) argues that Simpson's career-long investigation of Black hair culture in works such as this foreground "a contingent form of relation across space and time" that signifies "the unchanging facts of black female oppression, but [also] a willingness to be connected" across generations.

The title of *Tað er tvætt í hvørjari ætt* underscores the difference of Vinther's position from that taken up by Simpson. It is difficult to reconcile this title with the instance that led Vinther to begin plaiting hair. She may have been attempting to reflect on her own experiences of struggling with family belonging. As Vinther was born amid the outbreak of the Second World War, when she was only one year old her Finnish parents sent her to a foster home in Vejle, Denmark, where Danish became her first language, likely creating challenges when she was repatriated in 1947 (Skarðhamar 2011, 87). Still, an individual experience such as this diverges sharply from

the collective connections Copeland describes, even as relational ideas indeed informed Vinther's perspectives on feminism and weaving's history.

\*\*\*

These are only some of the discussions that Vinther's practice could facilitate. As I hope these reflections make clear, the narrow art historical parameters I introduced at the outset are far from sufficient. Vinther's work itself compels us to look to different directions.

#### NOTES

- 1 Although Vinther's Faroese title literally translates to "Every family has its black sheep," her monograph assigns to the work slightly different Danish and English titles: "Familiens sorte får" and "The black sheep of the family." The Danish and English titles likewise lack the rhyming quality of the Faroese.
- 2 As I do not read Faroese and am subsequently limited to utilizing Danish, English, and multilingual sources, my essay takes a more speculative tone, focusing on broad issues raised by her work and by authors who have commented on Faroese art in a Danish context. A more thorough assessment of Vinther's work within Faroese critical discourses would likely raise different questions than mine.
- 3 Olsen noted this in her discussion of contemporary textile artists Ragnhild Hjalmarsdóttir Højgaard and Alda Mohr Eyðunardóttir.

#### LITERATURE

- Berger, Otti. 1930. "Stoffe im Raum." *ReD (Prague)* 3, no. 5: 146.
- Black, Hannah. 2016. "Fractal Freedoms." *Afterall* 41: 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.1086/687082>
- Cassidy, Victor M. 1998. "Chicago Report." *Artnet*. [http://www.artnet.com/magazine\\_pre2000/reviews/cassidy/cassidy1-16-98.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/reviews/cassidy/cassidy1-16-98.asp) (last accessed 4 March, 2024).
- Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. 2023. *New Growth: The Art and Texture of Black Hair*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478023708>
- Copeland, Huey. 2013. *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226013121.001.0001>

- Eriksen, Solveig Helles, Cecilie Armand, and Iben Katrine Alminde. 2019. "Det er fårene, der driver os sammen." *Information*, 13 December. <https://www.information.dk/kultur/2019/12/faarene-driver-sammen> (last accessed 4 March, 2024).
- Frederiksen, Jens. 2004. "Paintings and Basalt." In *Kolonialen: 21 North Atlantic Artists*, exh. cat, 74-79. Copenhagen: Nordatlantens Brygge.
- Grand, Karina Lykke and Anna Maria Dan Ziska (eds). 2023. *Landslagið í broyting / Changing Landscapes*. Tórshavn: Listasavn Føroya.
- Hamilton, Andrew. 2018. *Scale and the Incas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77hpz>
- Kelly, Mary. 1981. "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism." *Screen* 22, no. 3: 41-62. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/22.3.41>
- Krauss, Rosalind. 2008. "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome." *October* 124 (Spring): 125-136. <https://doi.org/10.1162/octo.2008.124.1.125>
- Nauerby, Tom. 1996. *No Nation is an Island: Language, Culture, and National Identity in the Faroe Islands*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Olsen, Solveig Hanusardóttir. 2023. "Awareness and Processing." In *Stof til eftertanke / Conscious Threads*, edited by Mai Misfeldt, 6-9. Copenhagen: Nordatlantens Brygge.
- Simonsen, Kim. 2022. "Danske mediers syn på Færøerne er helt ude af takt med tiden." *Politiken*, 12 December. <https://politiken.dk/debat/kroniken/art9096158/Danske-mediers-syn-på-Færøerne-er-helt-ude-af-takt-med-tiden> (last accessed 4 March, 2024).
- Skarðhamar, Anne-Kari. 2011. *Tita Vinther*. Tórshavn: Listasavn Føroya.
- Stoops, Susan L (ed). 1996. *More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University.
- Warming, Dagmar. 2006. *Faroese Art: A Synthesis of Many Parts*, exh. cat. Tórshavn: Norðurlandahúsið í Føroyum.
- Øye, Ingvild. 2008. "Kontakten mellom Bergen og Færøyene i middelalderen i arkeologisk og historisk lys." In *Símunarbók—Heiðursrit til Símun V. Arge*, edited by Helgi Michelsen and Caroline Paulsen, 223-232. Tórshavn: Faroe University Press.